

Unveiling Koovagam

JEFF ROY



KOOVAGAM, India—In the middle of India's southernmost state of Tamil Nadu is the hamlet of Koovagam—a spit of dry dust surrounded by two empty rice fields and crisscrossing dirt pathways that converge like veins into the heart of town. At the center is a temple—a modest structure adorned with statues of gods and goddesses, where incense sticks burn. Surrounding the temple are market stalls that, on a normal day, offer displays of spices, flour, and seasonal fruits and vegetables for the town's handful of residents. But, on the full moon of the Chithirai month of the

JEFF ROY

Tamil calendar, generally late April or early May, flamboyant arrays of offerings, religious figurines, and refreshments fill the stalls for tens of thousands of townsmen, women, children, and Aravanis, or transgender pilgrims.

The occasion is the Kuthandavar-Aravan Mela or Koovagam, from which this village draws its name—a centuries-old, annual religious festival that pays tribute to the temple's renowned patron, Lord Aravan. Each year, a symbolic marriage takes place between Aravan and thousands of his devotees. But these days, there is another attraction of an entirely different variety. Alongside the main rituals, a group of Aravanis organize a series of

**THE LGBT
COMMUNITY NOT
ONLY OCCUPIES A
SPACE IN HINDU
MYTHOLOGY, BUT
ALSO IN SOUTH
ASIA'S RICH
ISLAMIC PAST.**

town hall meetings and music and dance talent contests for the transgender community. And, following a series of performance-based competitions, a "Miss Koovagam" is crowned in a place where South Asia's historically validated ideals of gender and sexual ambiguity

stand in stark contrast to the current plight of the transgender community.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community has not fared well since the colonial-era law known as Section 377 criminalized "unnatural" forms of sexual expression in 1861. After a three and a half year reprieve, when the law was repealed in 2009, the community faced an even greater setback in December 2013, when the Indian Supreme Court reinstated the law. The transgender community—comprised of in-

dividuals assigned a sex, usually at birth and based on their genitals, but who feel that this is a false or incomplete description of themselves—celebrates the landmark Supreme Court decision in April 2014 to grant full recognition to members of the "third gender." Many within the LGBT activist community are also turning toward the cultural significance of Koovagam to create tangible social change. In a frustratingly complex political era, the "third gender" identity has been formally recognized, yet homosexuality and bisexuality continue to be labeled a products of "western corruption." In this context, Koovagam has become more than just an important refuge for the transgender community to celebrate its identity, but also a significant tool for the restoration of LGBT equality as a whole. The festival stands as a cultural icon of India's inclusive past, a beacon of equality in the political present, and a symbol of the community's hopes for a better future.

In the wake of the April 2014 ruling, the newly-elected Indian government should not only ensure that the fundamental rights of its transgender community are protected, but also take steps to formally recognize cultural institutions like Koovagam as national festivals. This will assist in the revitalization of centuries-old LGBT cultural practices and support the continuing vitality of South Asia's historically-validated and culturally-sanctioned gender and sexual minority communities. Moreover, India as a whole features a dramatic contrast to some of the world's most progressive and regressive policies for gender and sexual minorities, maintaining a large institutional divide between the two. But this divide is arbitrary and fails to reflect the cultural synergy of India's LGBT com-

Jeff Roy is a filmmaker, musician, Fulbright-mtvU scholar, and Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at UCLA, based in Los Angeles and Mumbai.

munities as demonstrated by Koovagam, local pride marches, LGBT film festivals, and music concerts. In order to respond to cultural realities of its LGBT citizens, India should take important steps to (re)legalize homosexuality, like in neighboring Nepal, and usher in a new era of policy-making with greater attention to the enrichment of community-based arts and culture.

THE PAST AS CONTEXT

The transgender communities of South Asia, often combined under the umbrella term *hijra*—a word with Arabic roots meaning “to depart from one’s home”—are vast, complex, and deeply rooted in cultures of the “third nature.” No reliable population records are available for the *hijra* community, though their numbers are likely well over 3 million. UN estimates for India’s lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities approach the same number.

