

The *Thirunangai* Promise: Gender as a contingent outcome of migration and economic exchange

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Abstract

In this paper, I track how social actors in the city of Chennai in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu contested the boundaries of *thirunangai* identity, the preferred Tamil term for transgender women. Using a framework derived from linguistic and economic anthropology, I show how gendered personhood is a contingent outcome of the value and meaning given to migrations and economic exchanges, where migration makes new gendered subjectivities possible while curtailing others. I offer a queer analysis of migration, highlighting how social womanhood is a contingent achievement and a contested status, split along axes of class, caste, religion, language, cis- or transgenderhood, and so forth. Not all persons socially categorised as women marry, migrate or labour in the same way, and gender is never a singular or isolated axis of differentiation.

Keywords: transgender, migration, linguistic anthropology, kinship, South Asia

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'Look at me,' [said my friend, Sri]. 'Am I not a kothi? I am educated too. I have a steady job. Don't I take time out every now and then to lead a woman's life? ... With all your qualifications...do you want to end up as a beggar? I want to be a woman, even if it means begging on the streets, [I said]. The only way I could live the life of a woman was to beg or be a sex worker. My linguistics or theater experience would not help me here. I could never be a sex worker, so begging was my only option.'¹

¹ L S Vidya, *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (translated by V Ramnarayan), Oxygen Books, Chennai, 2007, p. 6.

The above excerpt is from the autobiography of Living Smile Vidya, one of the most influential *thirunangai* activists in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India. *Thirunangai* means ‘respectable woman’ in Tamil and is the preferred term for transgender women. *Kothi*, as used by her friend, refers to a person who is assigned male at birth but identifies as feminine while retaining male presentation. During the conversation cited above, Vidya is still a *kothi*, but considering undergoing surgical transition to affirm her identity as a woman. It is striking that her *kothi* friends attempt to dissuade her not because they doubt her gendered experience, but because they worry about the impact on her livelihood. Gender is not only a psychological essence to be expressed sartorially and addressed medically, but a socio-economic matter. Transitioning from a male-passing *kothi* to a female-presenting *thirunangai* implies the radical loss of job opportunities, state recognition, social mobility, and educational capital promised to cisgender men. When Vidya does eventually transition gender, and joins a *jamath*,² her *guru* once again reminds her that her education does not give her higher status: ‘Whether educated or illiterate, a *kothi* is a *kothi*, do you understand?’³ ‘Living like a woman’, for Vidya at the time of writing, is synonymous with the stigmatised labour of sex work or begging.

Vidya’s transition is economic in a second sense, in that it has consequences for the economy of gifts and obligations within her family. Her father, a municipal sweeper from a *Dalit* community, took loans to pay for her Master’s degree, hoping his ‘son’ would end the caste-based oppression and humiliating work that had characterised his own life. When Vidya joins a *jamath* in Pune, withdrawing from the sexual economy reserved for those who occupy the social role of sons and daughters, her father’s sacrifice becomes a gift she cannot reciprocate.⁴ Charting the gains and wrenching losses of gender transition within her family’s history, Vidya demonstrates the intergenerational stakes of claiming one gendered identity over another.

² A kinship system built on patronage-based ties and adoption, where a *guru* generally mentors or adopts *chelas*, or daughters.

³ Vidya, p. 78.

⁴ I use the term sexual economy in Gayle Rubin’s sense to describe a system that regulates and produces sex and gender through a web of prescribed material and symbolic transactions. Sexual economies are operationalised through norms governing marriage and kinship which reinforce gendered subjectivities and economic relations. Unlike the Marxist feminists who were her contemporaries, Rubin drew on theories of kinship and gift exchange to highlight the symbolic dimensions of material transactions and how they actively produced gender as a meaningful category. For more on this aspect of her argument see G Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “political economy” of sex’, in R R Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1975, pp. 160–183.

Vidya's account affords a glimpse of the complex relationship between gender and migration. It is not just that gendered persons migrate; it is equally that migration makes new gendered subjectivities possible while curtailing others. Gender transition implies a simultaneous migration across labour markets, time, and space: as Vidya says later in her book, to be a dignified *thirunangai*, she could no longer live in an 'overgrown village' like Madurai.⁵ Gendered identities are continually made and unmade through migrations that are simultaneously economic, linguistic, medical, and kinship-based.

Scholars of migration have proposed expansive definitions to accommodate this complexity. In her ethnography of how women move between construction work and sex work markets in Mumbai, Svati Shah defines migration as 'a spatiotemporal process, where space accrues meaning through migrant workers' conditional [access] ... to the specific temporalities governing these spaces'.⁶ Writing on marriage migration within India, Ravinder Kaur suggests, following Farhana Ibrahim, that regions and borders are 'subjectively experienced rather than objectively given'.⁷ In this paper, I track how social actors in Chennai contested the boundaries of *thirunangai* identity by treating gender as a contingent product of the value and meaning given to one another's migrations and economic exchanges.

