



## Divine Power and Fluid Bodies: *Tirunaṅkai*s in Tamil Nadu

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**Abstract** This article analyzes the complex ways in which religious practices influence the formation of identity and community among *tirunaṅkai*s, male-to-female transgender people in Tamil Nadu. I argue that *tirunaṅkai*s draw on long-standing religious resources to enact nonnormative identities that operate outside of the secular constructions of the modern subject that undergird governmental “uplift” efforts as well as the liberatory projects of Western feminist scholars such as Judith Butler. I focus in particular on three arenas in which *tirunaṅkai*s negotiate their identities in specific religious and social contexts: the kinship network, the annual Kūttāṅṅavar festival, and public rituals associated with Hindu goddesses in Tamil Nadu. The *tirunaṅkai* kinship network deploys multiple religious rituals while at the same time transcending boundaries of religion, caste, and class in its inclusivity. The enactment of marriage and widowhood at the annual festival to Kūttāṅṅavar foregrounds the divinity of the male-female form that *tirunaṅkai*s emulate. Serving as vehicles of the divine who embody particular goddesses through ritual possession in public temple spaces provides affirmation of their ritual efficacy and power to mediate between the human and divine worlds.

**Keywords** *tirunaṅkai*/thirunangai · hijra · transgender · Tamil Nadu · goddesses · Kālī/Kali · Aṅkāḷamman/Angalamman

This article maps the temporal and spatial sites in which *tirunaṅkai*s (*tirunaṅkaikaḷ*), or male-to-female transgender people in Tamil Nadu, negotiate their identities at the intersections of caste, class, and religion and also across the boundaries between

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*tirunaṅkai* kinship communities and mainstream society.<sup>1</sup> *Tirunaṅkais* perform gender in ways that register as “alternative” in the larger society but that also incorporate conventional forms of gendered comportment. *Tirunaṅkais* embody multiple roles, some of which are restricted to the *tirunaṅkai* community, and others, such as serving as ritual experts in temples, that are significant in the larger social arena. In the ethnographic work in the state of Tamil Nadu that I have conducted with my fieldwork associate, Mr. M. Thavamani, I aim to understand identity as emerging in a localized web of actions, concepts, and meanings that reflect intersecting national and global influences.<sup>2</sup> My research includes some work in Chennai but is mostly located outside of this major urban center in smaller towns and rural areas, and I am therefore particularly interested in how nonelite individuals with limited means negotiate nonnormative identities.

In recent years multiple governmental reforms based on medicalizing, normalizing frameworks have been implemented in Tamil Nadu with the aim of integrating *tirunaṅkais* into mainstream society. I argue that *tirunaṅkais* draw on longstanding *religious resources* to enact nonnormative identities that operate outside of the secular constructions of the modern subject that undergird the rights-based discourse of governmental “uplift” efforts as well as the liberatory projects of Western feminist scholars such as Judith Butler.

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), Butler advances a performative theory of gender in which she argues that sexed and gendered subjects are formed continuously through practices repeated over time:

Construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which “sex” is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of “sex” into a potentially productive crisis (10; emphasis in the original).

Butler’s theory of gender performativity grounds resistance to regulatory norms in the constitutive processes themselves. Butler’s theory is helpful in illuminating

<sup>1</sup> I follow Stryker here in using the term “transgender” to refer to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” and to highlight “*the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination*” (2008: 1; emphasis in the original).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Reddy’s (2005) landmark work on *hijras* in the city of Hyderabad, in which she argues for a complex understanding of identity that takes into account multiple intersecting vectors that play out in local contexts. Reddy and Cohen (1995) both argue for more complex analyses of *hijra* identity that go beyond the essentializing concept of the “third sex.”

certain ways in which the constitution and subversion of norms are intertwined in the reiterative practices through which *tirunaṅkai* construct alternative bodily identities and an alternative kinship system, the “gaps and fissures” in their reiterative practices opening up productive possibilities for destabilizing heterosexual norms. However, there are limits to the applicability of Butler’s theorizations of gender performativity to the case of the *tirunaṅkai*, because, as Saba Mahmood (2012) has emphasized, Butler’s theorizations are based on “secular-liberal assumptions” that do not take into account the role of traditional religious practices in the construction of authentic selves.

In her ethnography of an Islamist women’s piety movement in Cairo, Mahmood explores the work that orthodox Islamic self-cultivation practices perform in constituting subjects. She focuses on women who are part of a religious movement that operates outside of secular-liberal assumptions about the modern subject, and in this context she critiques Butler’s discussion of agency, which rests on a dualistic model of performativity in which “norms suppress and/or are subverted, are reiterated and/or resignified—so that one gets little sense of the work norms perform beyond this register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the subject” (Mahmood 2012: 22). Mahmood argues that, on the contrary, “norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted...but [are] performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways” (2012: 22), and she conceptualizes agency as not limited to resisting norms but as a modality of action, of performative behavior, that is critical to self-cultivation (157). For the women in the piety movement, “bodily behavior does not simply stand in a relationship of meaning to self and society, but it also endows the self with certain kinds of capacities that provide the substance from which the world is acted upon” (Mahmood 2012: 27). In contrast to Butler’s understanding of the materiality of the body in terms of the model of language, in which she “analyzes the power of bodily performatives in terms of processes of signification whose disruptive potential lies in the indeterminate character of signs” (Mahmood 2012: 165), Mahmood emphasizes that the women in the piety movement understand the body as a medium for constructing a self rather than as a site of signification. Mahmood’s insightful study of how women in the piety movement in Egypt employ orthodox Islamic practices to construct virtuous selves brings to light the religious dimensions of gender performativity that are also important to my own study, which seeks to illuminate how *tirunaṅkai* in Tamil Nadu draw on traditional Tamil religious practices to create authentic selves.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I explore three arenas in order to illuminate how *tirunaṅkai* negotiate their identities in specific religious and social contexts: (1) the kinship network; (2) the annual festival that celebrates marriage to the *Mahābhārata* hero Aravān, or Kūttāṅṭavar; and (3) public rituals associated with Hindu goddesses in Tamil Nadu.

