CHAPTER 6 – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To conclude the research study is the most difficult task. The research study aimed to understand the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of transgender (hijra/ aravani) activism in Tamil Nadu, India. The research study commenced with an assumption that transgender welfare and development was result of strong advocacy and lobbying by the transgender movement. The objective of research study was to explore the origins of transgender movement and issues around it.

6.1. Aravani Activism, Collectivization, Mobilization, and Movement Development

‘Community collectivization’ around ‘we-feeling’ (aravani, MtF transgender/ transsexual identity/ identities, and MtFness), and ‘community culture’ (aravani jamaat subculture), has facilitated various aravani and MtF transgender/ transsexual groups to come together for ‘collective action’, ‘social change’, and ‘political change’ through strategies such as lobbying and advocacy with the state government. Transgender activism and collectivization in Tamil Nadu has addressed social, economic, health, and political issues.

Transgender activism and collectivization in Tamil Nadu has some features of a social movement. However there is no overarching transgender movement in Tamil Nadu. The transgender movement is still in its growing stage. Various forms of collectivization exists in the form of large spectrum of groups such as mainstream NGOs, transgender CBOs, federations, sangams, autonomous groups (both registered and non-registered) etc.

There is no central aim and ideology within the transgender movement. In the absence of a central ideology/ ideologies, transgender rights are the main driving/ guiding principle for various groups across Tamil Nadu. A rights based approach is used by movement members. One of the main agenda of various transgender groups in Tamil Nadu is to seek state’s recognition and dignity for community members.

Transgender activism and collectivization in Tamil Nadu can be viewed within the location and class-cultural context. Leading transgender activists in Tamil Nadu are mainly from urban areas (city and big towns), are educated and can converse in English. They are the advantaged groups who lobby at the state level and lead various transgender groups. They
have liberal perspective towards transgender empowerment. They have the capacity to mobilize and gather community members to raise collective voices.

However the disadvantaged members are mainly from lower socio-economic background. They are mainly from rural areas (small towns and villages), mostly are school drop-outs or illiterate, affiliated with the *aravani jamaat*, and are recipient of services from mainstream NGOs, transgender CBOs, and also avail government welfare schemes through these NGOs and CBOs.

A handful of privileged individuals are the first generation transgender activists in Tamil Nadu. They have set a benchmark by addressing transgender issues through various activities and also by availing government welfare schemes for community members. Few non-transgender advocates (cisgender men and women) also have an important role in highlighting transgender issues in Tamil Nadu.

Transgender activism and collectivization in Tamil Nadu can be viewed at various stages. The initial stage started around late 1990s with HIV/ AIDS intervention programmes for transgenders and MSM by mainstream NGOs. Mainstream NGOs in Tamil Nadu were mainly service provides to transgenders at the grassroots level. Few individual transgenders working in those NGOs developed NGO management skills and later formed their own CBOs for community welfare and development.

There were mushrooming of transgender CBOs across Tamil Nadu and various autonomous groups in the form of federations, *sangams* etc. were formed. The purpose of forming these federations was to strengthen transgender CBOs and get funds (mainly HIV/ AIDS related project funds) for transgender welfare and development which was largely in the hands of mainstream NGOs. HIV/ AIDS intervention in Tamil Nadu has a larger contribution for highlighting transgenders issues in Tamil Nadu.

Though HIV/ AIDS intervention programmes for targeted population are project based and have specific aims, objectives, and goals, events such as Koovagam festival became a platform to raise transgender rights issues. Though HIV/ AIDS policy framework reflect NGO-centrism though project specific activities (Seckinelgin 2008), transgender rights issues highlighted during the beauty contest at the Koovagam festival deviate from the projects aim or goals, which is only to concentrate on HIV/ AIDS related activities.
Much of the earlier discussion on transgenders during the Koovagam festival was related to violence faced by transgenders (mainly from police and hoodlums/ extortionists) and violation of transgender rights. Issues raised during these events proved a positive step for gaining transgender recognition. Though these violent incidents cannot be completely considered forms of hate crimes, the nature of these crimes demonstrate violence inflicted upon vulnerable transgender population because of their ambiguous sex/ gender status and also because of lack of legal mechanism. Atrocities inflicted on lower-caste people in the form of violence, murder, rape etc. by upper-class and upper-caste especially by men is a good example that can be compared with transgender situation in Tamil Nadu in which they silently bear the atrocities and do not voice because they are unheard in the absence of proper legal and judiciary support.

This is a form of gender oppression. There are two types of gender oppression, one is oppression of trans people as trans people (because they transgress both biological ‘sex’ and social ‘gender’ norms), and second is oppression of women as women (Bettcher 2009). It is the socio-cultural construction of gender that leads to both women’s and trans people’s oppression.

Initially Koovagam festival became a common ground for highlighting transgender oppression. The story of Lord Aravan and his marriage with the female form of Lord Krishna to win the Mahabharata war is the link between hijras and Lord Aravan. Hijras are related with the female form of Lord Krishna. Koovagam is thus a significant historical place both in terms of mythological-religious descriptions and also for contemporary transgender rights activism in Tamil Nadu.