Theoretical Frameworks and Method

My fieldwork unfolded over a period of about 20 months between 2009 and 2016 where I conducted participant observation with LGBT activists in Chennai. I was associated closely with four community-based organisations. The first was Sahodaran, founded in the late 1990s by and for 'Men who have Sex with Men', a term that had been used in HIV/AIDS-related public health discourse since the early 1990s.⁸ Sahodaran had 20 full-time and 46 part-time staff, and ran a targeted intervention for HIV prevention, a drop-in centre, and events promoting LGBT rights and public health. As *thirunangai* identity and the term transgender became more established in activist and government vocabulary, Sahodaran opened

⁵ Vidya, p. 141.

⁶ S P Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, p. 32.

⁷ R Kaur, 'Marriage and Migration: Citizenship and marital experience in cross-border marriages between Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bangladesh', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, issue 43, 2012, pp. 78–89, p. 86.

⁸ For more about the history of the term 'Men who have Sex with Men', see R M Young and I H Meyer, 'The trouble with "MSM" and "WSW": Erasure of the sexual-minority person in public health discourse', *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 95, no. 7, 2005, pp. 1144–1149, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2004.046714>. For more about Sahodaran, see their website: <https://www.sahodaran.org>.

a second unit in North Chennai and created two sister organisations, Thozhi and Snegidhi, which represented exclusively *thirunangais*. I also worked with a sexual rights organisation called Nirangal⁹ and a volunteer-run LGBT support network called Orinam.¹⁰

I spent much of my time at the Sahodaran office, helping to write grant applications, create publicity materials, and occasionally mentoring interns. Every day, about 30 *kothis* and *thirunangais* would drop by the office to socialise, eat, or play a game of dice. It was also a hub for activists across the city to hold planning meetings. While I was there, about 10-15 *kothis* I knew transitioned to *thirunangais* and about 5-10 *kothis* left the community to marry cisgender women due to family pressure.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted about 25 formal one-on-one interviews with *kothis* and *thirunangais*, including authors, activists and elder *jamath* leaders; two seminar-style reading group sessions with Sahodaran staff, 10 journalists, and 2 staff members at government public health agencies; and regularly attended events conducted by the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association, a left-leaning organisation of intellectuals allied with the *thirunangai* cause.¹¹ I collected texts and networked with writers through these forums.

The seven years over which I conducted my research were a turbulent and crucial period for queer and sex worker rights movements in India. The HIV/AIDS funding apparatus that had supported these movements for over two decades was being supplemented by human rights frameworks with new activist vocabularies. Between 2013 and 2014, India's anti-sodomy law was re-introduced by the Supreme Court, yet the very same court passed a progressive order affirming transgender identity and social protections.¹² The stakes of claiming a specific gender identity were high and fraught with contradictions (for example, as a *thirunangai*, one's gender was legal but sexual practice was not), even as daily life was negotiated by sliding between these identities.

⁹ More about Nirangal here: <https://nirangal.ngo>.

¹⁰ More about Orinam here: <http://orinam.net>.

¹¹ For more about the history of this intellectual movement and organisation, see F Cody, *The Light of Knowledge: Literacy activism and the politics of writing in South India*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2013, pp. 140–141.

¹² For an account of the *thirunangai* movement in Tamil Nadu see S F Saveri, *History Identity and Politics: Aravani movement in the state of Tamilnadu, India*, Doctoral dissertation, INFLIBNET, 2013; for an account of the national movement see C Lakkimsetti, *Legalizing Sex: Sexual Minorities, AIDS, and Citizenship in India*, NYU Press, New York, 2020.

Language Produces Gender

When I began my fieldwork, I wanted to highlight the instability of gender identity categories by paying ethnographic attention to how linguistic practices produced gender in real time. I drew on a tradition within queer linguistics that combines Michael Silverstein's theorisation of indexicality¹³ with Butler's invocation of performativity¹⁴ to examine how sex, gender, class, race, and other social attributes are produced through linguistic forms that are continually contested by different participants in a communicative event.¹⁵ At Sahodaran, I attended to how community members switched rapidly between linguistic forms in Tamil and English to index one another's gender.

Methodologically, I was keen to avoid eliciting first-person life stories shared in one-on-one interviews. Linguistic anthropologists have pointed out that interviews are themselves highly particular communicative events whose social history must be part of the analysis.¹⁶ In the Indian subcontinent, interviews and life stories of sexual minorities have a chequered past, linked to colonial anthropology and its fetishisation of otherness.¹⁷ Since the 1990s, public health and research projects targeting sex workers and sexual minorities have relied heavily on life stories to typologise subjects, often reifying the narrator's identity. When I conducted my fieldwork, activists were cynical about the canned life stories sought by researchers. *Thirunangai* activists and their allies were reclaiming life stories by working them into new genres such as autobiographies, autoethnographies, and poetry, and conducting writing and theatre workshops. I tracked the social lives of life stories by interviewing authors, translating texts, and holding reading circles at Sahodaran to examine how participants made assessments that were simultaneously about aesthetics and gendered authenticity. I was applying Bakhtin and Medvedev's insight that texts are neither purely formal constructs nor are they straightforward 'windows into reality'. Their meaning is underdetermined and volatile, emerging in their production, reception, citation, and circulation over time.¹⁸

¹³ M Silverstein, 'Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life', *Language & Communication*, vol. 23, issues 3-4, 2003, pp. 193-229, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(03\)00013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00013-2).

¹⁴ J Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sex*, Routledge, New York, 2011.