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<sup>3</sup> Mahmood’s critique of the secular-liberal assumptions undergirding liberatory projects also informs my perspective on the limits of the government’s approach to *tirunaṅkai* “uplift” in Tamil Nadu. See also Hollywood’s (2006) analysis of Butler’s use of the term ritual and its close connection to language in her work.

## The Tamil Context

The word *hijra*, which is commonly used in much of India to refer to transgender persons, is not widely used in Tamil Nadu. Historically, male-to-female transgender individuals were called *alis*, and then for many years they were called *aravāṇis* (*aravāṇikaḷ*) because of their marriage to the *Mahābhārata* hero Aravāṇ. However, this word has been supplanted by the secular term *tirunaṅkais* (*tirunaṅkaikaḷ*), a word that can mean either “auspicious women” or “half male, half female,” that was originally proposed by the transgender classical dancer Narthaki Nartharaj and was subsequently promoted by former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi (Vasudevan 2020: 2, 18n13). In other parts of India *hijras* occupy a culturally sanctioned and remunerated role in blessing newborn infants and newlywed couples, but for the most part *tirunaṅkais* in Tamil Nadu do not play this ritual role in mainstream culture.<sup>4</sup> Consequently many *tirunaṅkais* engage in the stigmatized activities of begging and sex work. Although prostitution is legal in India, solicitation is not, so in addition to the violence that *tirunaṅkais* suffer at the hands of clients and gangs of thugs, they are regularly harassed by the police, who have also targeted them for engaging in homosexual behavior, which was illegal until the Supreme Court of India decriminalized homosexuality on September 6, 2018.<sup>5</sup>

The need to categorize gender and sexual variance arose in India in the 1990s in response to the spread of AIDS. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) aided the Indian government in mapping disease transmission, marking high-risk groups to receive the funding tied to AIDS work. There was a recognition that Western labels for behavior and identity, such as “gay,” may not apply in local Indian contexts. Over time the behavioral category of MSM, or “men who have sex with men,” became a subject position and umbrella term. *Kothi*, or *koti*, emerged as a subset of MSM, signifying males who express differing degrees of femininity, with *hijra* and *tirunaṅkai* as one subcategory.

In recent years the state and central governments have made some attempts to ameliorate the discrimination that gender and sexual minority communities face. In 2003 *tirunaṅkais* began petitioning the Tamil Nadu government to address their need for legal rights, including ration and voter identity cards to establish a legal identity (Govindan and Vasudevan 2011: 84–92; Menon 2007). In 2004 the High

<sup>4</sup> I am not referring here to *tirunaṅkais* who participate in dance and drama troupes that are hired for temple and other functions. *Tirunaṅkai* participation in life-cycle rituals is not unheard of, especially in North Indian homes, but it does not appear that this work is traditional in Tamil Nadu. Historical participation in life-cycle rituals appears to have been the purview of *devadāsīs*. In an interview in April 2009, a *tirunaṅkai guru* named Bharathi sang a song, which I quote later in this article, in which *devadāsīs* are called to perform at a wedding. See the path-breaking work on *devadāsīs* in South India by Soneji (2012). In a personal communication Soneji confirmed that the absence of *tirunaṅkais* at life-cycle events in Tamil-speaking regions is undoubtedly because *devadāsīs* generally fulfilled this role, especially when such occasions were celebrated by upper-caste communities. See also Kersenboom 2011.

<sup>5</sup> According to Section 377 of India’s penal code, homosexuality has been illegal in India since 1861. In July 2009 the Delhi High Court overturned this law and legalized homosexuality. In response to petitions against this decision, the Supreme Court of India recriminalized homosexuality in 2013. It subsequently agreed to review this judgment and reversed the decision and decriminalized homosexuality on September 6, 2018. Based on the dozens of interviews with *tirunaṅkais* that Thavamani and I have conducted in the last few years, violence is part of virtually everyone’s experience.

Court of Tamil Nadu allowed individuals to choose either “female” or “male” on identity documents but not a third gender, as petitioners had requested. The state government responded to the appeals of *tirunankai* activists such as Priya Babu by establishing the Aravani Welfare Board in 2008 and granting other rights such as reserved seats in universities and colleges and some financial subsidies. The government established free sex reassignment surgery (SRS), or gender-affirming surgery, at Chennai’s Government General Hospital in 2009, but a state subcommittee on transgender welfare recommended counseling against SRS (Govindan and Vasudevan 2011: 89, 102). Other recommendations included making a study of *tirunankais* “with the aim of ‘giving full rehabilitation for their improvement and upliftment of life’” (Govindan and Vasudevan 2011: 90), language that pathologizes the community. In 2014, in *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court of India confirmed the legal right to choose one’s gender as male, female, or third gender. In 2019 the Indian Parliament passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, which, among other controversial issues, requires an individual’s gender identity to be certified by a District Screening Committee (Raghavan 2017: 97–99; Reddy 2018: 54–55). Since it passed, the bill has been challenged by protests and movements throughout India.<sup>6</sup>

In my research I only recently heard the word “transgender” used in self-identification outside of Chennai. As Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy note in their article “Decolonizing Transgender in India”:

As an emergent hegemonic category, transgender may offer representation and upward mobility for people who fit official definitions, but it may elide or delegitimize working-class and *dalit* discourses and epistemologies of gender/sexual variance that are not entirely legible in terms of hegemonic usages of transgender—even as these groups, particularly *kothi-hijra* communities, must increasingly represent themselves as TG to be intelligible to high-level networks of large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), transnational funders, and the state (2014: 323).