Not only HIV/ AIDS projects, but also participation of state official (Mr. Ravi, IPS) and his support to hijras by coining the term ‘aravani’ for them during one of the beauty contest held at Koovagam festival proved a benchmarking event for highlighting transgender issues in the presence of media. At present the term ‘aravani’ is considered a politically correct identity for MtF transgenders/ transsexuals in Tamil Nadu and non-sex/ non-gender terms such as aravani and transgender appear on various G.O.s. and Policy Notes.

Use of non-sex/ non-gender terms for transgenders on government official documents reflect acceptance of transgender identity and body outside the rigid/ fixed sex/ gender binary. Context is very important to understand such acceptance. Unlike the west, where identity/ bodies outside sex/ gender binaries are less tolerated and are medically and pathologically scrutinized to make them fit under the socially and culturally constructed sex/ gender binary
through medical-technological intervention (for e.g. SRS, cosmetic surgery, body modifications etc.), *aravani* and MtF transgender/ transsexual identities and bodies in Tamil Nadu enjoy a legitimate space within the state-subject citizenship model. Much of this legitimacy of transgender bodies comes from the religious-cultural acknowledgment of gender transgression within the Indian society.

For e.g. the female form ‘Mohini’ taken by Lord Vishnu, and Lord Ayyappa born to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu (Goudriaan 1978; Doniger 1999) explain gender transgression, and the birth of a child between two male gods. Lord Vishnu in his Mohini form is described as a beautiful woman. His woman form is so attractive that Lord Shiva too is attracted to him.  Enchanted by her beauty Lord Shiva runs after Mohini and embraces her. As a result Lord Shiva’s seed fell on the ground and a child is born. The child is known by various names such as Mahashasta, Skanda, Hanuman, Aiyar, Hariharaputra (i.e. the son of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva). In this whole episode there is no intercourse and no sexual penetration. Though the purpose of Lord Vishnu was to distract the attention of demons in his Mohini form, and he was successful in grabbing their attention, Lord Shiva loses his memory and is seduced while looking at his (her) beauty. Later Lord Shiva realizes his delusion and returns back to Goddess Parvati and Lord Vishnu comes back to his original male form.

Here the narration is not on copulation between Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, but the relation of Lord Vishnu’s female form Mohini with the male form of Lord Shiva. Moreover Lord Vishnu too does not permanently remain in the female form and returns back to his male form.

Lord Krishna (who is also the incarnation of Lord Vishnu) too took a woman form to destroy the demon Araka. When he is successful he comes back to his male form. According to *hijra* folklore, *hijras* relate themselves to the Mohini form of Lord Vishnu and Lord Krishna (both are same gods) and Lord Krishna told other gods that there will be more people like him who will be neither man nor woman and their curse or blessing will come out to be true.

Similarly the description of *hijras* presence during Lord Rama’s going to exile and blessing them after his return explain presence and acceptance of identities outside the sex/ gender binary. The third gender *hijra* identity is embedded in the Indian society and enjoys a culturally legitimate space through their age-old *badhai* (dancing) profession and as

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83 Doniger 1999.  
84 Doniger 1999.  
entertainers during various events. A hijra body is accepted as a part of the Indian society because of its religious-cultural background, regardless its ambiguous status.

6.2. Relationship with the State

Coming back to the discussion on the historicity of transgender activism, various transgender welfare reforms were introduced by the DMK government during its regime. Though inception of transgender activism was during the ADMK government in Tamil Nadu, it was during DMK rule that transgender welfare reforms were introduced and implemented. Many state officials mainly women (including the then CM’s daughter Ms. Kanimozhi Karunanidhi) took their personal interest and pushed transgender welfare agenda with the state government.

In the words of Sassen (2009: 234) ‘... the state bears responsibilities for the basic wellbeing of its citizens, ...’, within this context when various transgender groups from across Tamil Nadu collectively approached the Social Welfare Minister with a memorandum, there was a quick response by the state and immediately after that many transgender welfare schemes were introduced and implemented. It explains that the state considered transgenders as its citizen and hence the response was prompt.

However transgender welfare schemes introduced in Tamil Nadu are available only for native transgenders. These schemes cannot be availed by transgenders from other states and outside of Tamil Nadu. This explains the territorial restriction which is also one of the features of the state which marks its territories and boundaries (Kukathas 2008).

There is also a ‘gendered nature of the state’ in which the state as a welfare state has welfare services for women (Waylen 1996). Within this context the state has two categories of welfare services, one in which middle-class professional women are employed by the state, and two poor women are recipients of welfare services.

Transgender welfare schemes introduced in Tamil Nadu are very recent, and hence the gendered nature of the state can be assessed only when aravanis/ transgenders will also get an opportunity to become government’s employees. At present, mostly the government is at the service rendering stage i.e. transgenders are still recipients of welfare services.