¹⁵ K Hall, 'Commentary I: "It's a hijra!" Queer linguistics revisited', *Discourse & Society*, vol. 24, issue 5, 2013, pp. 634-642, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513490321>.

¹⁶ C L Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

¹⁷ For a discussion, see S Nataraj, 'Trans-formations: Projects of Resignification in Tamil Nadu's Transgender Rights Movement', Doctoral dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2019.

¹⁸ P N Medvedev, M M Bakhtin, and A J Wehrle, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (translated by Albert J Wehrle), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978.

Gift Exchange Produces Gender

It quickly became clear to me in my fieldwork that distinguishing one's gender was not an end in itself; it gave economic and moral value to one's social relations, migrations, and actions and history. Terms like *kothi*, *thirunangai*, and *naaran* (cisgender woman) situated a person in many economic circuits at once: the benefits circulated by government and funding agencies; the cycles of patronage, gifts, and obligations of biological and *jamath* families; and the cycles of merit, honour, and ethical action that made life count. Vidya's account shows how these axes come together seamlessly: without her 'male' body as guarantor, her MA linguistics loses much of its exchange value, and even her father sees his gifts to her as a 'waste'. The government exacts its own cost by refusing to recognise the degree she earned. Unmoored from the gendered relations that give it value, her degree is 'put into cold storage' and her labour no longer counts as 'dignified'.

I use the term gift in Marcel Mauss's sense, to expand economic exchange beyond material transactions. Gifts produce ongoing debts, both economic and symbolic, that underpin relationships and produce social personhood.¹⁹ Gayle Rubin argued that the gift exchanges engendered by heterosexual marriage produced binary gendered personhood as a systematic outcome, socialising children to become future wives and husbands to sustain sexual economies.²⁰ In a different theoretical tradition, BR Ambedkar pointed out in the case of India, how endogamous marriage reproduces gender and caste hierarchies, through systematic patterns of hypergamy and hypogamy,²¹ producing a web of economies that Uma Chakravarti calls Brahmanical patriarchy.²² Gift theory captures the complexity of how migration, gender, honour, occupation, and recognition are implicated by material transactions. For example, Vidya has elsewhere argued that transphobia is a form of Brahminism, reproducing 'occupational fixity' in both *Dalit* and transgender communities, confining them to occupations such as manual scavenging, begging, and sex work.²³

I bring these linguistic and economic frameworks together to examine the circulation and interpretation of a story authored by Paul Suyambu in his

¹⁹ M Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2002.

²⁰ Rubin, pp. 157–210.

²¹ B R Ambedkar, 'Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development', *Readings in Indian Government and Politics Class, Caste, Gender*, 2004, pp. 131–153.

²² U Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, caste, class and state', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, issue 14, 1993, pp. 579–585.

²³ G Semmalar, 'Transphobia as a form of Brahminism: A Conversation Between Gee Imaan Semmalar and Living Smile Vidya in Gender, Caste, and the Imagination of Equality', *Women Unlimited*, 2018.

anthology *Thirunangaigalin Ulagam* (The World of *Thirunangais*), about an idealised trajectory of *thirunangai* life.²⁴ Suyambu, a journalist at the Tamil daily *Dinathanthi* introduced a weekly column in 2008 featuring interviews with prominent *thirunangais* in Chennai. His work is an instructive contrast to that of Vidya and shows the highly varied cultural work that the term *thirunangai* was doing at that moment.

In the following section, I give a brief account of the activist movement in Tamil Nadu, analysing what the terms *kothi*, *aravani*,²⁵ *thirunangai* and *naaran* meant for my interlocutors in terms of legal personhood and socio-economic relations. I then give a short analysis of Suyambu's story; an analysis of my conversation with the author about his text; an account of our reading group's discussion; and some concluding thoughts.

A Brief History

Kothi

Tamil Nadu was the first state where HIV was detected in the late 1980s, and from 1992, the National AIDS Control Organisation introduced targeted interventions for 'high risk groups' defined by public health discourse as Female Sex Workers (FSW) and Men who have Sex with Men (MSM). Charged with mapping the epidemiological term MSM onto local idioms of identity, many community-based organisations increasingly used the term *kothi* as a stand-in for MSM, vying for HIV/AIDS related funding as they did so.²⁶ In the early 2000s, *kothi* also connoted a working-class vernacular identity in contrast to *gay*, which was associated with aspirational, urban English-speakers.²⁷ *Kothi* also indexed sexual behaviour, and Sahodaran staff often defined *kothis* as 'receivers', contrasting them with 'double-deckers' and gays who switched between sexual roles; and *panthis*, who assumed the penetrative role.

²⁴ P Suyambu, *Thirunangaigalin Ulagam: Athisayangal, Athircchigale* [The World of Thirunangais: Wonders, Marvels], Kizhakku Pathippagam, New Horizon Media Ltd., Chennai, 2009.

²⁵ *Aravani* was a term used for transgender women in the early 2000s, which has since fallen out of use, replaced by *thirunangai*.

²⁶ L Cohen, 'The Kothi Wars: AIDS Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification', in S L Pigg and V Adams (eds.), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822386414-011>.

²⁷ A Gupta, 'Englishpur ki Kothi: Class dynamics in the queer movement in India', in A Narrain and G Bhan (eds.), *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 123–142.