Although these governmental moves are intended to more fully integrate a marginalized community that falls outside of normative gender and social roles, the requirement to conform to a singular stable identity in order to gain official recognition cannot adequately address the complexities of identity and self-expression of *tirunankai* individuals (Dutta and Roy 2014: 333). A consistent refrain that I heard from *tirunankais* is that the NGOs, with their narrow focus on sexual behaviors, have not done anything to provide needed material benefits and alleviate

<sup>6</sup> Reddy notes that these legislative efforts at reform are inscribing norms in order to create greater legibility for marginalized subjects that delimit inclusion: “[W]hat seems to have occurred in the 2000s is a consolidation and institutionalization of the category ‘transgender’ in state institutional logics of development and governance, creating both an overly bounded understanding of this category as well as a deepening schism between ‘transgender’ (often, or only focusing on transwomen) and ‘homosexual’ or MSM grids of intelligibility, merely generating new forms of surveillance for marking ‘authentic’ gendered difference, and delineating norms of legibility for one community against its class- and sexual-other” (2018: 55). Vasudevan (2020: 61–63) discusses critiques of the bill’s circumscribed conception of family organization and vocation.

suffering. Consequently many *tirunaṅkai*s draw on other longstanding resources to construct their livelihoods.

### **Kinship, *Nirvāṇam*, and the *Pāl* Ceremony**

Butler's work seeks to open spaces for those individuals who are excluded by normative regulatory structures, many of whom cannot inhabit a livable life without psychic and physical violence. In *Undoing Gender* (2004) she emphasizes that "a more radical social transformation is precisely at stake when we refuse, for instance, to allow kinship to become reducible to 'family,' or when we refuse to allow the field of sexuality to become gauged against the marriage form" (129–30). Butler's theory of gender as performative, along with her call to reimagine kinship relations that are not based on heteronormative marriage and reproduction, can help to illuminate some of the ways in which *tirunaṅkai*s negotiate, embrace, and at the same time subvert gender norms in a localized web of actions, concepts, and meanings. Integral to the construction of *tirunaṅkai* personhood is the refiguring of the body through repeated citational practices that materialize a felt sense of gender and sexual identity. In addition, constructed kinship relationships provide *tirunaṅkai*s with a distinctive social system and ties to regional and even national networks.

Like *hijras* in other parts of India, *tirunaṅkai*s maintain a complex kinship system that is not based on marriage or reproduction and includes individuals from a variety of social locations. In this context *tirunaṅkai*s repeatedly claim that among them there is no caste, class, or religion. The crucial social system that this kinship network provides is constructed and legitimated within the community by the persistent enactment of roles that involve varying degrees of personal and economic responsibilities and rewards. In this kinship network individuals speak a distinctive language, maintain strict rules of etiquette, and participate in required *tirunaṅkai* life-cycle rites that can take up a great deal of time and energy. In this system a novice will initially become a *celā*, disciple, to a *guru* through the ritual of putting *rīt*, allegiance, on a *guru* and a house. In addition to having fellow *celās* under one *guru*, *tirunaṅkai*s build relationships with each other based on affection: mothers adopt daughters, who may become sisters to each other, aunts to their sisters' daughters, and so on. The *guru-celā* relation is the axis that anchors a web of female kinship relations in which a *tirunaṅkai* is increasingly embedded and that often replaces the birth family.<sup>7</sup> According to Kalki (n.d.), founder of the transgender rights foundation Sahodari:

We are an all women's family and no men—no husbands, fathers, uncles, sons or grandsons. It is a women's world...This [is] a family hierarchy which is fully matriarchal...The chronological age has no value here, whoever joins the family becomes the part of the hierarchy...This is a unique family system

<sup>7</sup> Reddy (2005: especially 164–68) discusses the importance of nurturing relationships other than the *guru-celā* one.

which the transwomen have been following for more than 100 years and it is a strong bond which unites us as a family network throughout the country.

The hierarchical *guru-celā* relationship is the central axis of the matriarchal network. The *guru* is essentially a mother to the *celā*, and in many aspects the *celā* is like a daughter to her *guru*. But when a *guru* dies, her *celās* play the role of widows and, adopting the white garb of a widow, perform conventional rites of widowhood. On the fortieth day after the funeral, the widowed *celās* attend a *jamāth*, or meeting, with their leaders at which they are given colored saris and jewelry to put on, signifying the end of their widowhood and enabling them to become the *celā* of another *guru*.<sup>8</sup> The funeral rites are performed according to Muslim traditions regardless of the religion of the individuals involved. These *tirunañkai* kinship networks provide a social identity within a potentially stable community, one that integrates as well as transcends religious differences and allows for a certain degree of fluidity in positions and roles.<sup>9</sup>

