THESIS ABSTRACT

The research study aims to highlight the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of aravani movement emergence in Tamil Nadu, India. However, politics of use of terminologies, preference for various trans(gender) identity/identities, multiple transgender sexualities, transgender passing as a woman, and procreation (to be considered a complete woman) within the location and class-cultural context also came out as important points of discussion during the research study.

A qualitative research methodology was used to collect data from primary respondents such as MtF transgender (hijra/aravani) activists, transgenders from various Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and individual transgender/transsexual rights activists. Secondary respondents (multiple stakeholders/actors) included cisgender men and women (also called as non-transgender advocates of transgender welfare and development) from various backgrounds such as NGOs, academicians, researchers, human rights activists, civil society members, and government officials. Purposive sampling method and snowball sampling technique were used to contact both primary and secondary respondents. In-depth unstructured and in-depth structured interviewing methods were used to collect data from both primary and secondary respondents. Group discussions were conducted with transgenders from various transgender CBOs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Content analysis of Government Orders (G.O.s) and secondary sources such as internet, newspaper articles, NGO reports etc. were done. Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005 was also filed with various state government departments.

Field data revealed that there is no overarching transgender movement in Tamil Nadu. However, transgender collectives exist in the form of CBOs, sangams, federations, autonomous groups (both registered and non-registered) etc. in Tamil Nadu. Transgender collectivization exhibit few features of (new) social movements. The historicity of transgender rights activism, collectivization, and movement development, various campaigns and events, transgender welfare reforms introduced and implemented by the state government are explained in the thesis. Leadership issues within the emerging transgender movement, decreasing top-down power-
control hierarchy within the aravani jamaat system and inclusion and exclusion of members within various CBOs, sangams, federations etc. are highlighted. There is a preference for use of terminologies and trans(gender) identity/identities, and transgender sexuality is viewed from a heteronormative lens. Preference for trans(gender) identities and transgender sexuality lead to multiple positions of transgenders both within the aravani subculture and also within the mainstream society which is (non) heteronormative. Body modifications are not important criterion for transgenders to pass as woman. MtF transgenders are looked upon as an epitome of feminity. Socially MtF transgenders are accepted as women if they adapt traditional-cultural-social values. However in the absence of procreation they remain an incomplete woman. The state of Tamil Nadu has created a non-heteronormative citizenship model for transgenders by giving citizenship as an ‘aravani’ and by not placing them rigidly under the sex/gender binary definition (nevertheless irrespective of providing free SRS schemes for transgenders/transsexuals which is largely derived from medical-technological intervention model). Acceptance of third gender within the religious-cultural context in India has facilitated accommodation of gender transgressed bodies outside the sex/gender. Transgender body politics in Tamil Nadu explain the rigid nature of biological body and fluidity of socially constructed gendered body.