In 2015, *kothi* also connoted a certain liminality, positioned between the supposedly ‘fixed’ identities of *hijra*, cisgender woman, and cisgender man.²⁸ As Sri tells Vidya: a *kothi* can stay flexible, occasionally leading a woman’s life without making the commitment of a *thirunangai*. As transgender identity and surgery became more institutionalised, *kothi* came to connote a new kind of in-betweenness marked by the refusal to undergo surgical transition.

While *kothi* possessed these connotations, in everyday banter it could be used to address people regardless of surgical status, indexing endearment and familiarity. Vijaya, the vivacious office manager at Sahodaran, was one of the few senior activists who chose not to become a *thirunangai*, proudly declaring herself a *kothi*. She would address even senior *thirunangais* as *kothi*, referring cheekily to their *kunju* (a slang word for penis) and playfully switching between male, female, and inanimate pronouns instead of consistently gendering them female. *Kothi* had the effect of piercing the decorous femininity they displayed outside the office and reminding them poignantly of their shared experience of once having a ‘male’ body; an experience that *naarans* would never understand. This switch also reminded *thirunangais* that while their gender identity was legally recognised, their sexual practices were still criminalised in 2015. At Sahodaran, the term *kothi* expanded or contracted the boundaries of belonging.

Aravani, *Thirunangai*, and Transgender

Unlike *kothi*, a term that remains relatively unknown outside the LGBT activist community, the terms *aravani* and *thirunangai* were publicly visible, widely documented and debated by policymakers and government institutions at the time. Indeed, *aravani* was coined by an officer of the Indian Police Service, Mr Ravi, when he presided over the annual beauty contest held at the Aravan temple at Koovagam in 1998.²⁹ In his address as chief guest, Mr Ravi criticised the derogatory term *ali* that was then in use, proposing the word *aravani* instead, meaning a devotee of Aravan. The term is both a religious and government-recognised identity.

²⁸ K Hall, ‘Intertextual Sexuality’, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 15, issue 1, 2005, pp. 125–144, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2005.15.1.125>.

²⁹ The Koovagam festival dramatises a myth from the Mahabharata, where Lord Aravan, Arjuna’s son, was sacrificed for the Pandavas to win the war. Aravan pleaded to be married and have sex before he died, and Lord Krishna in his avatar as Mohini, married and duly mourned him the next day. Each year, thousands of *aravanis* throng to the Aravan temple in Koovagam to marry the deity and ritually mourn him the next morning. The festival is a site for celebration, sex, and activism.

As sociologist Shabeena Saveri has documented, *aravani* activists began petitioning the state government in 2002 to issue them ration cards based on a ‘third gender’ identity, forging alliances with *Dalit* groups and other leftist organisations. In the 2000s, there were increasing references to the term ‘transgender’ in government documents, and public health reports.³⁰ By 2008, the government had established an Aravani Welfare Board under the aegis of the Social Welfare Department, and in 2011, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced distinct projects for transgender persons and MSM. With strong political will on the part of the ruling Dravidian party, by 2012, schemes were implemented to provide *aravanis* with free sex reassignment surgery, university admission, subsidised housing, and support with organising self-help groups and acquiring identity documents.³¹

In the same decade, the term *aravani* gradually became unpopular, acquiring new meanings as it resurfaced in government policy. Writing in 2011, activists Aniruddhan Vasudevan and Padma Govindan raised concerns about the way—in government orders—*aravani* was used interchangeably with the pathologising colonial-era term ‘eunuch’, and official forms confusingly offered applicants the option to identify as *aravani*, transgender, eunuch, or woman, leaving trans men out altogether.³² With the rise of anti-trafficking movements, there was a spate of police cases and medical journal articles accusing *aravanis* of ‘kidnapping and converting’ boys, replicating a centuries-old colonial narrative that *bijras*, India’s iconic transgendered ritual specialists, kidnap and castrate children.³³ By 2012, *aravani* came to connote a folksy, vernacular, religious identity, and *thirunangai* had become the preferred Tamil term for transgender woman, with *thirunambi* the concomitant word for transgender man. *Thirunangai* promised an aspirational modern identity compatible with both progressive Tamil politics and international transgender rights activism. It combined the Tamil word *nangai* [young woman] with the deferential prefix *thiru* [respected], marking its distance from the traditional connotations of *aravani* and the westernised English transgender. Activists emphasised its pure Tamil roots, marking their difference from the *bijras* of the Hindi-speaking North, and foregrounding a connection to the progressive anti-caste, secular ideologies of the Dravidian movement.

³⁰ Saveri, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³² P Govindan and A Vasudevan, ‘The Razor’s Edge of Oppositionality: Exploring the politics of rights-based activism by transgender women in Tamil Nadu’, in A Narrain and A Gupta, *Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law*, Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 84–112.

³³ For a discussion see Nataraj, pp. 13–55.