Although these kinship groups include individuals who present as men in the outside community, *tirunañkai*s who undergo genital excision, *nirvāṇam* (*nirvāṇ*), assume the highest status in these networks. Lawrence Cohen (1995) has noted both the violence and the pleasure at the root of *hijra* identity. Penectomy and castration are bloody acts in which the body is refashioned into a more feminized individual. The *nirvāṇam* surgery is increasingly performed by medical doctors but was traditionally performed by a *tirunañkai* called a *tāyammā*. Many *tirunañkai*s still consider the *tāyammā* procedure more prestigious and more successful in making them into a “real woman.”<sup>10</sup> *Hijra* and *tirunañkai* communities in India worship a form of Bedhrāj Mātā, or Bahuchāra Mātā,<sup>11</sup> the goddess whose vehicle is a rooster and whose main temple is in Gujarat.<sup>12</sup> If the rite is performed by a *tāyammā*, Bedhrāj Mātā is worshiped before and during the procedure. She is also worshiped

<sup>8</sup> This description is based on Thavamani’s notes on a *tirunañkai* funeral in Villupuram on July 26, 2009, and a *raṅgī sārī*, or final rites ceremony, in Villupuram on August 27, 2009. See also Reddy 2005: 107–8, 162.

<sup>9</sup> *Celās* can change *gurus*, but it is expensive; the original *guru* must be paid double the *rū* fee, which is doubled again each time a *celā* wants to change *gurus*. The *tirunañkai* kinship network in Tamil Nadu closely parallels the Hyderabad *hijra* network that Reddy (2005) describes. Many informants told us that Tamil *tirunañkai* traditions come from Hyderabad. See also Nanda 1999: 38–48. There are some evocative parallels between the *tirunañkai* kinship system and the kinship relations of mothers and children in houses connected to the drag ball in Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris Is Burning* (1991). See Butler 1993: especially 136–37.

<sup>10</sup> We heard this statement several times, including at a *tāyammā nirvāṇam* in Villupuram on June 11, 2010. See also Reddy 2005: 94.

<sup>11</sup> See Reddy 2005: 108; Nanda 1999: 24–26.

<sup>12</sup> Although Bhedhrāj Mātā is worshiped at all important *tirunañkai* life-cycle ceremonies, and many if not most of the *tirunañkai*s whom Thavamani and I interviewed kept the image of Mātā in their homes, none of them had been to the temple in Gujarat or knew of any temples to her in Tamil Nadu, and only one or two knew the story of this particular goddess. The story of Bedhrāj Mātā is told in Reddy (2005: 108–9) and Nanda (1999: 25–26). According to the story, a prince married a beautiful goddess, but every night he would enjoy himself with other men instead of with her. When the goddess found out she was very angry and cursed people like him to be born as neither man nor woman and cut off his genitalia. But, according to Reddy’s recounting of the story, “she also stated that if such people worshiped her at this point, she would help them to recover quickly and bless them with power” (2005: 109).



during the ceremony that is performed on the fortieth day following the surgery, after which the newly operated person is considered a “full” *tirunaṅkai*. This ceremony is called *pāl*, which means both “milk” and “sex” or “gender” in Tamil.

The *pāl* ceremony is a huge celebration that draws a large number of *tirunaṅkai*s for a night of feasting and dancing. The rites for the celebrant begin in the middle of the night, when she is anointed with henna, turmeric paste, oil, and sugar water and elders bathe her and dress her in the required green sari. Elaborate offerings are placed in front of Bedhrāj Mātā’s photo, which is bathed in milk that is kept in a brass pot. The celebrant worships Mātā with her face covered so that she cannot see the goddess. The *guru* places the pot of milk from the altar on her head, and the *guru* and *celā* go to the nearest body of water to pour the milk from the pot into the pond or tank. The celebrant returns and stands in front of Mātā, uncovers her eyes, and worships her for the first time as a “full” *tirunaṅkai*.<sup>13</sup> The *pāl* ceremony is a happy celebration of an individual gaining full membership in the *tirunaṅkai* community, engendered through an intentional re-making of the body. Excising the genitalia takes away the individual’s reproductive ability but replaces it with power from the goddess.

Butler describes the construction of sexed and gendered bodies as “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (1993: 9; emphasis in the original). Cohen similarly emphasizes the processual nature of the refiguring of *hijra* identity and argues that “the absent phallus is an inadequate marker of authentic gender; *hijras* locate their essential difference processually, along a path of self-awareness” (1995: 295).<sup>14</sup> Genital surgery may be accompanied by other practices to refigure the body according to the norms of conventional Tamil womanhood, including receiving hormone treatments, modulating the voice, walking in a feminine manner, growing the hair long, plucking the beard, and wearing feminine clothes and jewelry. Such stylization reveals the potential disjunctions between normatively perceived sex and gender and both reworks and subverts gender norms. Butler remarks:

“[R]eality” is given to certain kinds of gender appearances over others, and... those who are transgendered are regularly debased and pathologized for “not being real.” The point is that the ontological field is mobilized by power relations, and that what we come to regard and affirm as “real” or “unreal” can and does undergo critical change depending on social mobilizations of various kinds (2006: 282).

The ideal of femininity, of being able to “pass” in the outside community as a woman, is a powerful trope in the *tirunaṅkai* community, but there is necessarily slippage that opens a potential space between embracing and resisting dominant

<sup>13</sup> The *pāl* ceremony that I attended during the night of February 10, 2012, at a marriage hall in Gingee followed what seems to be the typical format. In addition to this ceremony, I am drawing on fieldwork notes about a ceremony in Anaveli on June 17, 2007, and about a ceremony in Valaipettu (in between Villupuram and Cuddalore) on June 19, 2007. In Thavamani’s notes about a puberty ceremony in Saidapet on April 21, 2007, he writes that images of Kūttāṅṅavar and Kāmāṅci Ammaṅ were displayed. See Nanda (1999: 26–29) for a detailed discussion of the operation and the fortieth-day ceremony.

