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Koovagam Festival: Traditional, Societal and Political Impact on Transgender Community

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ABSTRACT

This paper is dedicated to Traditions and societal customs of Koovagam Festival (annual festival celebrated by Transgender community at Viluppuram, Tamil Nadu) Transgender, popularly known as 'aravanis', are in the midst of celebrating the 18-day-long Koovagam festival, an annual event that attracts their kind from abroad, including Singapore and Malaysia, and from across the countryside, including Delhi, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It is a folk date backs to Mahabharata period and it's relevance in present day is analyzed in this paper. The community and it's interaction among the society during the 18 day long festival has been discussed in detail. Koovagam festival is an annual event where traditionally selected transgender are married to Aravan and later next day after his death the married Transgender becomes a widow. Transgender community from various part of the world and India joins and educates the community in itself on safe sex and Aids awareness. I will be discussing with the comments of the locals and their views on this festival in detail. This festival is criticized for its nature of seducing locals for sex by transgender community and it has turned to lure for sex rather than the cultural and traditional aspect to it. The paper brings focus on the issue faced by the non community members and the transgender community like shop keepers, local public, hotel owners and the transgender community itself. This paper also aims to provide solution to such problem in three category as classified as follows, Police and District administration, Acceptance among the society or inclusivity and self regulating mechanism of Transgender Community.

Keywords: Koovagam, Viluppuram, Transgender, Aravan and Tradition.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is rooted to it's tradition, culture and longstanding customs. As a source of equality and living with dignity in the society in South India there is a temple located Koovagam, Viluppuram District, Tamil Nadu which is dedicated to Aravan the central God of Kuttantavar. Lord Aravan story is said to be the origin of third gender in Indian Culture. Before Lord Aravan,

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Ardhanareeshvara was considered to be only form of integrity of both genders. This is a festival that integrate the transgender community by bringing them to one stage and one single platform. Though third gender is recognized late by Indian legal system, Indian cultural system was very long accepted the third gender by worshipping Lord Aravan. Hijras, Eunuchs, apart from binary gender, be treated as “third gender” for the purpose of safeguarding their rights under Part III of our Constitution and the laws made by the Parliament and the State Legislature.²The Koovagam festival is an important festival of Transgender community celebrated by transgender all over India and from other countries also. Transgender community has been facing large amount hatred like Untouchability and forced to business of begging and prostitution. Koovagam is more like a Hindu Traditional festival and never represent a pride parade like marching festival for LGBTQ rights.

II. MYTHOLOGY OF KOOVAGAM FESTIVAL

Koovagam festival is celebrated for Lord Krishna sacrificing Aravan for Mahabharata war. Aravan is a character from the epic Mahabharata who was son of Arjun and Ulupi. Arjun married Ulupi while he was in an exile for 12 years to breaking the marriage vows with Draupadi.

“ब्राह्मणैः सह तीर्थान्यटतोऽर्जुनस्य स्नानार्थं गङ्गायामवतरणम् ॥ 1 ॥

तत्र उलूष्या नागकन्यया गृहीतस्यार्जुनस्य नागलोकगमनम् ॥ 2 ॥

संवादपूर्वकमुलूष्याः परिग्रहः ॥ 3 ॥

इरावत उत्पत्तिः ॥ 4 ॥

अर्जुनं पुनर्गङ्गाद्वारमुपनीय उलूष्या स्वलोकगमनम् ॥ 5 ॥”³

The verse above mentioned means,

“Arjun’s descent into the Ganges for a bath while wandering in holy places with the Brahmins There Arjun, captured by the serpent-daughter Ulupi, went to the world of serpents.

The marriage of Ulupi before dialogue.

The origin of the Iravata (Aravan) .

² National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India and others

³ Mahabharata, Adiparva chapter 234

<https://sa.m.wikisource.org/wiki/%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%B9%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%AD%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%A4%E0%A4%AE%E0%A5%8D-01-%E0%A4%86%E0%A4%A6%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%B0%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B5-234>
(Visited on 21st May, 2023, 16:05 PM)

Arjun was again brought to the gate of the Ganges and Ulupi went to her own world.