In the past, sexually fluid individuals were respected and played significant roles in South Asian society, as indicated on centuries-old Hindu temples and in ancient texts. Hindu mythology is fertile with references to homosexuality and transgenderism. Perhaps the most recognizable gender-defying symbol is Lord Shiva, who is sometimes represented as half-man, half-woman under the name Ardhanarishvara, which means “The Lord whose half is a woman.” Gender-bending characters also fill India’s longest ancient epic, the *Mahabharata*. The story’s hero, Arjuna, joins a “third gender” tribe while serving on the King’s court.

The Koovagam festival attributes its significance to a story in the *Mahabharata*. Lord Aravan agrees to sacrifice himself to end a devastating war between the Pandavas and Kauravas factions, but only on the condition that someone marry him and become his widow. After no woman accepts

his generous offer, Lord Krishna volunteers to become his wife. And, since same-sex marriage is banned, Krishna transforms himself into the beautiful seductress Mohini. After their marriage, Aravan is executed by the goddess Kali, and Mohini becomes his widow for the day before eventually transforming back into his male form.

At the Koovagam festival, Aravan’s marriage and subsequent death are re-enacted by the townspeople and transgender devotees, the latter taking on the role of Mohini. During the final stage of the ritual, Aravanis perform a traditional Tamil song and dance of mourning. Many say that when this happens, the Aravanis are not only lamenting the death of Aravan, but also their whole lives.

The LGBT community not only occupies a space in Hindu mythology, but also in South Asia’s rich Islamic past. During the height of the Mughal period (16th to 17th centuries), eunuchs played important roles for Muslim rulers in South Asia. Many eunuchs became personal servants or guardians for the female members of the royal court. Additionally, *kothbis* (effeminate males) or transgender servants were often entrusted in important political matters and served high positions in the courts of the nobles. Some may have also been sexual partners of rulers of princely states. Even today, the city of Lucknow, once a Mughal capital, possesses a rich oral history of these relationships, which many within the city’s LGBT community still proudly maintain.

CLARIFYING “T”

The way transgender communities live are extensions of this deeply-rooted past. There is a diverse array of identities and a number of social customs practiced by the transgender community in South Asia. Especially in the northern reaches of South Asia, most transgender individuals call themselves *bi-*



JEFF ROY

jrās and maintain a complex set of religious and social customs that include a mix of Hindu and Islamic-derived rites. After pre-initiated *bijras* join *bijra gharanas* (households), they are taught to pay their respects to the *bijra* goddess, Bahuchara Mata, who is usually depicted riding a large rooster. At the same time, aspects of initiation may include castration. In post-castration, unveiling ceremonies, *bijras* and *kothis* alike celebrate through dance, prayer, and other ceremonies, including a diverse mix of Hindu iconography, Sufi music, and Islamic practices. Members of the *bijra* and *kothi* communities even speak a secret, coded language that includes many Urdu terms.

In parts of South India, transgender *jogtas* follow the goddess bearing two names—Renuka Yellamma, a regional incarnation of the fierce, and arguably feminist, goddess Kali. Many of them dedicate their lives to the goddess, joining the ranks of hereditary female ascetics. While their communities are defined largely by Hindu customs, transgender *jogtas* also intermingle with members of the *bijra* community and participate in special rites of passage, especially in larger urban

areas like Mumbai. Thus, for transgender communities of India, the lines separating religion, class, caste, language, and most importantly gender, are quite permeable. What matters instead is that all belong to a community, are visible members of the community, and dedicate their lives toward the betterment of that community.

The significance of the performing arts in South Asia's transgender communities is also an important aspect of social cohesion. *Hijras* are traditionally known for performing ritualistic acoustic music and dance called *badbais* at Hindu marriages, births, and even business openings, where they are called upon to bless a family for financial or procreative prosperity. In the Mughal past, *bijras* and *kothis* were employed as courtesans and still maintained traditional dances, especially in places like Lucknow. In the Hindu world, transgender temple dancers also once maintained a rich dancing tradition. In fact, music and dance were even recognized as distinct characteristics of India's transgender community by British colonizers. Section 377—the law that banned homosexual sex in 1861—also let police arrest *bijras*. For the

purposes of this law, *bijras* were defined by their performance: “Any eunuch who appears dressed or ornamented like a woman... or who dances or plays music or takes part in any public exhibition in a public street.”