It is still a question whether transgenders are considered a vote-bank in Tamil Nadu given their small numbers 2663 according to the district-wise state level transgender population count in the year 2009. Many political parties in Tamil Nadu have opened membership to
transgenders. Many transgenders also aspire to contest in elections in Tamil Nadu and they have approached leaders of various political parties. But there is no political party based transgender groups who voice openly for transgender rights. Most of the transgender groups are Non-Party Political Formations (NPPFs) and CBOs.

Tamil Nadu has a history of various liberalist movements like Periyar movement, non-Brahmin movement, Self-Respect movement, women’s movement, dalit movement, adivasi (tribal) movement etc. and the state has been responsive to these movements in the past in the form of various welfare reforms. It is no wonder why the Tamil Nadu state had a ‘positive’ response to transgender voices. Though there are various loopholes within the transgender welfare reforms, both primary and secondary respondents are of the view that it is better to have something rather than having nothing.

Terms such as ‘positive’ and ‘good’ were used by aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals to describe nature of the state. Can it be said that Tamil Nadu is a ‘soft’ state when it comes to issues of marginalized populations? If it is a ‘soft’ state, then does it provide transgenders an unprecedented and unique degree of freedom to claim various welfare reforms/schemes that fall outside the heteronormative citizenship framework which is unheard in any other state in India or in any other country in the world?

Though 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 rarely highlighted the oft-invoked, innate glory of the Tamils, and their ancient past and unique culture. Periyar focused on the unjust practices based on caste and religion. Periyar’s anti-Brahmanism and self-respect of Tamil’s was counter to the social caste hierarchy.

Though the DMK followed Periyar’s teachings, it distanced itself from the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) in 1949 as Periyar refused to participate in electoral politics and his wish to retain DK as a social movement. The reason for distance was due to Dravidian parties aiming for state power which contradicted with Periyar’s ideologies.

DMK was formed by Annadurai. After his demise Mr. Karunanidhi became its leader. The party’s anti-religion, anti-caste, anti-Aryan, anti-North Indian, anti-Hindi language etc. ideologies did not change.
Though political parties such as DMK have a liberalist view towards gender issues, the interview of film actress Khushboo in Tamil Nadu received repercussion from various political parties. Khushboo gave an interview in the weekly news magazine *India Today* on the topic ‘Changing Sexual Attitudes’. After the article was published there was a backlash and the South Indian media Sun TV raised questioned on Khushboo’s right to speak about ‘Tamil women’. Her expression of ideas was treated ‘derogatory remarks’ about the chastity of Tamil Women.

A massive protest (which included broomstick-wielding, slipper waving demonstrations etc.) was staged against her by political parties and women members from the parties, and defamatory charges were filed against her in various courts across Tamil Nadu. Khushboo was viewed as a Hindi-speaking, Gujarati Muslim ‘outsider’ in the Tamil film industry. Khushboo’s case reflects controversy which involves intersection of culture, myth, notions of female sexuality and identity. The state which is liberalistic towards *aravanis* and their welfare, did not tolerate issues related to chastity of women.

Contrary to this Periyar strongly ridiculed the notion of women to be ‘chaste’ and condemned the ideas of portraying women as ‘fragile’ and ‘gentle’. Similarly Khushboo’s comments were interpreted as a challenge to the historical notions of Tamilness, honour, and culture, a position that reminds one of right wing upper caste Hindu fundamentalism.

The Periyar-DMK-Khushboo (link) enables us to understand that the state maintains double standards when it comes to expression of an idea, which is related to chastity of a woman. The state is gender-sensitive towards women’s issues in a normative manner, but can react violently to protect chastity of Tamil women and Tamil honour.

However liberal view of Periyar towards women’s empowerment and his embracement of Westernization (Dhara 2006) is also adapted for transgender emancipation in Tamil Nadu. If Periyar advocated abolishing age old traditional practices especially pertaining to women, then transgender liberation and empowerment in Tamil Nadu also falls in same line which urges transgenders to utilize states services and abolish traditional *aravani jamaat* cultural practices which is highly prevelant in the Western-and-North Indian states.
6.3. Growing Significance of the State and Individual Rights Gained Through Collective Action Leading to Steady Decline of Jamaat Control

Transgender activism and their welfare and development explain breaking bonds (though not completely) with the traditional aravani jamaat subculture. It is like breaking the chains of the jamaat system and seeking freedom of expression within the Human Rights framework which is mostly related to basic fundamental rights granted to an Indian citizen within the Indian Constitution.

Writ Petition filed by a transgender activist along with a female lawyer (cisgender woman) helped in getting Right to Vote (either as male or female). Writ Petition is a good example to demonstrate utilization of constitutional right. The Madras High Court allowed transgenders to vote either as male or female. Transgenders were given the liberty to choose sex of their choice.

As citizens of India, through the Madras High Court’s decision, aravanis were entitled to cast their votes irrespective of their ambiguous sex/ gender status. Moreover the freedom to choose the sex on the voter identity further avoided confusion of choosing sex at a later stage.

Contrary to this their ambiguous sex/ gender identity is in question when they want to participate in a political process like contesting in election which is one of the constitutional rights of an Indian citizen. For e.g. Kamla Jaan from Katni, Madhya Pradesh resigned from her Mayor’s post only because the opposition filed a case against her highlighting she was not born a biological woman. Mismatch between (male) sex assigned at birth and gender identity is a lacuna for MtF transgenders to blend into the rigid sex/ gender binary boundaries.