Naaran (Cisgender Woman)

The third identity that serves as a point of reference for *thirunangai* activism is the cisgender woman, colloquially referred to within the *kothi* community as *naaran*. Saveri describes how in their early petitions in 2003, *aravani* activists demanded third-gender status but were asked to apply under the ‘woman’ category, until *aravani* and transgender became institutionalised. In 2002, Kamla Jaan, a *hijra* mayor in Madhya Pradesh, had been removed from her post on the grounds that she was not a woman.³⁴ The question of whether *aravanis* could be ‘women’ was a point of contention at the Seventh National Conference of Women’s Movements in Kolkata in 2006.³⁵

The debate was ongoing when I conducted my fieldwork. While some activists took issue with the ‘third gender’ stereotype, others opined that ‘woman’ came with pitfalls of its own. Saveri, herself a *thirunangai* activist, criticised the government’s double standards in accepting *thirunangai* identity while simultaneously policing Tamil women’s chastity, referring to the defamation suits filed in 2005 against the Tamil actor Khushboo because she spoke positively about premarital sex. Saveri also lamented the continued emphasis placed on procreation and chastity as the ‘clincher’ defining female gender, arguing that the state was unable to conceive of a consensual, harmonious, and egalitarian relationship between a transgender woman and cisgender man.³⁶ *Thirunangai* activist Kalki Subramaniam, in her poetry written at the time, argued that *thirunangais* promised a form of birth and community that was more progressive than that of conventional caste-bound heterosexual families. She described *thirunangai* to me not as a third gender but a respectable, self-made, progressive *woman*, unencumbered by old-fashioned Tamil ideals of chastity.³⁷

The term *thirunangai* was distanced not only from old-fashioned Tamil womanhood but also from the stigma of sex work, which in the public discourse was associated with the terms *aravani* and *hijra*. By 2015, the HIV/AIDS social movements of the 1990s, which had once united MSM and cisgender female sex workers, had splintered. Transgender identity was gaining government recognition and homosexual intercourse well on the way to being decriminalised, but things had gotten worse for sex workers. Sex worker unions had long fought to repeal the *Immoral Traffic Prevention Act*, which is widely used to harass voluntary sex workers. Despite their efforts, the state adopted ever-more punitive and carceral approaches towards sex work, conflating voluntary sex work with trafficking and

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

³⁵ Saveri, p. 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

³⁷ Nataraj, p. 57.

performing ‘rescue raids’ that restricted cisgender women’s economic migration by placing them in ‘rehabilitation homes’ or sending them back to their families.³⁸ While many transgender women engage in sex work, it is no surprise that they have had more success pursuing entitlements based on their gender rather than their sex worker identity. These were some material issues at stake for my interlocutors, as they drew distinctions or continuities between gendered terms, giving meaning to the migrations and economic exchanges in Suyambu’s story.

The Story

I met Mr Suyambu in 2010, when he was honoured at the Pride celebrations for his weekly column entitled ‘The World of *Aravanis*’ in the Tamil daily *Dinathanthi*. His interviewees were cosmopolitan, articulate *aravani* women who worked in a range of professions from modelling to psychology. Written in a chatty, intimate style, peppered with English words, Suyambu described their rocky road to success alongside teasing references to their love life and beauty routines. By the time I conducted my fieldwork in 2015, Mr Suyambu’s columns had been collected into an anthology titled *The World of Thirunangais*.³⁹

His book opens with a story centred on a protagonist, Alagappan, who eventually becomes a *thirunangai* Alagammai. Alagappan is born as the third child of a family in rural Tamil Nadu. At puberty, it becomes clear that he is not a regular teenage boy: he does not develop facial hair, he remains shy in disposition, and he desires men. In Suyambu’s words, he is ‘a female trapped in a male body’.

Alagappan’s gender transformation involves numerous migrations from rural to urban Tamil Nadu, and then to Mumbai and Bangalore. Ostracised by his family, he meets a compassionate friend who takes him to Chennai, where he meets a group of aged *aravanis* who work as cooks and live in a wretched hovel. They warn Alagappan not to leave his bourgeois comforts for a life of poverty and hard labour: ‘You are a boy from a well-off family. If you become like us, you’ll have to come for cooking jobs. You’ll struggle for food and wilt in the heat. Just go back to your *amma*’.⁴⁰ Their faces are visibly aged, their voices are coarse, and they sleep with their legs splayed in a decidedly unladylike fashion. Their engagement in ‘women’s work’ has made them less feminine than ever. By contrast, Alagappan is so feminine that he sleeps on his side like a woman and instinctively covers his

³⁸ For a comprehensive review, see P Kotiswaran, ‘Trafficking: A Development Approach’, *Current Legal Problems*, vol. 72, issue 1, 2019, pp. 375–416, <https://doi.org/10.1093/clp/cuz012>.

³⁹ When citing the story, I use the term *aravani*, but when writing in my own voice, I use the term *thirunangai*. The translations are mine.

⁴⁰ Suyambu, pp. 11–12.

chest. Impressed by his chastity and femininity, the *aravanis* send him to Mumbai at their own cost.

In contrast to most *thirunangai* autobiographical narratives, where these migrations are mediated by obligatory gifts to parents and *gurus*, Suyambu portrays the cost of migration as an altruistic gift from well-meaning strangers. Reframing this payment as altruistic rather than obligatory or transactional allows Suyambu to distinguish it from trafficking relationships or labour migration. In his story, Alagammai is migrating not for work but in preparation for a respectable marriage as a woman, after which her obligations to her *aravani* family will eventually cease.