Today, however, catching a glimpse of a *badbai* troupe with a drum in hand is rare. The vast majority of *bijras* throughout South Asia live in destitute conditions in city slums and outlying communities. Many make a living by begging on the streets or in trains. Some become bar dancers or sex workers, and account for a high volume of HIV/AIDS cases in South Asia. For this and other reasons, greater recognition and government-sponsored patronage of *bijra* culture should be established.

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Despite occupying a supposedly sanctioned space in Hindu mythology and Islamic history, transgender communities continue to face harassment and discrimination on all levels. *Hijras'* economic plight is well known in South Asia. “Transgenders have been suffering for a long time,” explains A. Revathi, author of *The Truth About Me*. “They beg on the streets, going from door to door just to make a penny. Many of them have to save up for months to buy new outfits just for Koovagam.”

The transgender community also suffers from a lack of access to basic health-care. Before the April 2014 court ruling, fear and stigma prevented transgender individuals from receiving any care at government hospitals and clinics. Transgender-specific health services are concentrated within HIV/AIDS organizations serving members of the community of “men who have sex with men” and *bijra* communities in India’s urban areas. But lack of adequate funding has made it difficult to reach outlying communities, and services often do

not provide holistic care, especially with respect to mental health. In 2013, transgender communities celebrated the availability of feminization and sexual reassignment services at so-called “medical tourist” clinics. However, these services are only available in a few select locations and can carry hefty price tags.

One of the roots of transgender problems lies in lack of access to formal education, explains Abheena Aher, a transgender activist and program manager for the HIV/AIDS Alliance in New Delhi. Facing neglect and abuse from their own parents, siblings, and social communities, many escape from their home to larger cities where the hope of acceptance is much greater. Then they join a *bijra gharana* for safety and shelter. This, she suggests, has both pros and cons.

Generally speaking, a *bijra* family group is as much a family as it is a business. On one hand, it is a place of security and safety, especially for young *bijras* who have been ostracized by their family. *Hijra* families possess an elaborate and firm social structure that is defined by the hierarchy of the *guru* (mother or teacher) over her *chela* (daughter or student). Most of the time, the relationship between the two is loving and nurturing. But sometimes *gurus* may encourage a way of life that puts the lives of their *chelas* in jeopardy. While for some *badbai* performances are the chief source of income, this “older” *bijra* way of life is on the decline. Today, many *bijra* households make less money performing *badbais* than they do on the sex market. For

MANY WITHIN THE
HIJRA COMMUNITY
ARE APPLAUDING
INDIA’S RECENT
DECISION TO
PROVIDE FORMAL
RECOGNITION
OF THE “THIRD
GENDER.”

ACTION STEPS

Goal: State and national recognition of LGBT cultural institutions in India and around the world.

- Activists: Support local artists, musicians, dancers, and filmmakers by developing a diverse range of events that showcase their talents.
- Artists: Support local activists through engagement with their political activities. Get your fans involved.
- Reach out to local politicians, media, and prominent entertainment figures to attend LGBT cultural institutions like pride marches, film festivals, talent shows, and fairs.
- Bring petitions to state or national assemblies demanding formal recognition (and sponsorship) of these events as intrinsic to Indian culture.
- Develop an organization that monitors and sponsors LGBT society in media, entertainment, and the arts.

-Jeff Roy

many young *bijras* who have nowhere else to go, this is quite a problematic situation.

Opting for a better quality of life, some decide to leave their community and start a life of their own. Others are working for social change from within. Aher recognizes the problems inherent in a system defined by social inequality. She acknowledges the need for greater access to educational programs, observing, "That is our greatest salvation." At Koovagam, many transgender individuals from Tamil Nadu fight for equality on the inside of their community. "We want a culture based on cooperation and respect," says Catherine, a transgender from Tamil Nadu. She, like other transgenders from Christian and Muslim backgrounds, comes to Koovagam to celebrate alongside her Hindu sisters.

This is why many within the *bijra* community are applauding India's recent decision to provide formal recognition of the "third gender." The law will spur progress and improve access to basic health and education services for members of the transgender community. But that is just one step that needs to

be taken. Formal recognition of LGBT cultural practices like the Koovagam festival will not only unveil centuries-old performance traditions that are part of the fabric of Indian culture, helping to improve values and attitudes about the transgenderism, but also economically empower individuals within these communities who maintain knowledge of these traditions. If India values its transgender citizens, as is suggested by the approval of the recent transgender law, then it should also help the community integrate culturally with Indian society through the recognition and sponsorship of its arts and culture.