<sup>14</sup> See also Salamon 2010: 179.



norms. *Tirunaṅkai*s aim to embody a notion of “woman,” but with a difference. Sheethal, the director of Sahodaran and a *tirunaṅkai nāyak* (leader) in Pondicherry, commented in an interview after her *nirvāṇam* surgery, “Now I am a real woman. I can have sex like a woman.”<sup>15</sup> But in another interview she said, “Why shouldn’t I be able to sit on the bus wearing a sari yet speak in my normal voice?”<sup>16</sup> *Tirunaṅkai*s repeatedly declare that it is only because of their unique strength, their courage (*tairiyam*), that they are able to embody their authentic selves every day.

In their article “The Razor’s Edge of Oppositionality: Exploring the Politics of Rights-Based Activism by Transgender Women in Tamil Nadu” (2011), Padma Govindan and Aniruddhan Vasudevan note that the hierarchical kinship system “frequently fosters violent and coercive behavior between *gurus* and *chelas*, in no small part due to the pressure to earn money and support community members in the context of a larger social stigma” (93). Many if not most *tirunaṅkai*s engage in begging and sex work, at least for part of their lives—activities that stigmatize the community as a whole and make it difficult to obtain any mainstream jobs. The state government has given jobs to a few *tirunaṅkai*s,<sup>17</sup> but most are unable to get mainstream jobs. Sheethal, the Sahodaran director in Pondicherry, told me that some *tirunaṅkai*s will not stay in other jobs even if they get them because there is so much more money to be made doing sex work, a claim that was echoed by many other *tirunaṅkai*s whom Thavamani and I interviewed.<sup>18</sup> Some *tirunaṅkai*s talk about being able to fulfill sexual desires through sex work. A. Revathi comments:

I must admit that in my early days of sex work, I did look for sexual gratification. There *were* a few caring, loving male clients and such rare opportunities allowed me to experience heterosexual love that I so desired as a woman. But such beautiful experiences were more of an exception than a rule (2016: 46; emphasis in the original).

Governmental reforms aim to normalize *tirunaṅkai* individuals and raise their profile in society, but the attempt to move *tirunaṅkai*s away from sex work further stigmatizes a livelihood that has been integral to *tirunaṅkai* lives. Some social scientists have critiqued the tendency to view material transactions as incompatible with “true” sexual intimacy. As Lucinda Ramberg emphasizes:

<sup>15</sup> Sheethal, interview by Thavamani, Cuddalore, December 25, 2012, conducted on the occasion of Sheethal’s *pāl* ceremony. Some of the quotations from interviews in this article have been edited for clarity and brevity. All interviews were conducted in Tamil and are translated by Thavamani and the author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>16</sup> Sheethal, interview (in English) by Thavamani and the author, Sahodaran Office, Pondicherry, March 8, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Prithika Yashini became the first *tirunaṅkai* police subinspector in November 2015. See Aditi R. 2015. Jaya, who has a twelfth-standard certificate and attended three semesters of college, was hired as the organizer of food provisions for children at a school. Interview with Jaya by Thavamani and the author, Tiruvannamalai, March 26, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Sheethal, interview (in English) by the author, Sahodaran Office, Pondicherry, May 12, 2016. When Revathi (2016: 47) told her *guru* that she was giving up sex work to join the NGO Sangama, her *guru* was shocked that she would work for so little when she could make so much more doing sex work.

Conjugality is no more a guarantor of intimacy, equality, and the absence of coercion than the selling of sex is de facto devoid of affection, mutual regard, and willing participation. The presence of material interests in the context of sexual activity is not a necessary or sufficient indicator of coercion (2014: 174).

Part of the normalizing project in Tamil Nadu is for birth families to accept their *tirunaṅkai* children and allow them to continue living at home. In March 2016 Thavamani and I attended a *tirunaṅkai* awareness workshop for village leaders in Gingee. One of the presentations was a mock debate about accepting *tirunaṅkai* children, in which one side argued that if a family accepts a disabled child, they should accept a *tirunaṅkai* child. The other side argued that they are not able to accept a *tirunaṅkai* child until society accepts them because they cannot do anything to harm their standing in society, and they claimed further that if they keep the child then no one will marry their other children. In interviews some *tirunaṅkai*s said that life would have been easier if they could have stayed in their natal homes, but some expressed concern that then they would have had to follow the family's practices, including those of caste.

Some *tirunaṅkai*s whom Thavamani and I interviewed continue to live in their natal homes, like Velan, who is higher caste, dresses as a man, and keeps their *tirunaṅkai* network activities hidden from their natal family.<sup>19</sup> Velan was trained to be a priest in Chennai and performs *pūjā* in temples to Murugan and Muthumāriyamman for a salary. As a child they would perform *pūjā* to dolls and started to serve in a temple at the age of fourteen. When they hit puberty, they were increasingly teased for being a feminine boy, but they felt called by the goddess and continued to do *pūjā*, which gave them cover for things like putting on *kumkum* and wearing their hair long. They were possessed by the goddess Aṅkāḷamman as a teenager, but they now perform their possession rituals only at festivals. They paid for their sister to get married but will not attend any family functions so that people do not ask questions. They spoke disparagingly of *tirunaṅkai*s who do sex work. They loved a man many years ago, but since his death they have not had any sexual partners. Velan's work provides a steady income and some room to enact feminizing behaviors for the goddess, but the respectability that they feel their natal family demands leaves comparatively little room for self-expression.<sup>20</sup>

The *tirunaṅkai* kinship network, in contrast to the natal family, allows some individuals to construct more authentic identities and to engage in patterns of caring (Ramberg 2014: 194–95) that can sustain people who are exiled from normative structures. Violence at times plagues *tirunaṅkai* kinship groups, but violence can plague “normative” families as well. Although some natal families may successfully embrace a *tirunaṅkai* child, the *tirunaṅkai* kinship network provides an invaluable alternative support system.

