



Transformation of the transgender community from vulnerability to empowerment

Looking Back: About the festival

Every year lakhs of people, especially the Aravanis or transgender community, come together for the annual temple festival of Koothandavar, at Koovagam, in Tamil Nadu. The festival commemorates the day when Krishna took on the form of a female to marry Aravan, a handsome young man who was to be sacrificed the following day. It is a theme that the community empathizes with and year after year many of them go through the rituals of marriage and widowhood as a form of worship.

Koovagam: Messaging on Safe Practice

While the festival has been of cultural and religious significance for centuries over the last decade Koovagam in Villupuram district has also been used as an occasion to creatively message on safe sex. And HIV messages have become a part of this town especially during the “wedding night”, which falls on the full moon night in the Tamil month of Chithirai during April – May.

TAI has been working with the transgender community in 12 districts of Tamilnadu since 2004 with the aim of bettering their quality of life and bringing about a health-seeking behavior among them. And more importantly to integrate the community with mainstream society.

From vulnerability to empowerment:

Recent years have witnessed a paradigm shift in the lives of Aravanis. In 2007 they were pleading for integration in mainstream society. Today they speak of how they, “are getting the respect we deserve” and of “The drastic change in the way media and the general public treat us”

“It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see thousands of Aravanis celebrating the festival throughout the night”- Ravi ,a senior Aravani

Significance of this festival today:

Voices of supportive stakeholders:

Dr. Poongothai, Former Minister Social Welfare Board: The Government has just started work on the Welfare Board for the transgender community.

Media: “The transgender in the state had exercised their franchise in the last assembly polls after they got voter I-cards and ration cards.”

Rajathiammal, wife of former TN Chief Minister: “You are all intelligent people who shine very well in all departments.

Justice M.Y. Eqbal: The progress made in fostering public health, systems and affirmative action policies for transgender in Tamil Nadu should be replicated at the national level”



Ms. Geetha Jeevan, Former State Minister for Social Welfare board: "The Tamil Nadu government has initiated several steps to improve the quality of lives of transgender community like issuing ration cards and voter identity cards."

Mr. P. Chidambaram, Former Central Minister: "Treat transgender community with dignity, as they are also citizens of our country"

Justice V. Vikramajit Sen, Delhi High Court: "The judiciary need to enable the transgender right to social inclusion"

Mr. Rajendran, Former state DGP: "Transgender are the children of God, the society should try to help them"

Mr. Kumaraswamy, Former Sub Judge, District Legal Services Authority, Salem: Human rights are common to all, it is important to prevent human right violation against transgender and vulnerable communities"

Mr. Baskar, Former Sub-Judge, District Legal Services Authority, Coimbatore: " The District Legal services Authority will make all the necessary efforts to protect the rights of the transgender community"

Justice Kabir: "The constitution affirms, equality in all spheres and the moot question is whether it is being applied"

Former Minister Ponmudi: "Transgender should overcome all their struggles and lead a confident life"

Koovagam 2006: Reducing risk, raising self esteem

Hundred of Aravanis and Kothi community members came together in Koovagam to celebrate the festival of Koothandavar.

The highlight was a procession by community members to spread goodwill and general health messages. They carried umbrellas with the caption, "Nalladoru Samudayathirku Nangalum" or "We too, for a healthy society" and distributed friendship bands among the general public to reinforce their desire to be recognized as responsible citizen and plead for the integration of their community with mainstream society. As Rani, who was participating in the march remarked, "We are telling everyone how we can also help to build a healthy society." Kishore, who was walking alongside added, "I now interact with members of my community to spread awareness on HIV"

The community also requested permission to meet the District Collector and express their willingness to work for society because as one of them said, "Today we have begun to speak about what we can do for society".



Meanwhile at the exhibition grounds, near the temple, members showcased their talents and their personal achievements through various skills. There were folk arts and theatre performances by a cultural troupe comprising wholly of transgender persons on the cultural theme of Koovagam and the need for safe behavior. And a *kala kalatchebam* or spiritual discourse with song and music on the tradition and the cultural importance of the Koothandavar festival

A mobile health care clinic was also on hand to give free and specialized care to the community for various common health and specific STD problems. While a mobile beauty van run by Aravanis close by provided professional beauty services for the Aravanis. Radha who was on hand to provide services said, “I was trained as beautician and now I am running a saloon in Salem” while her colleague who added, “Initially, we faced some problems in marketing as people were not ready to talk to us. But slowly, our beauty parlor is catching up”

TAI-ARM also honored some veteran Aravanis who have been role models to the younger generations.