BOLLYWOOD TO MAIN STREET

The LGBT community as a whole has already made tremendous headway in terms of earning recognition and respect through media and entertainment. Since the temporary reprieve on enforcement of Section 377 in 2009, South Asia has substantially expanded portrayal of gender and sexuality from Bollywood films and television narratives to coverage of pride marches and transgender

events. Mumbai's LGBT film festival recently celebrated its fifth year anniversary, and in October 2013, India's first LGBT radio station was launched in Bangalore to support the emergence of independent musicians, performance artists, and writers.

At the same time, transgender personalities have also taken the spotlight, including Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, who recently appeared on the nationally syndicated *Bigg Boss* (the Indian equivalent of *Big Brother*) and *Queens: Destiny of Dance*, an independent film. Her larger-than-life personality, eloquence, and political savvy are just a few traits that have helped her become a national beacon of transgender equality.

The media has also played a large role in the Koovagam festival. Part of Koovagam's attraction has not only been the main rituals, but also the town hall meetings, talent shows, and beauty contests. These attractions have been growing in numbers every year. This year, three talent contests aimed to crown their own "Miss Koovagam" on the same day, much to the chagrin of the organizers of the original Miss Koovagam pageant.

LEGAL DISPARITIES

With a growing visibility, local community organizations and activists within the LGBT community have begun to tackle government policy head-on. Until recently, their efforts had been met largely with resistance. Despite their achievements thus far, the general trend across much of South Asia has provided full recognition for transgender communities, while denying it to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities.

One of South Asia's more progressive nations—with policies more akin to its Southeast Asian neighbors Thailand and Singapore—is Nepal. The country decriminalized homosexuality in 2007 and, soon after, began issuing "third gender" ID cards to this newly

protected class. Nepal also allows gays to serve openly in the military, and, at one point, was on the verge of allowing same-sex marriage. Pakistan, in 2010, and Bangladesh, in 2013, officially recognized the "third gender" as a protected class. In 2010, Pakistan won international attention for employing *hijras* in the national tax collection system. Both nations join Iran in legally recognizing the transgender community, but not the gay community. In each of these countries, homosexuality carries harsh penalties, including, in some cases, life in prison and, in Iran, even death. While providing medical intervention for pre-operative transsexuals interested in undergoing a sex-change procedure, Iran has also made sexual reassignment surgery a condition of legal recognition. Thus, imprisoned gay men are forced to choose between the death penalty and sex change operations.

Prior to the mid-April 2014 ruling, it appeared as though India would not have been able to join the ranks of Nepal since it had just witnessed the greatest setback the LGBT community had ever seen. In a surprise decision by the Indian Supreme Court in December 2013, a judge on the verge of retirement, ruled that Section 377 is legal and does not violate the constitution on the grounds of the right to equality, prohibition of discrimination, or the right to life. Thousands of demonstrators who expected the section to be overturned, took to the streets in major cities across India and around the world. Many figures in entertainment and politics demanded

POLLS
CONDUCTED
IN INDIA DO
NOT REFLECT
A PUBLIC THAT
IS READY TO
ACCEPT ANY
FORM OF
CHANGE ON THE
ISSUE OF SEXUAL
EXPRESSION.



To read Rochelle Terman's
 "Trans[ition] in Iran," from the Spring 2014
 issue of *World Policy Journal*,
 go to www.worldpolicy.org/transition-iran
 or scan this barcode with your mobile device.

a review. "This is really very sad," proclaimed transgender activist Tripathi on the day of the ruling. "It has taken us 100 years back...I am ashamed at being Indian today."

Tripathi issued a call to political action. In October 2013, she filed a petition demanding establishment of a "third category" in identity documents like election cards, passports, driver licenses, and ration cards, and called for greater attention to be paid to admissions procedures in educational institutions and hospitals. The case brought by her attorney, Anand Grover, challenged the very definition of gender as a binary construct, since the experience of gender—as different from biological sex—constitutes one's personal autonomy and freedom. Discrimination on these grounds, Grover argued, violated the constitutional guarantee of equality, adding that there can be no justification for the state's resistance to the recognition of third gender or cross-gender identities, considering India's rich tradition of individuals who identify as the third gender. He even mentioned the contribution of transgender communities in ancient religious ceremonies like *Koovagam* and referred to texts pointing out the roles played by transgender individuals in the royal Mughal courts.