After the birth of Aravan”

Later at the time of Mahabharata war it is noted in Bhishma Parva regarding the sacrifice of Lord Aravan. Shakuni the uncle of Duryodhana tells him that he should perform Kalappali, a battlefield (kalam) sacrifice (pali) to Kali to guarantee victory of kauravays. In response to Shakuni, Bhishma opined Aravan is the most suitable victim for the Kalappali, and he insisted that Duryodhana should ask Sahadeva (whom the Tamil tradition regards as a great astrologer) the ideal time for the sacrifice. Truthful and sincerity towards his astrological profession, Sahadeva tells Duryodhana that the correct time for the sacrifice is midnight of the Amavasya. If he performs it then, It will spell certain victory. Duryodhana then obtains Aravan’s agreement to come secretly to the battlefield to be sacrificed the following night, and leaves.

In the camp of Pandavas’, Lord Krishna now takes this matters in his own hand. After knowledge of Duryodhana’s plan, Krishna asks the Pandavas to perform Kalappali before Duryodhana offering Kalappali. But only slowly does he reveal how it must be done and who must be the victim: It will be performed to Goddess Kali, or more exactly, to the “Great Kali of Heroes,” as part of the ayudhapuja the ceremonial blessing of weapons that occurs traditionally as a sub rite during Dussehra festivals, where it is connected with the opening of military campaigns at the end of the rainy season, and more specifically, with the opening of the armory.

The various epic accounts says that when Aravan stepped forth he chided Dharma for his vacillation, and says that as he is obviously the victim Dharma would prefer, he would agree to perform the Kalappali for the Pandavas were it not that he had already promised the same to Duryodhana. Dharma congratulates Aravan’s courageous dedication to his “father” Duryodhana, and leaves it to Krishna to work out the details so that Aravan’s Kalappali will be performed for the right side. Finally Lord Krishna orchestrates the sacrifice. He asks Aravan if he will cheat in any way, and Aravan assures him he is fearless. Krishna then tells him to take up a knife for the miracle of cutting his own body. Aravan tells Krishna to regard his firmness. He is ready for the battlefield sacrifice, but requests three boons in compensation.

KUTTANTAVAR THIRUVIZHA

Viluppuram turns into a festive mode for 18 days to remember the sacrifice made by Aravan in Mahabharata war. The transgender community comes in large numbers to Koovagam make themselves as Mohini and get married to Aravan as it is considered auspicious and the transgender community believe that since Krishna took the avatar of a woman despite being a man, He is one of them. This form of acceptance from God is what to be communicated among

the society. The Koovagam festival usual happens in April and May as per the chitra poornami as per the Tamil calendar. The festival is carried out for 18 days as marking the Mahabharata war took place for 18 days in which 16 days the Transgender community enjoys by doing various activities like singing, dancing, fire walking, Beauty contest. They also select Miss Koovagam by organizing a beauty contest and a fashion show. The selected persons tie the knot with Aravan on 17th Day. On 18th Day Aravan replica made and his head would be sacrificed to goddess kali by Lord Krishna in the form of Mohini.

WIDOWHOOD AFTER THE DEATH OF ARAVANA

After the death of Aravan the Transgender who married Aravan by tying ‘Thali’ (a yellow thread with a piece of turmeric) which is like mangalsutra in Tamil culture will be cut and they will be staying in widowhood for three days for the death of their husband Aravan. It is act done with a real sense and emotion by the transgender to show case the rich cultural values in Hindu mythology. The Indian classical cultural which is a way of life.⁴ Aravan’s sacrifice was regarded as supreme by Lord Krishna and so the form took by him as Mohini was a woman in a man’s body that’s the reality of Transgender so Lord Krishna named the form of a woman in a man’s body as Aravani. Which later become derogatory day by day due to it’s usage in the form of mocking. In 2006, then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi replaced the former title ‘Aravani’ and replaced it with the more dignified ‘Thirunangai’. A Welfare Board was set up with this name under the Social Welfare Department to empower the trans community.