<sup>19</sup> Velan is a pseudonym. I have chosen to use pseudonyms for interviewees who do not have public profiles. Although some *tirunaṅkai*s like Velan dress as males, pronoun usage can be flexible among *tirunaṅkai*s, who use “they/them/their” or “she/her/hers” pronouns. In the case of Velan, as well as in the cases of Kumar and Raju, whom I discuss later, I use “they/them/their” pronouns in keeping with their gender-fluid presentation in different contexts.

<sup>20</sup> Velan, interview by Thavamani, Chennai, December 15, 2008.

## Marrying Kūttāṅṭavar

Although *tirunaṅkai*s emphasize that men are not part of their kinship network, many *tirunaṅkai*s voice the desire for a boyfriend or husband, a *panthi* or *panti*, who would stay with them and with whom they could perform the role of a wife.<sup>21</sup> Marriages between *tirunaṅkai*s and men are sometimes performed, but they remain supplemental to the *tirunaṅkai* kinship network.<sup>22</sup> For some *tirunaṅkai*s, the desire for a perfect husband is enacted in the annual festival to Kūttāṅṭavar that is celebrated in many Tamil villages. *Tirunaṅkai*s draw on Hindu tradition to legitimate their embodiment and identity, and one deity whom they invoke is Mohinī, Kṛṣṇa's female incarnation who appears on earth to marry Kūttāṅṭavar—the name by which the *Mahābhārata* hero Aravāṅ (Sanskrit, Irāvān) is commonly known in Tamil folk traditions. As mentioned earlier, *tirunaṅkai*s were previously called *aravāṅis* because of their marriage to the hero Aravāṅ. In the *Mahābhārata* Aravāṅ is the son of Arjuna who must sacrifice himself in order for the Pāṇḍavas to win the war. Alf Hildebeitel (1995) has traced the evolution of Aravāṅ from a minor hero known as Irāvān in the Sanskrit version of the *Mahābhārata* into a central figure in Tamil narrative and ritual traditions. Here I highlight just a few elements from this hero's genealogy to help set the context for the festival.

In the Sanskrit version of the *Mahābhārata* Irāvān is the son of Arjuna and a serpent maiden called Ulūpī. Irāvān sides with the Pāṇḍavas in the war, and on the eighth day he engages in a prolonged, fierce, and bloody battle but is ultimately decapitated. This heroic figure appears in Peruntēvaṅār's ninth-century Tamil version of the *Mahābhārata*,<sup>23</sup> in which Kālī is the goddess of the battlefield, and Irāvān, now known as Aravāṅ, agrees to sacrifice himself to Kālī to ensure the Pāṇḍavas' victory in return for dying a hero's death on the battle's eighth day (Hildebeitel 1998: 145). Over the centuries, in later versions of the narrative, Aravāṅ's boons increase. In Villipūttūr Ālvār's fourteenth-century version, Aravāṅ demands a second boon: to watch the war, which requires that his severed head survive so that his eyes can see the battlefield. In later Tamil folk traditions, Aravāṅ is called Kūttāṅṭavar, and he asks for a third boon: he does not want to die unmarried, or ancestral rites will not be performed on his behalf

<sup>21</sup> See Cohen (1995, 2005) for detailed and insightful discussions of the language used in India for different genders and sexualities and the role of AIDS-prevention organizations in the labeling of groups of people. He problematizes the over-simplified definitions of *panthi*, or *panti*, as a penetrative man and *kothi*, or *koti*, as a feminine, receptive man. He notes that "Madras was the first site of the making of Indian AIDS" with the testing of female sex workers and foreign students, some of whom tested positive for HIV, leading to the labeling of risk groups and the development of AIDS-prevention discourse (Cohen 2005: 283). Sunil Menon, the director of the NGO Sahodaran in Madras, did field research in the city areas and is credited with highlighting *kothi* as a local term for feminized men, distinguished from *panthi* as a term for masculine men (Cohen 2005: 282–85). See also Reddy's (2005) rich discussion. In our fieldwork people tended to differentiate "full" *tirunaṅkai*s from feminized *kothis*, who usually do not wear women's clothes, but both groups are contrasted with masculine *panthis*.

<sup>22</sup> Kalki started a matrimonial website for *tirunaṅkai*s in 2010, [Kalkisubramaniam.com/activism/](http://Kalkisubramaniam.com/activism/) (accessed September 14, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> This is a period when the *Mahābhārata* is recited in temples, postdating the iconography of head offerings to Durgā that has appeared in temples since the seventh century. Hildebeitel dates the head-offering iconography to the ninth century, but Padma Kaimal dates it to at least the seventh century at Mamallapuram (personal communication, April 21, 2011).

following his death. But of course no woman would want to marry a man who is destined to die the next day, so Kṛṣṇa incarnates as Mohinī, usually described as a female form but considered by many *tirunaṅkai*s to be a *tirunaṅkai*—half male, half female—form.<sup>24</sup> It is the marriage to Aravāṅ/Kūttāṅṭavar and subsequent widowhood that *tirunaṅkai*s ritually reenact at contemporary Kūttāṅṭavar festivals in Tamil Nadu—most famously at Kuvakam near Villupuram, which draws *tirunaṅkai*s from all over Tamil Nadu, other parts of India, and even other parts of the world.<sup>25</sup>