In Mumbai, Alagappan is adopted ceremonially by a *guru* and renamed Alagammai. When she goes to beg at the shops with her *aravani* sisters, the shopkeepers freely give fruit and goods (rather than money) to the *aravanis* in exchange for their blessings, and money is conspicuously absent.⁴¹ This scenario contrasts starkly with Vidya's recollection of her first begging experience. Vidya is humiliated, overcome with memories of her education, until her sister snaps her out of it: 'Your MA means nothing here'. By contrast, Suyambu portrays the exchanges that take place while begging as altruistic rather than antagonistic, confrontational, or transactional. In doing so, he portrays Alagammai as a person harmoniously integrated into society unlike the aged *aravanis* in Chennai. Vidya writes of how she had to pay her *guru* INR 300 a day until she had earned enough for her operation.⁴² By contrast, in his story, Suyambu replaces money with fruits and goods, obscuring the economic arrangements of the *jamath* family and portraying them as spontaneous love and care.

The third migration in the story is for surgical transition. On her way home from the shops, Alagammai spots a beautiful woman on a train:

The woman self-consciously adjusted her sari and frowned at Alagammai.

Alagammai: Please don't misunderstand me. I am an *aravani*. God has given you all the beauty that is due to a woman. That's why I looked at you.

Woman: Shall I tell you the truth? I am also an *aravani*. But I keep it a secret. I am a famous official in this town.

Alagammai: How did you become even more beautiful than a woman?

Woman: Very simple. I, who was born a man, had an operation to rid myself of the organ that I so despised. I took hormone injections. Now everyone sees me as a woman. I have even gotten

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁴² Approximately USD 7 at the time.

married. My husband looks like a film actor. You should also do the operation! Become a woman like me.⁴³

The posh *aravani* on the train contrasts strikingly with the poverty of the Chennai *aravani* Alagammai first met. Chaste but also worldly, the posh *aravani* speaks English ('very simple!'), has a husband that looks like a film actor, takes hormone injections rather than have a 'traditional' operation, and is 'more beautiful than a woman herself!' Suyambu's story envisions a world where *aravani*s do not beg on trains but are regular passengers, landing bureaucratic jobs and handsome husbands.

In the final section, Alagammai has the operation with her *guru*'s blessings and is then secluded for 40 days, not allowed to look at men. At the end of the period, she emerges veiled from her room. Lifting her veil, she is amazed to see her mother, father, and cousin before her:

'Your daughter came to me as a man. I have made her a woman and I return her to you,' [said her *guru*], and Alagammai fell at her feet.

Alagammai's parents took the money that they had brought and gave it to the *guru*. She refused to accept it.

Tears running down their cheeks, her parents expressed their thanks. They said, 'From today, we will accept you as a woman' and took her home.

Now Alagammai has married her father's sister's son and lives in Bangalore. They have adopted a female child. Alagammai has no urge to seek publicity or to parade her identity about, she lives quietly enjoying the pleasures of domestic life.⁴⁴

Suyambu's vision for *thirunangai* acceptance is to be enfolded into the sexual economies reserved for cisgender women, namely heterosexual caste-bound marriage and child-rearing. Emphasising how Alagammai did not look at other men and adopted a child, he restores her chastity and procreative ability, the importance of which was being actively debated by activists in 2010. The gift to the *guru*, and her refusal, remain ambiguous. As my discussions with Suyambu and the Sahodaran staff will show, this gift was interpreted in extremely different ways by different readers, gendering the protagonist differently as a result.

In 2015, I interviewed Mr Suyambu and asked him about the parents' gift. Why did the *guru* refuse it? Suyambu's reading was that the *guru* was relinquishing her hold on Alagammai and returning her home without encumbrances, ultimately

⁴³ Suyambu, pp. 24–25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

conceding the ascendancy of the birth family. 'It isn't realistic maybe [for all *thirunangais* to return home]', Mr Suyambu acknowledged, 'but it is my dream for the community.' He continued:

It is already happening. Nowadays [many *thirunangais*] are returning to their families and the inability to bear a child is not really such an issue. [In the mainstream population], there are 10% couples that cannot bear children, and at this rate, we are going to have something like 20-30% couples like this. Once people get used to [*thirunangais*], they will adopt children and get married, and slowly those 'kidnapping' type of stories will reduce, and people will be able to just raise children in peace.

Refuting the sordid stories of 'kidnapping' that were prominent in the press at the time, Mr Suyambu transformed the meaning of Alagammai's migration to Mumbai: she was migrating not as a worker or *jamath* member but as a future wife. In his perception, *thirunangais* are freed of the imperative to reproduce biologically, open-minded enough to adopt, and well-travelled across rural Tamil Nadu and Mumbai, offering an aspirational womanhood superior to the increasingly infertile Tamil cisgender wives. Eschewing any reference to monetary payments for migration, surgery, and marriage, he lifts Alagammai out of narratives of trafficking and sex work and portrays her as a chaste woman generating prosperity for her heterosexual family.

The worldly elegance of the posh *aravani* on the train for Suyambu similarly represented an aspirational hyperfemininity that cisgender women lacked. He said in hushed tones:

[*Thirunangais*] have a certain daring to talk about all the things that are uncomfortable... they still do *that* [sex work] but you can't write that in the newspaper... they let themselves be taken at a young age... Like this *thirunangai* I know, she enjoys it openly. She looks even more beautiful than a real woman. When she came into the office, it caused quite a splash...