Community voices quoted in the media:

“Now we are getting deserved respect.”

“Today, no one dares to say anything and people call me beautician madam”

“More than 50% of the general community has accepted us”

“It gave meaning to the HIV prevention work we are doing for the past two years”

“We want to take part in public interest causes like polio eradication, blood and eye donation”

“I found lot of happiness in spreading the message that ‘We too are for a healthy society’”

“We stress the importance of HIV prevention, good health, blood donation, eye donation”

“I was trained in Inter-personal Communications, I now interact with the members of my community to spread awareness on HIV/AIDS”

“We focus on other human interest issues besides spreading information on HIV”

“We want to tell people that we are also responsible to the social values”

Koovagam 2007: Recognition of rights and a life free of S&D

“The Government order to meet our needs has made us very happy.”

More than 500 Aravanis participated in a rally to thank the Government for a new order that recognized the community’s concerns and deep sense of estrangement from the dominant gender identity while



announcing a plethora of measures to ensure their day-to-day social integration with mainstream society and claim their right to live a life free of stigma and discrimination.

Key highlights of the Government Order:

- *The Government in its order states that: Aravanis are those who are biologically born as a male but feel like a "woman trapped in a man's body."*
- *The Government has mandated the schools and administration to extend services such as counseling for children and family.*
- *"Admission to School and Colleges cannot be denied on the basis of their sexual identity. If any report is received of Aravanis being denied admission, suitable punitive measures would be taken by the concerned authorities."*
- *The Government Order emphasizes their commitment to offers special vocational and skill development training through exclusive Self Help Groups and access to micro-credit and small loans.*

The Aravanis welcomed the initiative and submitted a memorandum to the District Collector committing their support in effective implementation of the Government Order. One of them revealed that the "memorandum to the Collector seeks recognition and health care centres".

The festival also provided that community with an opportunity to rediscover age-old cultural forms like *parai, kummi, kazhil* and *oyil* which were used by TAI Kaaviya, a cultural troupe of transgender to inform and educate the community about the many day to day concerns such as HIV prevention and legal rights.

The community also organized special religious and cultural messages for the program at the Koovagam temple. And a beauty cum talent show, called "Aravani Rani". Over 30 Aravanis participated in the contest which was judged by a jury comprising of media persons from Villupuram.

Given the huge success of the food stalls the previous year, TAI Vizhudugal, a CBO of Aravanis, set up six food stalls with specialties from Chennai, Salem, Coimbatore, Madurai and Vellore in Villupurum and Koovagam . It enabled the cooks, all Aravanis to showcase their culinary skills and also earned them a good income.



Community voices quoted in the media:

“Respect from the society also increases day by day”

“We are also able to satisfy our economical needs which give us a lot of job satisfaction”

“Nowadays there has been a drastic change in the way the media and general public treat us.”

“I am more than happy in my role as a beautician, I have mental peace and satisfaction”

“The GO states that aravanis shall be given educational assistance, health services and ration cards”

“Teachers too would be trained on how to deal with these issues”

“Quota for aravanis should be given in education and jobs”

“District Collector would hold a grievance day for aravanis”

“We too have social responsibility”

Koovagam 2008: Aravanis witness a sea change in their lives

The theme for the Koovagam 2008 activities sponsored by TAI and conducted by their NGO partner ARM and CBO TAI Vizhudugal was: “The Lives of Transgenders have changed. We have been born to achieve.”

A rally was conducted on at Villupuram that showcased the talents of the transgenders accompanied by small groups of community members and the TAI Kaviya team who performed traditional folk art forms like oyl, kolattam and karagam during the rally. A talent show “Nadananjali” on the specific themes allotted to the community members in the various zones of TAI Vizhudugal was also held.

A special song that speaks about how the lives of the community members have changed and how they now come forward to showcase this change was composed especially for the event and played during the rally and beauty contest.

Alongside the culinary skills of the community were showcased during the rally through the snacks and tea served complimentary to the members of the general public

Posters and leaflets with messages calling on the community to lead “healthy and respectful lives” were also distributed during the festival”.



Community voices quoted in the media:

“The Aravanis should get their basic education and should pursue higher studies”

“We are still fighting for recognition in society.”

“Only thing we want to communicate is that we are human beings”

“Now I work as a coordinator for six districts”

“The government has initiated a number of programmes including providing ration cards to transgender”.

“The government should take a head count census of transgender in a more systematic manner.”

“For the first time in India only in Tamil Nadu ration cards are provided for the transgender”

Koovagam 2011: Moving Ahead

Over 300 transgender community members were part of a huge rally that was organized by the Tamil State AIDS Control Society in partnership with ARM NGO, Villupuram, organizations including ACE and SIP+ and Tamil Nadu Aravanaigal Association. This rally was flagged off by Mr. Janagaraj, Chairman, Villupuram district.