Similarly events such as Public Hearing, dharna, silent rallies etc. held by transgender groups collectively (along with non-transgender advocates from the mainstream society) exhibit exercising Right to Freedom such as ‘speech and expression, assembly, association etc.’ which cannot be ignored on the grounds of their sex/ gender ambiguity as it is one of the fundamental rights.

Other transgender welfare schemes introduced by the state includes free Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS), admission in government colleges with full scholarship, free housing scheme for homeless transgenders, formation of SHGs, promotion of IGP's through SHGs, and
issuance of various identity documents including ration (family) card etc. are fundamental rights of an Indian citizen which cannot be denied.

In the pre HIV/AIDS intervention project period transgenders did not contest the state. However when these issues were raised collectively, few fundamentals rights were officially declared by the state government. Most of these rights basically fall under the broader economic, social and cultural rights framework. These economic, social, and cultural rights are recognized by Universal Declaration on Human Rights and hence member states are obliged to respect, protect and fulfill these rights.

However complex issues such as legal definition of transgender sex and gender, legal marriage of transgender (aravani and MtF transgender/ transsexual) with cisgender man etc. are yet to be addressed. Aravani/ MtF transgender in Tamil Nadu are not officially recognized as female/ woman (though after SRS a transsexual can be legally identified as a female), and in this situation legal marriage of a aravani/ MtF transgender with a cisgender man will raise many questions on inclusion of aravani/ MtF transgender within the ‘woman’ category. These are some issues which transgender activists are keen to raise in the coming future.

When the state will respond to these issues it will not only impact transgender sex and gender definition but also transgender position within various social institutions within the larger mainstream society. With these pending issues, transgender activism is gaining momentum in Tamil Nadu. Contemporary transgender issues such as trans(gender) identities, right to marriage, right to property (share in family property), right to adopt a child etc. are expected to be raised in the near future.

As citizens of India fundamental rights already exists, however existence of rights and exercising rights are two different things. The same is in the case of transgenders. Unless and until something is exercised and challenged, till then one does not know its applicability and usage.

What differentiates hijra situation in the Western-and-North Indian states and elsewhere with aravani and other MtF identities in Tamil Nadu is the assertiveness of fundamental rights and absence of strong aravani jamaat system in Tamil Nadu.

Stigma and discrimination, non-acceptance of gender transition by family members, and denial of fundamental rights were some of the major reasons for aravanis to migrate to
Western-and-North Indian states and join the *hijra jamaat*. The *hijra jamaat* became a safe haven for gender transition and for *hijra* traditional livelihood options. Transgenders were also trafficked to these Western-and-North Indian states which is violation of fundamental rights, and also violation of individual rights within the closed top-down *hijra jamaat* subculture. Though the *jamaat* is considered a safe place for its members, certain norms of the community are hindrance in leading an independent and individual life and expression of various trans(gender) identities and multiple sexualities.

Just like the *hijra jamaat*, there is *aravani jamaat* in Tamil Nadu too. There is no give-and-take relationship (which is a prominent feature of the *hijra jamaat*) between the *aravani jamaat* in Tamil Nadu and the *hijra jamaat* elsewhere in India. *Aravani jamaat* is not considered a part of the larger *hijra jamaat* system. The first exclusion starts from there by not considering *aravani jamaat* a part of the larger dominant *hijra jamaat* across India. *Aravani jamaat* in Tamil Nadu thus remains an isolated and secluded entity.

Moreover *aravani jamaat* rules in Tamil Nadu are not strict and stringent as compared to the Western-and-North Indian *hijra* community norms and the *aravani jamaat* does not control its members. Secondly the guru-*chela* top-down power-control hierarchy is also not rigidly followed by *aravanis* and MtF transgenders in Tamil Nadu. There are conservative *aravani jamaat* leaders with pro third gender and pro *jamaat* norms perspectives, and there are *aravanis* and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals with liberal and forwarding thinking attitude.

Decreasing control of the *aravani jamaat* over *aravanis*, diminishing traditional *aravani* sub-cultural practices within an office setting, and multiple voices from across Tamil Nadu strongly against *jamaat* patriarchal values (such as domination, suppression, top-down power-control hierarchy, violation of transgender rights within a closed community system etc.), preference for desired identity/ identities, expression of oneself within the sex/ gender binary, and acceptance of multiple transgender sexualities are the major highlights of transgender lived experiences in Tamil Nadu.

While moving closer to welfare and development transgenders denounce age-old traditional *jamaat* norms and lead an individualistic life. Moreover new meanings are added to identities through adaptation of western terminologies, either solely or in combination. Though there is division/ proliferation of these ideas within Tamil Nadu, what holds them all together for activism is the ‘we-feeling’ of identity/ identities.
In the words of Diani (1992: 7) “A social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity.” Transgender collectivization in Tamil Nadu is around ‘we-ness’ associated with the MtF identity.