In his perception, *thirunangais'* sexual liberation placed a demand on Tamil men, too, to be more masculine than they were.

Another *thirunangai* I know is from a good family, grew up with her parents. Her husband is a model...but the marriage only lasted 6 months. That's why they offer different sexual practices [from the norm], to keep their husbands interested.

His comment suggests that Alagammai and her hypermasculine cross-cousin husband enjoy not only the respectability of a conventional caste-bound marriage,

but also the pleasures of ‘different sexual practices’ from a regular wife. For Suyambu, *thirunangai* integration promises an aspirational kind of womanhood, capable of remaking Tamil families and society.

Alagammai as *Kothi*

The participants in the reading circle I held at Sahodaran read the story in a significantly different way from Mr Suyambu, reinterpreting Alagammai’s migrations, gifts, and kin relations in a way that gendered her not as a *thirunangai* but a *kothi*. By gendering Alagammai as a *kothi*, the participants indexed a cheeky, irreverent relationship to the institutionalised seniority and overt femininity of *thirunangai*.

In Mr Suyambu’s story, we never get a sense of Alagammai’s life outside of her femaleness; her experience with a male body hardly comes into sight. Indeed, her *guru* goes so far as to tell her she must never remember her life as a man. Gendering her as a *kothi*, however, the group participants highlighted the fluidity of her identity, so her male past was never fully erased.

Bhairavi: I know one *kothi* that is similar to this... She went [to Mumbai] to work in an office as an MSM, then she did the operation and wanted to live like a *naaran*, so she got married to her *mama*’s [maternal uncle’s] son and is settled in Bangalore. Karuna: They got divorced. The *kothi* you’re talking about is Vimala from [the town] Nagercoil... that *kothi* Senthil’s older brother...

Saya: They are not together anymore. Just last week I met that *kothi* at [an HIV/AIDS] training workshop and she was moaning to me about it.

Jessie: That’s not all... I know another *kothi* who now calls himself an MSM and has married a [cis]woman!

The word *kothi* foregrounds intimate relationships: Vimala and Senthil’s *kothi*-ness binds them to the group participants, foregrounding the migrations, contingency, and life history that they all share, while ‘MSM’, ‘woman’, and ‘husband’ are presented as contextual, shifting identities. The posh femininity of the *aravani* on the train was likewise denaturalised in Bhairavi’s reading:

Bhairavi, giggling: So on the train, she sees this *naaran* [cisgender woman]-bodied *kothi* that looks like [the actress] Shalini, and [the *kothi* on the train] says why are you staring at my *daaman* [breasts] and that *pinju kothi* [young *kothi*] tells her ‘Oh you have been granted all the beauty of a real woman’ and [the *kothi* on the train] says, ‘Oh no, I am also a *kothi* just like you, I am just living like a *naaran*.’

By casting both Alagammai and the posh *aravani* as *kothis* and peppering the interaction with irreverent *kothi* slang (*naaran*, *daaman*, *pinju*), the encounter on the train became a moment of comical misrecognition rather than a long-awaited recognition. In Bhairavi's telling, the woman on the train is just a trussed-up *kothi* trying to look like a film actor, and Alagammai is a naïve young *kothi* for actually believing that she is a cisgender woman. This has the effect of mocking cisgender femininity as well, pointing out the artifice that lies behind apparent chaste femininity.

The participants considered the last scene especially unrealistic:

Karuna: It was like a cinema story... I can't believe that any *guru* would do that, especially in Mumbai. Chennai *kothis* tell me how they were treated so poorly [by *gurus*] in Mumbai... Maybe in Chennai, a *thirunangai* might introduce their parents, but not there.

Saya: In my opinion, the depiction of *thirunangai* and *aravanis*...

Me: Oooh, look at us being researchers! [Affecting highly formal Tamil] 'In my humble opinion, the mode of depiction of *aravanis* and *thirunangais*...'

Saya: Di idiot, I'm saying this for real. I think that to improve the public image of *aravanis* and *thirunangais*, he has painted everything in this positive light.

The term *thirunangai*, as Karuna uses it, has the effect of making Tamil Nadu seem more progressive than the Hindi-speaking Mumbai. The words *thirunangai* and *aravani* also evoke public images, indexed by my own joking affectation of formal Tamil, and how Saya switches to those terms when stating that Suyambu was addressing the general public. By contrast, *kothi* indexed a more intimate, secret recognition that they felt Suyambu would not have put in the text.

By recasting Alagammai as the *kothi*, the family reunion became silly and even pretentious. Bhairavi performed a comedic reading of this scene, mocking its sentimentality:

Bhairavi: So this *kothi* starts crying, she cries, cries, cries, [laughter] ...and says [whining] I want to see my *amma*, my *appa*, my *athai payyan* [paternal aunt's son] and wow! There they are!

Me: Then the parents also offer the *guru* money, no? What is that for?

Bhairavi: [sarcastic] Oh, maybe this guru was so affected by love for this *kothi* that she refuses the money... like in the film *Mahanadi* where the father comes to rescue her from the prostitutes and the [brothel owner] throws all that money at her [chuckles].