The celebration of the eighteen-day Kūttāṅṭavar festival at Kuvakam can be traced to as early as 1878, which included the participation of men dressed as women who got married to Kūttāṅṭavar and then the following day performed the rites of widowhood (Hiltebeitel 1999: 279). In contemporary festival reenactments of the marriage to Kūttāṅṭavar, some men may still dress as women. In addition, many people of all ages and genders participate in the festival and marry Kūttāṅṭavar, although married women do not tie the *tāli*, marriage necklace, for Kūttāṅṭavar. In recent years *tirunaṅkai*s have been increasingly numerous and visible participants during the two central days of the Kūttāṅṭavar festival. According to Hiltebeitel (1995: 454, 469), *tirunaṅkai*s have come to Kuvakam in large numbers only for the last few decades, beginning when a *tirunaṅkai* named Tēvi became an ardent devotee of Kūttāṅṭavar and told other *tirunaṅkai*s about the festival. Whatever the origin of their participation is, it is clear that in the last few decades the Kūttāṅṭavar festival at Kuvakam has become an important space for *tirunaṅkai*s to come together in large numbers to maintain bonds across geographic regions and also to embrace norms of feminine comportment and enact the role of a wife who becomes a widow, highlighting important ways in which desire is constructed in devotional and social realms.

Thavamani and I attended the two “marriage” days of the Kūttāṅṭavar festival at Kuvakam in 2009. On the first of these two days, the *tirunaṅkai*s go inside the temple along with other devotees, where the priests tie the *tāli*, the necklace signifying their marriage to Kūttāṅṭavar. The day of marriage is a festive one involving a lot of dancing and celebrating with friends and kin from other parts of Tamil Nadu and India. During the night, in the area outside of the temple grounds, many of the *tirunaṅkai*s engage in liaisons or perform sex work, some say to consummate the marriage.<sup>26</sup> The following day Kūttāṅṭavar’s temple image, a giant red head, is placed on top of his newly constructed and decorated body, and then in his fully embodied form Kūttāṅṭavar is pulled on a chariot through the crowds, signifying his readiness for the battlefield sacrifice. At this point the *tirunaṅkai*s begin streaming to the lamentation ground (*aḷakuḷam*), where they break their bangles, cut their *tālis*, and sing songs of lamentation. Some may begin a period of widowhood during which they wear white and remove all jewelry for up to thirty days.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See also Hiltebeitel 1995: 456.

<sup>25</sup> Other villages in which the festival is enacted are Pillaiyarkuppam near Pondicherry and Kottattai near Chidambaram. See Cohen (1995: 281–82) for a discussion of how *hijra* space is constructed as a “carnival utopia.” Films have been made about *tirunaṅkai*s at the Kuvakam festival, such as Santosh Sivan’s 2005 film, *Navarasa*.

<sup>26</sup> See also Hiltebeitel 1995: 470.

<sup>27</sup> That night Kūttāṅṭavar’s body is dismantled near the Kālī temple behind the lamentation grove (Hiltebeitel 1995: 463–64).

Unlike other participants at the festival who only temporarily become Mohinī, *tirunaṅkaiś* embrace a transgender form in their daily lives, which they repeatedly stress takes a great deal of strength and courage.<sup>28</sup> One of the most eloquent testaments to the importance of the Kūttāṅṭavar festival for *tirunaṅkaiś* came from Bharathi, a *guru* in Tiruvannamalai, who said that at the festival they become Kūttāṅṭavar’s bride and are therefore treated like Kṛṣṇa in his form as Mohinī. She went on to say, “He [Kūttāṅṭavar] is going to die tomorrow, so they lose the husband. How can a real woman become a widow? [She cannot.] So Kṛṣṇa incarnated as an *aravāṇi*.”<sup>29</sup> She talked about *tirunaṅkaiś*’ singular ability to be completely devoted to a husband.

I will labor for you. I will give water to you. Only you are there to my eyes. I will not look for my parents’ house....For our husband we go [to Kuvakam] and tie the *tāli* and remove the *tāli*; when we remove the *tāli* we really feel that our own husband died. The tears come automatically.<sup>30</sup>

Bharathi then broke into a series of Kuvakam songs, the first one describing in detail the preparations for and celebration of the wedding and the subsequent mourning for a husband who died so quickly that the bride’s jasmine garland had not yet wilted.

That good Aravāṇ, who came here for the bride, why didn’t he come on Wednesday, why did he come today? The pandal that was made [for the marriage] is not yet removed; the guests who came are not yet gone, the drummers who came to play, they didn’t even cross the field. The *devadāsī* was called for the dance; she did not cross the riverbank....The jasmine that we brought is not yet withered on my head, the sari that I wore is not yet wrinkled....I was looking for him through the window, I stood in the courtyard, I thought the cart would come....And he took all my people and he went to the battle, and he made me suffer in all the eight directions.<sup>31</sup>

Bharathi then sang a lamentation song (*oppāri*) that is sung when the *tirunaṅkaiś* cut their *tāliś* at the Kuvakam festival.

Father, didn’t any astrologer tell you that I’m going to cut my *tāli* soon?... Now the golden cart is coming. My parents’ things will come; my good husband I don’t want the gold, I don’t want things, I want to be a wife. My good husband, you told me the golden cart filled with things is coming for me from your house, but I don’t want all those things, I just want you. [You] went away [and] I don’t know where to turn.<sup>32</sup>

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler remarks about transgender individuals:

<sup>28</sup> See Hildebeitel’s (1995: especially 468–71) discussion of *tirunaṅkaiś*’ devotion at Kuvakam. He characterizes their marriage to Aravāṇ as “a permanent condition” (471).