Also Bernstein (2005) mentions that identities play an important role in social movements for mobilization of its members. Without identity issue the social movement will not have a meaning. Thus the ‘we-ness’ of trans(gender) identity/identities brings various transgender groups for collective action.

Aravanis can easily seek legal help and protection from the judiciary system. Aravani jamaat rules are not necessarily followed in an organizational (CBO/ NGO) set-up. Importance is given to transgender (individual) rights. All these examples exhibit non-adherence to aravani sub-cultural jamaat norms, and within the Human Rights framework (in other words transgender rights) community members collectively seek judiciary and state’s intervention to exercise their fundamental rights.

The concept of ‘individual resistance’86 can be applied to transgender model in Tamil Nadu. Non-adherence to aravani jamaat norms reflects resistance to traditional jamaat practices. It is not only individual resistance but also aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals as groups resist community norms. It is not just ‘individual resistance’ but also ‘group resistance’.

In the words of Foucault (1976: 95) “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” One is always inside power and there is no escape from it, there is no absolute outside as one is subject to the law.

Though aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals escape aravani jamaat norms, they abide by the state’s decision when the state enforces welfare reforms in the form of various welfare schemes to ‘normalize’ marginalized transgender population. In the absence of strong jamaat control, the state as its responsibility takes over the control and implements its welfare reforms. The state thus comes in the power position where it has an authority over its subjects.

86 Individual resistance as discussed by Agarwal (1998).
Current transgender situation in Tamil Nadu demonstrates that traditional community (sub-cultural) structure loses its importance when the state intervenes and enforces welfare reforms. The traditional *aravani jamaat* does not counter-interact with the state’s decision and the *jamaat* members too utilize the state’s welfare schemes and live as one of its citizen. The *jamaat* exists on one side and on the other side the state implements its welfare schemes. Both these entities exist as parallel entities. While moving closer to welfare and development, *aravani jamaat* loses its importance and traditional values and transgenders prefer to lead a liberal, independent and individualistic life away from the control and gaze of the *jamaat*.

The welfare schemes introduced by the state reflect a mainstreaming model for transgender population. Admission in government colleges with full scholarship for higher education, availability of loan through SHGs for starting IGPs etc. demonstrate that the state is ready to provide certain services which allows marginalized transgender population to blend into the mainstream society and lead a normalized life.

6.4. **Breaking Away From the Binary**

Free SRS for transgenders in Tamil Nadu as part of transgender welfare reforms is also one major achievement in terms of access to transgender health care services. SRS is an utmost important transgender/transsexual agenda. The free SRS scheme in Tamil Nadu is a good initiative to curb the crude castration process which is illegal (but still practiced by some quacks and by older *hijras/ aravanis* in a traditional method) and also has many health complications in the absence of proper medical care.

According to International Classification of Diseases-10 (ICD-10) of WHO (1992) and DSM-IV of APA (2000) transsexualism is classified as a mental disorder. In the process of availing SRS services in many countries, transsexual patients pass through a rigid process of psychological and physical examination to undergo SRS to alter to the desired (opposite) sex. It is a step-by-step process.

Free SRS for transgenders in Tamil Nadu is appreciated as it deals with Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria of transgenders, which is a medical condition, and is important from a mental health perspective. However SRS protocols followed in Tamil Nadu is unclear. Transgenders desiring free SRS undergo both physical and psychological tests and also a recommendation from transgender community (mainly members from the Transgender Welfare Board) for the surgery. Though the state constructs a female body through free SRS
scheme, it does not identify *aravani* and MtF transgender/ transsexual as a female/ woman (except for voter id and passport).

Traditionally transsexuals undergo medical-technological intervention to alter their body and to fit into the fixed sex binary (Finn and Dell 1999). However within Tamil Nadu, even after complete SRS they have the liberty to choose *aravani* as their gender identity.

The mismatch of sex/ gender on various documents issued to transgenders in Tamil Nadu demonstrates inability of the state to solve transgender sex/ gender definition. Tamil Nadu state does not thrust any gender identity on transgenders irrespective of the operated/ non-operated, and SRS status. For example, non-sex and non-gender terms such as *aravani* and transgender used on the G.O.s, Policy Notes, and on various documents issued to transgenders in Tamil Nadu explain ambiguity of the state. By doing so the state unconsciously disrupts the binary. The state creates a sexless and genderless citizenship model by not placing transgenders within the sex/ gender binary.

Traditionally citizenship is heteronormative with male as head of the household (Johnson 2002). However *aravani* transgender citizenship in Tamil Nadu compulsorily does not follow heteronormative citizenship model as *aravani* transgender is the sex/ gender used on documents and it is considered a politically correct identity term.

It is an alternative model to deal with issues of transgender bodies and transgender gender norms, and stands counter to cultural values that define sex and gender binary definitions such as male/ female and man/ woman respectively. If sex and sexuality is compulsorily heteronormative, and gender has rigid boundaries and is enacted (Butler 1990: 49, 63, 148), then example of *aravani* body in Tamil Nadu demonstrate (non) heteronormative construction of transgender body.