Bhairavi is sceptical of Suyambu's portrayal of the *guru's* altruism, comparing it to a scene from the iconic 1993 Tamil film *Mahanadi*. In *Mahanadi*, a poor but honest single father becomes caught in a nexus of corrupt child traffickers and frauds, which ultimately send him to prison. When released, he finds his daughter in a brothel in Kolkata, wearing skimpy clothes and reading a fashion magazine. Devastated, he begs the owners to let her go. The male owners demand INR 5,000 for the girl but the female brothel-owner is moved by the father's plight. She appeals to the other women: 'Look, we were all sold here by our families, but Kaveri's father has come to rescue her. She is blessed, let us be happy for her.' The women in the brothel shower the girl with rupee-notes, paying for her to return to the chastity of her biological family. Her father is saved from the disgrace of paying for Kaveri's lost chastity, and the women, in turn, redeem themselves: their selfless gift restores her chastity though theirs is lost.

Bhairavi and Saya expressed scepticism and humour at the earnest piety of the scenes in *Mahanadi* and in Suyambu's story.

Saya: The *guru* will never take such good care of her... unless there are some benefits. She won't even consent to the operation... And [for her] to say, 'Fly away with your family, there is no longer any relationship between us, go and live a happy life as a woman' ... it will never happen.
[She shrieks in mock-Bengali imitating the brothel owner in *Mahanadi*, pretending to throw money on the ground. Everyone laughs.]

Through their satirical retelling, Saya and Bhairavi argue that the *guru* will likely expect reciprocation for the care given to Alagammai and this claim is natural and justified. Having paid for her operation, the *guru* has invested in making Alagammai an economic actor in the *jamath* and would be understandably unwilling to relinquish all ties. The biological parents likely have economic interests in Alagammai as well, whether in terms of the gifts and labour expended on raising her, or the prospect of her marrying, reproducing, and earning. The hypocrisy of the scene in *Mahanadi* comes from its sentimentality, pretending that heterosexual biological families guarantee entry into a chaste female life, or that such femaleness is untainted by the parents' economic interests.

Conclusion

I have argued that *thirunangai* is not merely a neologism but a social and economic trajectory, promising upward mobility and integration. The term *thirunangai* suggests a person that can become a progressive respectable woman who chooses from a range of occupations. The term is free from the religious trappings of *aravani* and its association with begging, the double life associated with a *kothi* passing as a man, or the cisgender woman cast in public discourse either as a conventional wife or an impoverished sex worker. Yet, as the difference between Vidyā's, Suyambu's, and my reading circle's interpretations suggest, what exactly integration looks like is a matter of debate. This discussion offers a small glimpse into a vibrant conversation within the *thirunangai* movement in Tamil Nadu, where I argue that gender is being rethought in relation to language, economics, and social relations to envision utopian futures.⁴⁵

The stakes are high, because, as Lakkimsetti has argued, state recognition of gender works in tandem with recriminalisation.⁴⁶ For example, the recently passed *Transgender Persons Protection Bill* (2018) reverses many of the gains of the progressive 2014 judgment because it does not recognise self-identification, does not mention affirmative action, and introduces clauses that criminalise *jamath* structures and practices such as begging, which are key forms of livelihood. These paradoxes increase the stakes of switching between gender identities and give new economic meanings to transition.

The competing claims to *thirunangai* identity are also a powerful reminder that social womanhood is not the monopoly of cisgender women, and I echo other scholars in saying that we need more queer analyses of gender, migration, and labour.⁴⁷ According to the 2011 census data, 68% of India's 455 million internal migrants are cisgender women, most of whom have migrated for marriage. Since the census treats marriage and economic migration as mutually exclusive, the category of 'economic migrant' tends to be gendered male. Cisfemale economic migrants are imagined narrowly in terms of professions such as nursing and domestic work;⁴⁸ those migrating for sex work or marriage are not considered workers at all. Feminists have powerfully critiqued this divide by pointing out that marriage is a site of socially reproductive labour and not just sentimental

⁴⁵ This argument is further developed in Nataraj.

⁴⁶ Lakkimsetti, p. 135.

⁴⁷ S P Shah, 'Impossible Migrants: Debating sex work and gender identity amid the crisis of migrant labor', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 120, issue 3, 2021, pp. 515–532, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9154884>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

love,⁴⁹ so marriage migration *is* economic migration.

This critique must be pushed much further, since it is not only cisgender women's labour that is implicated by marriage economies. As Vidya's life and Suyambu's story both make clear, heterosexual marriage is only one element of a larger intergenerational kinship economy that systematically creates gendered divisions of labour for *all* parties. In migrating, people fall in and out of sexual economies, with implications for their assigned gender, honour, caste, class, kinship role, livelihood, and legal status. The point is not to say that *thirunangais* should be 'included' in the woman category, but to show that social womanhood itself is a contingent achievement, split along axes of class, caste, religion, cis- or transgenderhood, queerness, and so forth. A queer analysis of migration can powerfully demonstrate that not all socially assigned women marry or labour in the same way, and that gender is never a singular or isolated axis of differentiation.

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⁴⁹ P Kotiswaran, 'The Laws of Social Reproduction: A Lesson in Appropriation', *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2013, pp. 317–333, <https://doi.org/10.53386/nllq.v64i3.353>.