As expected, following the 2013 Section 377 verdict, Tripathi was apprehen-

sive about the future of transgender rights. "What face of India is left after such a judgment?" she asked. "Talking to politicians about sexuality will be one big...storm," said Tripathi. While Tripathi may have been justified, she was unaware at the time that her call to action would be met with an historical ruling in favor of transgender rights only three months later. Thus, while the Indian Supreme Court now acknowledges the historical and cultural validity of the nation's "third gender" communities in lieu of Section 377, the validity of Section 377 is still upheld in all other areas. While this legal incongruence may be frustrating, many within the LGBT activist community believe that recognition of the "third gender" as a protected class was the first step of many others leading toward the full repeal of Section 377.

THE NUMBERS

Polls conducted in India do not reflect a public that is ready to accept any form of change on the issue of sexual expression. In 2007, the World Values Survey reported that only 30 percent of the Indian public believed that homosexuality was a "justified" way of life. Among countries that have criminalized homosexuality, this number is the highest, and ranks among countries with laws protecting gender and sexual minorities already in place. But these numbers also correspond with a CNN-IBN poll, published in 2011, revealing that 73 percent of Indians believe homosexuality should remain illegal. Moreover, among this poll's respondents, 83 percent believed "homosexuality was not part of Indian culture," and 90 percent said they "would not rent their houses to a gay couple."

Still, since then, there has been swift growth in LGBT acceptance and tolerance, owing largely to the growing presence of

LGBT issues in media and the rise in pride festivals. Last year, one of India's largest cities, Hyderabad, celebrated its first Gay Pride Parade, joining the ranks of Chennai, Bangalore, New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and the state of Gujarat, among some others. Accompanying these festivals has been a steady increase in LGBT arts and cultural events, including LGBT film festivals (in cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, and Chennai), music, theater, and of course, dance events. The Dancing Queens, Mumbai's premier transgender dance contingent, is just one example of many emerging professional LGBT arts organizations that both support LGBT talent and increase exposure of LGBT issues throughout India. A more formal recognition will not only impact cultural dialogue about transgenderism through the support of cultural institutions, but also assist efforts taken by the LGBT community to fully integrate as visible members of Indian society.

LOOKING TO THE PAST

As a communal space frequented by tens of thousands of people, Koovagam is not bound by institutional or dogmatic constrictions of one governing organization. Instead, it is a site where multiple social and community groups and businesses come to share their ideas and express their talents. The power behind Koovagam, if properly harnessed, could have the potential to effect real change across India and, by extension, the sub-continent.

If India is to maintain its ideals of secularism, religious rituals inside Koovagam should play only a small role in the nation's democratic processes. The religious importance of the transgender community in ancient Hindu mythology, while compelling, should certainly not impact the govern-

ment's ability or willingness to change its laws. The plight of the transgender community is an issue that knows no religious bounds. Thus, the ability and willingness to change should purely depend on the will of the government to uphold the constitutional guarantees of equality, non-discrimination, and the right to freedom.

Koovagam does, however, play a significant symbolic and educational role. It is a festival defined by mutual cooperation and respect, by qualities that unite people, not divide them. Koovagam signifies Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of non-violence, equality, and the triumph over persecution. It is a place to forget the bonds of the material world and commune with others in an ancient rite of passage and of spiritual rebirth. Moreover, because of Koovagam, the institutional acceptance of alternative gender and sexual identities has the potential to serve as a symbolic testament to the age-old endurance of tolerance and acceptance. And because of this, South Asia, and India in particular, is in a unique position to serve as an international beacon of human rights. It would be a shame if this great potential was unrealized through the maintenance of arbitrary divisions that separate the 'T' from 'LGB,' or the LGBT from everyone else.

Many dream of a time when the spirit of Koovagam is not the exception but the norm, where individuals can live in a mutually-shared climate of freedom, liberty, and equality, not of superstition or fear. But while the future of LGBT rights in India is still uncertain, many find comfort in the very fact that Koovagam exists, and on a yearly basis, is celebrated. In short, Koovagam is a place of unity, where all of South Asia's diverse languages and religions can come together in celebration of love and kinship—not baseless hatred. ●