Facilitating health seeking behavior:

Five ICTC vans were travelling across the district to distribute IEC material on HIV/AIDS and provide counseling and diagnosis of sexually transmitted diseases. A health camp was organised by 6 Doctors from the Government Hospital on the 19th of April at KCB hall. The Doctors examined people with STI symptoms and provided treatment referrals free of cost.

Showcasing talents:

A different beauty contest was also held at Villupuram district this year which was not just about beauty alone but also about their intelligence. The Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative in partnership with the TAI Vizhuthugal had organized the event with the theme, “A festival to thank the Government for announcing transgender day”. The main program took place at Kamarajar Higher Secondary School, Villupuram. Over 500 members of the transgender community and 500 general public will be participating in the program

One of the contest was “**Best Transgender of the year 2011**” competition which was a completion to identify a transgender who is both beautiful and intelligent was selected as the winner of the competition. Judges posed questions to test participants’ knowledge on various issues. Over 25 participants



participated in the contest. Ms. Danushree from Bengaluru won the first place, the second place was won by Jaan Daas from Assam and the 3rd Place was won by Rangeela from Tuticorin.

The second event was the “Best dancing TG 2011” competition during which individual transgender community members exhibited their dance skills. This programme was also performed during the best transgender competition. Minister Ponmudi was also present during this competition.

The community also set up a lot of stalls at West Police station, Signal and KK road at Villupuram from the morning of 18th April and they also provide free buttermilk to the public and the community to beat the heat.

- A biryani stall was set up by the TAI CBO from Coimbatore from 4 pm onwards.
- Other stalls at the venue included:
 - A beauty parlour by CBO from Salem.
 - A stall with nutritious and healthy food products by the Salem TAI-PDI.
 - A halwa stall by the Tirunelveli New Life centre for transgender community and a stall on interpersonal communication and condom demonstration
 - One stall had a huge banner thanking the Government for their announcement of the transgender day.

Community voices quoted in the media:

“We are running beauty parlours and it is an opportunity to showcase our talents”

“Free and specialized care for common ailments and STD will be provided through a mobile clinic”

“I am happy to be crowned as the best transgender 2011 this year, I am grateful to the people of villupuram for their support”

“I am happy to be born as a transgender I am involved in Modeling Industry”

“ My family has accepted me as a transgender”

“Today the society has started to respect members of our community”

“We are also given opportunities to act in films”

“Transgender community to involve in self employment and improve their lives”

“I will strive to improve the quality of lives of the transgender community in the society”

“Transgender should be respected in the society, I thank my parents for their support”

Koovagam 2006: Reducing risk, raising self esteem

- A procession by community members to spread goodwill and general health messages.
- The community also met the District Collector and expressed their willingness to work for society.
- There were folk arts and theatre performances by a cultural troupe comprising wholly of transgender persons on the cultural theme of Koovagam and the need for safe behavior.
- A mobile health care clinic was also on hand to give free and specialized care to the community for various common health and specific STD problems.
- While a mobile beauty van run by Aravanis close by provided professional beauty services for the Aravanis.

Koovagam 2007:

- TAI Kaaviya, a cultural troupe used age-old cultural forms like *parai*, *kummi*, *kazhil* and *oyil* to inform and educate the community about the many day to day concerns such as HIV prevention and legal rights.
- The community also organized special religious and cultural messages for the program at the Koovagam temple.
- A beauty cum talent show, called “Aravani Rani” over 30 Aravanis participated in the contest which was judged by a jury comprising of media persons from Villupuram.
- TAI Vizhudugal, a CBO of Aravanis, set up six food stalls with specialties from Chennai, Salem, Coimbatore, Madurai and Vellore in Villupuram and Koovagam.

Koovagam 2008:

- The theme for the Koovagam 2008 was: “The Lives of Transgenders have changed. We have been born to achieve.”
- A rally was conducted on at Villupuram that showcased the talents of the transgenders accompanied by small groups of community members and the TAI Kaviya team who performed traditional folk art forms like *oyil*, *kolattam* and *karagam* during the rally.
- A talent show “Nadananjali” on the specific themes allotted to the community members in the various zones of TAI Vizhudugal was also held.
- A special song that speaks about how the lives of the community members have changed and how they now come forward to showcase this change was composed especially for the event and played



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- Posters and leaflets with messages calling on the community to lead “healthy and respectful lives” were also distributed during the festival”.