III. A COMMUNITY OF UNEQUALS CAN RAISE VOICE FOR EQUALITY

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples.”
Mother Teresa.

It is a proven fact that when some community is ill-treated if they refuse to join hand in hand to solve the problem then the strength of unity cannot be gained. The transgender by organizing this kind of community program can strengthen their voice for their rights and also standup for problems facing community members. A strong community is good source of power and opportunities. The community build up to safeguard such cultural and traditional practices can bring a large amount of change among the society. The change happens in a society only after the community is interlinked with the society and communicates the point of view and argue for rights and responsibility.

The Koovagam Festival brings out the Transgender community to build up their own

⁴ Dr. Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhoo vs Shri Prabhakar Kashinath Kunte & Ors. 1996 AIR 1113, 1996 SCC (1) 130

community and work along with the society, Interact with the society to safeguard the rights of transgender community at large.

IV. KOOVAGAM A PLACE OF AIDS AND HIV AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

India has the world's third largest population living with HIV – 2.1 million people – according to UNAIDS, with recognition that help is needed in the transgender community where the prevalence is 3.1% compared to 0.26% among all adults.⁵ This can be addressed to the community by focusing on sex education and promoting safe sex by use on condoms.

Many Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) that work to curb HIV/AIDS were always present at Viluppuram during the Koovagam festival. They use this occasion to educate and aware trans-gender community on the risks of the deadly virus.

Prominent among them is the Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative (TAI) which is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. According to 2003 data, there are 40,000 Aravanis in Tamil Nadu. TAI is working with 10,000 Aravanis in 14 districts of the state.

“The Koovagam festival has been happening for several decades, but for the last few years, the number of Transgender and local population coming here has increased tremendously. So also the risks of HIV/AIDS. As a group,

Transgender community is more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than even Female Sex Workers (FSW) because they are marginalized and do not receive proper medical care and support required from the family. It is also very difficult to work with Transgender Community as they are closed books and it is hard to make them listen to those education and awareness. So, this Koovagam festival is a great opportunity to educate them on the risks of HIV/AIDS,”

As stated earlier, an annual beauty pageant is also held, as well as various health and HIV/AIDS seminars and cultural programmes. The fashion contest included a question and answer session to decide the winner. The questions quizzed them on their knowledge of HIV/AIDS. The message in all of them was prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Transgender from all over the country travel to Koovagam festival. They stay in lodges and hotels at Viluppuram and some in the small huts of relatives or friends in the village itself. During night they engage in singing, dancing and even open sexual activities.

PROSTITUTION AT HIGH DURING KOOVAGAM FESTIVAL

Koovagam Festival is celebrated as a cultural and traditional aspect of the epic story. The

⁵ Annie Banerji, India's HIV-positive trans people find 'new strength' in technology
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-lgbt-healthcare-idUSKBN1WU1BT>

festival is not meant for sex or prostitution. During the Koovagam Festival The K. K road situated near to the old bus terminus at Viluppuram were the red light that lure the Hordes of men who are already lined up on either side of the street for sex. Among them manly were very curious to know about a sex with transgender, while others who are not interested in it are clearly seen with Uncomfortably.

The Shopkeepers who are unacceptable of these activities on streets points at some dingy lodges and hotels along the K.K road as the real reason for all such activities. The Koovagam festival bring men for a waiting on the road were apparently eager to get a glimpse of Transgender of the lodge or perhaps just wanted to have some 'fun' or gossips. While touring the lodges they are greeted by scantily-clad transgender people sauntering about with liquor bottles in their hands earning their living by prostitution. The corridors were unsanitary and empty liquor bottles lay strewn around. And then there were the hosts 'servicing' their customers with the doors wide open. The lodge owners and hotel owners thinks these were the best few days of the year.