Here the sexed body and gender binary cease their importance. For e.g. if a non-operated *aravani* or MtF transgender/ transsexual has a relationship with a cisgender man, her gender identity will remain *aravani* (a recognition given by the state) which is non-sex/ non-gender, her sex will be biological male as she has not undergone SRS, and her sexuality cannot be termed heterosexual because of her biological (male) sex as she still has male reproductive organ. If the sex is not defined, the gender is not constructed according to the cultural values, and if the sexuality is non-heteronormative, then in this example the transgender living with a cisgender man as a wife (either married openly in public places, or married secretly, or living together in a live-in relationship), living as a family with adopted children, demonstrate that it
is perceived as a heterosexual couple, such relationships exist, and are accepted in the larger society. This kind of a family’s existence in the larger society explains that there is a social acceptance of transgender bodies (irrespective of their operated/ non-operated status) within the family institution and they assimilate within the mainstream society. Generally marriage is recognized as an institution with couple from opposite sex and transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu abide by notions of compulsory heteronormative family/marriage structure but delink it from bodies fixed as a binary. However there is no legal recognition of transgender marriages, child adoption, and formation of families.

In some cultures, cross-gender identity (for e.g. the two-spirited people in Native American culture, the acault in Myanmar, the fa’affine and fa’afatama in Samoa, the fakaleiti in Tonga, the Papua in New Guinea Sambia, and the fatima on Fiji) and behaviour are not considered a disorder and they have a cultural and traditional significance (Fraser et al. 2010). The hijra/aravani identity fit under the definitions of cross-gender identity and expressions in the Indian society and they have a significant cultural role in India. Cross-gender identity and expression is not completely considered a disorder across the world.

Furthermore hijras in the Indian society is not necessarily a mental illness and the hijra identity enjoys a positive position in the Indian culture as compared to transgenders in the western culture (Kalra 2011).

Thus within a religious-cultural context, identities and bodies outside the sex/gender binary boundaries have acceptance and they exist alongside with cisgender men and women in the larger mainstream society. At the same time when these identities and bodies come under medical-technological intervention (in this case aravanis and MtF transgenders/transsexuals in Tamil Nadu) through SRS (and psychiatric evaluation, body modifications etc.), they cease their religious-cultural importance as they move closer to the sex/gender binary by adapting certain attributes of those binaries. While moving closer to welfare and development, the sub-cultural traditional jamaat values lose their importance.

Hijras in India are an epitome of the woman identity. Though they are not biological females they reflect feminity (Menon 2009). Menon (ibid.) discusses issues related to lesbians within the context of HIV/AIDS and mentions that sex between lesbians is not considered high risk behaviour as compared to MSM and hijras. The biological female body (in this case lesbian) is in tension with the ‘gendered female body’ (in this case the hijra). However when hijra bodies are perceived as a gender female body, and the case of two court judgments in which
two *hijras*[^87] were not permitted to contest in election for the posts reserved for women, demonstrate the non-inclusion of *hijras* in the woman/ female category only because of the reason that their biological sex was not a female. Here the question arises on the political representation of *hijra* identities and the second observation is that *hijra* bodies are reduced to biological organism to be legally identified as a female to participate in a political process. Menon (2009: 101) further raises the question ‘can *hijras* represent women in constituencies reserved for women?’

Though the state of Tamil Nadu does not thrust any sex/ gender definition on transgender bodies, both transgenders and general public have heteronormative view towards transgender sexuality. Moreover transgenders passing as a woman, and consideration of ‘self’ as a woman largely depends on the cultural and social values.

### 6.5. The Sexed Body and Unsexed Gender Relations

*Aravanis* and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals are considered women if they portray themselves as submissive, passive, helpless victim of power, soft natured, good etc. They can blend into the mainstream society as a woman if they refrain from indecent stereotypical *aravani* image such as lifting skirt in the public, clapping hands, using abusive language etc.

Cultural and social values within various patriarchal institutions define this typical kind of cisgender woman in the mainstream society (Thapan 2009). And so is in the case of *aravanis* and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals in Tamil Nadu.

Within the Tamil Nadu context, Dhara (2006) has shown a link between Tamil politics, cinema, and portrayal of women. Actor MGR depicted the role of a hero fighting everyday oppression. In most of his films, women had an unprecedented freedom to choose their love or man for marriage. Women’s ‘movements of freedom’ such as marrying a man of her choice which was not usually happening in their everyday lives, was shown within the caste or class context. Moreover in real rural life in Tamil Nadu, upper-caste landlords consider access and control over women as their authority.

In MGR films women were also shown expressing their sexuality. Culturally a woman is expected to earn her reputation as a moral being through controlled physical desire. Contrary to that MGR films showed the heroine taking an initiative to express her love first, daydream

[^87]: Kamla Jaan and Shabnam Mausi.
of her hero and pursue him which is not acceptable in real life. Furthermore the heroine also
dreams of a song-and-dance sequence, where the songs are shown expressing her sexual act.
What was actually prohibited in real life for women was expressed in Tamil films.

Dhara (ibid.) further mentions that within the Tamil society gender roles and sexual mores are
constructed in order to show women as cultural ‘carriers’, where the carriers relate to family
honour, community honour, and cultural honour is also attached to chastity of a woman. So if
a woman is humiliated then the whole community is humiliated. In this whole process the
institutions family, community, and culture are interconnected. In this the family is at the
centre encircled by the community and it produces the notion of traditional culture.

The notion to consider aravani as women if they successfully adapt cultural role of a woman
portray that they are also put within the social-constructed gender boxes. However their
biological body is not a hindrance to be considered as a woman. If a body adapts context
specific traditional-cultural values then it can easily accommodate itself within a binary, and
so is in the case of aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals in Tamil Nadu.

The concept of two cultures, dominant culture and trans subculture mentioned by Bettcher
(2012) can be viewed here too. Though transcontextually (i.e. across all or most contexts)
‘woman’ remains the same, a trans woman will not be counted as woman transcontextually in
various contexts where chromosomal karyotype is considered an important parameter to be
called as a woman.

However within the Tamil Nadu culture, aravanis are considered woman if they abide by
cultural values. The importance of biological body decreases. Absence or presence of
genitalia is of no importance in identifying oneself as woman. And thus the saying
‘biological body is not the destination to be called as a woman’ very well suits transgender
model. However there are limitations and it is related to procreation.

Generally trans subculture too asserts that biological body is not the criteria to be considered
as a woman (Bettcher 2012). However within the Tamil Nadu context, though socially a
transgender is accepted as a woman, in the absence of procreation she still remains a gender
transitioned body. She is not considered a complete woman in the absence of child birth.
Procreation is purely a biological process. It reduces transgender bodies to natural body vs.
social-cultural construction of the body.
Though the terms aravani, transgender, and transsexual are synonyms (or used interchangeably) for MtF transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu, their body politics exhibit intersectionality of social, cultural, political, sex/ gender, and medical-technological discourse. They explain the non-fixed nature of both sex and gender. They can be socially and medically altered. Transgenders transitioning from one gender to the other exhibit non-fixed nature of gender. While transsexuals undergo medical-technological intervention to alter their bodies to fit into the fixed sex binary. The gender of transgender is fluid, while the sex of a transsexual body can also remain un-fixed. A transgender can be in between, neither, or something different.

However according to Finn and Dell (1999) MtF transsexual alters her body to fit into the rigid sex binary. She becomes invisible by aligning with ‘gender roles and stereotypes’. Her body is considered healthy, while non-aligning bodies become unhealthy and they are visible because of their non-conformity to sex and gender binary. The visible body is thus pathologized as an illness and hence undergoes medicine and psychological intervention to become invisible within the larger society.

Visibility vs. non-visibility and alignment vs. non-alignment of aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals is not problematic in Tamil Nadu. It is context specific. And that is what Alexander (2005) and Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) mention that it is through lived experiences of transgenders that one can see the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, identity, and body politics. Thus transgender body politics are context specific issue. What is acceptable in one culture may not be accepted in another.

This is what transgender bodies in Tamil Nadu differ with their counterparts in the western countries. Sex/ gender is rigid in the west, and transgenders/ transsexuals are expected to fit within the binaries. This is not so in the case of aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals in Tamil Nadu. Not only MtF community members, but the state government too places their body outside the sex/ gender binary.

Though biologically through free SRS an aravani and MtF transgender/ transsexual body is constructed as a female, socially and culturally because of her submissiveness, passiveness, softness, good character etc. she is considered a woman, lack of procreation does not make her a complete woman. Though after SRS transsexuals can have heterosexual copulation with their cisgender male partner, she is not considered a woman in the absence of procreation.
Within the mainstream society, cisgender women too have similar views on incompleteness of their body in the absence of procreation (Thapan 2009). Cisgender women are considered barren or incomplete if they don’t conceive. It is considered a shame for her, her spouse and her in-laws family.

In the context of procreation, there are ‘sex positive’ and ‘sex negative’ societies (Kalra et al. 2010). In sex positive societies, sexual activity and sexual act is seen as meant for pleasure while in sex negative societies the main function of sex is procreation. Furthermore as hijras/aravanis are seen in the ‘third gender’ or ‘neither man nor woman’ context and they are examples of non-western transgenders. Kalra (ibid.) emphasizes on an emic approach i.e. culturally appropriate look for hijras, and not label them according to the western binary definitions of gender i.e. etic approach.

Thus if hijras/aravanis and MtF transgenders/ transsexuals are viewed from a ‘sex positive’ view then it eliminates the problem of procreation.

If biologically sexes had the role to procreate (Foucault 1976), then the third gender (hijral aravani) within an Indian context and within religious-cultural discourse has a significant role to bless cisgender couple/ sexes to procreate/ reproduce in order to continue their familial lineage, then this role of third gender counter-interacts with the concept of ‘biology of reproduction’ of sexes.

This discussion leads us to an understanding that both dominant culture and trans subcultures are also context specific. If in the western world transgenders are not considered a woman within the dominant culture, then within Tamil Nadu aravani and MtF transgender/transsexual is considered a woman within the dominant culture if she adheres to the traditional-cultural-social values.