One of whom said "We get more customers in these few days here than we do during our regular sex work. Not that we charge more. It could cost anywhere between Rs 500 to Rs 10,000 depending on the trans gender's looks and the services required along with additional services like liquor and cigarettes," explained one of the occupants, who hailed from Chennai and did not wish to be named. As one of the transgender from the lodge walks to the street, she can look around and immediately identified her customers.

She usually walk up to men who were staring her at the lodge and start up a conversation with them. Usually Ten minutes later, the men follows her into the lodge for sex. Sometimes, the transgenders walk up to their 'customers' making things easy for them, but in most cases, the 'customers' themselves walk into one of the two lodges. "There are some lodges here known and meant only for such activities," says a shopkeeper. And the whole town knows that these lodges house sex workers at this time of the year. More than the transgenders, male residents of Viluppuram were present at the all the cultural events, making it appear as if the festival was being held for them.

AGRICULTURE FIELD A ROOM FOR SEX

During the Final two-day Kuttantavar festival in Koovagam, agriculture farms surrounding the Koovagam village became room for sexual activities on 18th day night. Agriculture peasants and farm owners of the village raised concerns about this activity of the festival which is immoral, unethical and not cultural. And the residents of the village describes it as a problem

of this festival and it also spoils the reputation of the transgender community on the whole. The residents of the village urged authorities and police time and again to take appropriate actions to stop these unethical practice in the agricultural fields.

Agriculture land on either side of the Koovagam-Natham road became areas where the prostitution is carried out in the open. From teenagers to elderly men, several were seen soliciting sexual services from transgenders, who waited in the darkness near the fields. Many also used the areas to drink alcohol, turning open grounds into bars. Several cars and vans were also parked along the road.

On this, K Ayyappan, a PhD scholar who researched the issue, said, “Some transgenders are taking up sex work to meet basic livelihood needs. They are not offered jobs because of social stigma, so, left with no other option, they take to begging and the sex trade.” This trend deteriorates our culture and is completely unacceptable, he added. He further said, “Transgenders who are involved in sex trade should not be punished, rather they should be rehabilitated.”

Samanthi, a transgender from Chennai, said, “Though we are educated, no one offers us jobs. Transgenders run a self-help group and sell sarees, but the income is very little. This forces some to involve in sex trade. The government should formulate a plan to create job opportunities for us.” Ramamurthy, a resident of Viluppuram, said, “Koovagam was like any other religious site. But of late, it has become a prostitution site. However, only some transgenders are involved in sex trade at Koovagam, bringing a bad name to the community. Police needs to curb this practice from next year.”

V. AUTHOR’S BRIEF OPINION

1. Koovagam festival can bring a community development for the socially most backward community.
2. It should be a connecting bridge to the society and the transgender community rather than creating a negative impact on the society by promoting prostitution and disturbing agriculture farms
3. The festival should be celebrate as a cultural one not for promotion of prostitution.
4. The society should also encourage them by participating in large numbers to the events especially women of the town.
5. Koovagam like festival can build a beautiful relationship among Transgender community and society.

6. Police should give protection to the transgender community for the Koovagam festival.
7. The district administration must organize interaction of medical college and law college with the transgender community relating to medical and legal aid camps
8. The NGOs working in and around the state and national level for Transgender Rights should use this opportunity to educate and aware on use of condoms and safe sex
9. Alongside of beauty pageant the organizers should motivate business and other employment opportunities to the community members
10. Alongside of singing and dance, the organizers should motivate sports among the community and encourage them towards their aim.

VI. CONCLUSION

Koovagam festival which brings the Transgender community to one place is an essential festival to be celebrated with state or a national or a local holiday. Transgender community require respect and acceptance which can be brought down by encouraging this kind of festivals. The epic stories relating to LGBTQ in the ancient Hindu literature to be promoted by organizing such kind of festivals. I want to bring out a clear opinion from this paper is, Every Transgender demands respect and acceptability. Lord Krishna turned himself to Mohini to give sacrifice of Aravan. Likewise, the Transgender community has been living this life to motivate sacrifice among the society. Indian traditional values shows equality for all and all are equal.