What is unique in Tamil Nadu (and in India) is the acceptance of a body outside the sex/gender binary. Third gender (or in other words a body outside the sex/gender binary which is recognized as a third gender) is legitimate/ licit by itself in the Indian society. It exists by itself. Acceptance of a gender outside the sex/gender binary within an Indian context highlights presence and acceptance of these bodies.

However transgender sexuality is viewed from a heteronormative lens. It is taboo that makes sexuality normative both within the aravani jamaat subculture and also within the larger
mainstream society. It is also within the *jamaat* system that power is exercised on multiple transgender sexualities.

The power of *jamaat* is exercised over *hijra/ aravani* body to treat pleasure deviant derived from lesbian/bisexual orientation. Sexual relationship between a *hijra/ aravani/ MtF transgender/ transsexual* with a cisgender man is acceptable, but transgender lesbian/bisexual still remain an unbeatable and under-discussed topic. It is nothing but ‘policing of sex’ and sex remains an ‘object of secrecy’. The operation of *aravani jamaat* power over transgender sexuality is through the mechanisms of law (fine), taboo (acceptable/ non-acceptable), and censorship (silence). If something is non-acceptable members are fined, there is taboo with transgender-lesbian/transgender-bisexual, and it remains a silent issue within the *aravani* sub-cultural context.

MtF transgenders/transsexuals are mistaken for the *hijra* identity. There is a difference between a *hijra/ aravani*, transgender (woman), and transsexual (woman). Even if *aravani* is the mirror image of *hijra*, not all *aravanis* consider themselves a *hijra*. There is preference for identity term.

*Hijra, aravani, transgender* (woman), transsexual (woman), or just woman are the MtF trans(gender) identities that exists in Tamil Nadu. Use of terms and preference for identity is location, and class-cultural specific.

Educated *aravanis*/ MtF transgenders and transsexuals from cities and bigger towns are more comfortable with using the western term transgender, while the traditional terms *hijra/ aravani* are used by those from a lower socio-economic background mainly in rural and smaller towns.

Butler (nd: 103) raises the question ‘If gender is constructed, then who is doing the construction? In the case of *aravanis* and MtF transgenders/transsexuals in Tamil Nadu, it is the ‘self’ that constructs its own gender, and it falls in line with sociologists view that the body is a carrier of the ‘self’ (Davis 1997).

If there is a preference for identity/identities and if transgenders are assertive about their otherness, and if the state too acknowledges existence of these identities and bodies outside

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88 ‘Policing of sex’ and sex as an ‘object of secrecy’ as discussed by Foucault (1976: 25, 34).
89 Concepts of law, taboo, and censorship as discussed by Foucault (1976: 84).
the sex/ gender binary, then this non-genderization of trans(gender) identities help us to understand that gender is not a rigid binary boundary within certain context.

Preference for identity is one of the reasons for division/ proliferation within various transgender collectives in Tamil Nadu. Many *aravani* and MtF transgenders were purposely not included in federations or *sangams* only because they were either affiliated to the *aravani jamaat* and had a pro third gender, pro *aravani jamaat*, or had pro heteronormative sexuality perspective. Inclusion and exclusion within various groups largely depends on preference for trans(gender) identity/ identities and sexuality.

*Aravani* and MtF transgender/ transsexuality is viewed from a heteronormative lens. Though there is silent acknowledgment of multiple transgender sexualities it is not discussed openly. There is a taboo with non-heteronormative transgender sexuality and especially within the *aravani jamaat* system.

Though the *aravani jamaat* is pro third gender and pro heteronormative towards transgender sexuality, transgenderist and general public views on various trans(gender) identities and multiple sexualities are mixed views. The mixed views reflect diversity both within the dominant culture and within the trans subculture.

In the words of Halberstam (1999: 132):

> The breakdown of genders and sexualities into identities is in many ways, therefore, an endless project, and it is perhaps preferable therefore to acknowledge that gender is defined by its transitivity, that sexuality manifests as multiple sexualities, and that therefore we are all transsexuals. There are no transsexuals.

Transgender body politics in Tamil Nadu give an opportunity to understand existence of various trans(gender) identities and multiple transgender sexualities. Transgender citizenship is non-gendered. The state of Tamil Nadu officially acknowledges existence of transgender bodies outside the sex/ gender binary. Such recognition by the state plays an important role in solving transgender sex/ gender issues by accepting fluidity of bodies. By doing so the fixed sex/ gender binaries are not disrupted as transgender bodies are accepted as they are. This leads to a non-heteronormative citizenship model.

At the same time if transgender bodies are viewed from a ‘sex positive’ perspective, it will eliminate the problems associated with non-procreation of MtF transgenders. It is a liberatory possibility which does not disrupt relationships between MtF transgenders and their
cisgender partners (usually men), which is a positive step to accept existence of such relationships that are consensual, harmonious, and egalitarian irrespective of the physical bodies or their gender performance. Thus it will eliminate the gender performance of the socially constructed body and reproduction of the biological sexed body.