<sup>29</sup> Bharathi, interview by Thavamani and the author, Tiruvannamalai, April 2, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Bharathi, interview by Thavamani and the author, Tiruvannamalai, April 2, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Bharathi, interview by Thavamani and the author, Tiruvannamalai, April 2, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Bharathi, interview by Thavamani and the author, Tiruvannamalai, April 2, 2009.

The strategy of desire is in part the transfiguration of the desiring body itself. Indeed, in order to desire at all it may be necessary to believe in an altered bodily ego which, within the gendered rules of the imaginary, might fit the requirements of a body capable of desire. This imaginary condition of desire always exceeds the physical body through or on which it works (71).

The rituals at Kuvakam distill and channel multiple modes of desire and identity performed in a communal space. *Celās* play the role of a widow when a *guru* dies, ensuring that proper death rites are performed for individuals in a kinship network in which marriage to a man is not the central relationship. The *tirunaṅkai*s' reenactment of marriage to Kūttāṅṭavar embraces a romantic image of a courageous warrior willing to sacrifice himself for his kin, and it celebrates the desire for a heroic husband whose death makes them widows but also divinizes them.<sup>33</sup>

The Kūttāṅṭavar festival at Kuvakam has come to be widely identified as a transgender festival. The visibility that this popular Hindu festival affords *tirunaṅkai*s has brought some positive media attention as well as negative repercussions. Thavamani and I returned to the Kuvakam festival in April 2016, visiting the Kūttāṅṭavar temple during the day to observe the *tāli*-tying rituals. *Tirunaṅkai*s who came with offerings and to worship at the temple were thronged by photographers jockeying for advantageous positions to capture their every move; the *tirunaṅkai*s were the main spectacle. On the way from Villupuram to Kuvakam we saw the activist Kalki Subramaniam with a camera. She told us that she was documenting the sexual harassment occurring at the festival. Some media sources have suggested that increasing sexual harassment and violence at the festival might be deterring some *tirunaṅkai*s from attending.<sup>34</sup> However, *tirunaṅkai*s have worked to gain more control of the event, which continues to be an important arena for religious expression and community identity.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Hildebeitel suggests that at Kuvakam *tirunaṅkai*s are “worshipping a hero whose self-sacrifice is in so many ways similar to and, to them, as heroic and sad, as their own” (1995: 471).

<sup>34</sup> See Tejonmayam 2015. See also “Changing Face of the World-Famous Koovagam Transgender Festival” (2015).

<sup>35</sup> Desire is played out in a different register at the “Miss Kuvakam” beauty pageants that have taken place annually for the past twenty years or so in the city of Villupuram, nearby the village of Kuvakam, one day before the Kūttāṅṭavar festival’s marriage days. The beauty pageants are geographically, temporally, and in some ways thematically connected to the marriage to Kūttāṅṭavar at Kuvakam, but they also provide a striking juxtaposition to the festival that highlights some of the power relations involved in the creation of *tirunaṅkai* identity. These pageants provide a stage on which to display the *tirunaṅkai* participants’ ability to wear feminine or even glamorous costumes as well as their talent in choreographing and performing alluring dances. Much has been written about the disciplining of bodies necessary to be successful on the beauty pageant circuit, but arguably the bodies in the “Miss Kuvakam” pageants take the performance of gender and the creation of beauty to a different level. Many *tirunaṅkai*s revile the “Miss Kuvakam” pageants as shows that benefit the funding agencies and do nothing for the *tirunaṅkai* community, but others see them as a potentially useful showcase for the community. *Tirunaṅkai* community-based organizations have increasingly taken over the sponsorship of the annual pageants, as evidenced by the billboards advertising the event that Thavamani and I observed in 2016. The pageant in 2016 was well attended, and many journalists interviewed several of the *tirunaṅkai* leaders in addition to pageant participants.

## Embodying the Goddess

For some *tirunañkai*, certain religious resources that have long been a part of the broader Tamil culture are deployed to help construct identities that allow them to move more easily between *tirunañkai* and mainstream communities.<sup>36</sup> Although *tirunañkai* claim that in their kinship network there is no caste, class, or religion, these identities can influence how individuals negotiate their *tirunañkai* identities in financial and other ways. The activist A. Revathi describes moving from a small town in Tamil Nadu to Bengaluru in 1999 to work for the NGO Sangama, where for the first time she met English-speaking individuals who identified as gay or lesbian.

I realized that there was a huge gulf that separates working class, non-English speaking sexual and gender minorities from their affluent and educated counterparts. Later, as an activist, I decided to focus exclusively on the needs and rights of non-English speaking gender and sexual minorities as they are disadvantaged in every possible way (Revathi 2016: 44).

Revathi (2016: 77) further notes that *tirunañkai* who come from Dalit families that own no property can struggle much more than others.<sup>37</sup> Some *tirunañkai* who come from higher caste and middle-class families in which there are opportunities for college education and desirable jobs may opt to navigate two facets of identity, inhabiting *tirunañkai* identity only in certain contexts apart from the family so that they can continue to be employed and abide by their families' gender norms. Caste and class status may thus offer some opportunities to thrive but can also preclude opportunities in myriad ways.

Goddesses like Kālī, Māriyamman, and Āñkālamman have always been integral to the cultural fabric of Tamil Nadu. These goddesses are central deities for many different individuals and communities, but they are particularly important to those at the lower rungs of the social and economic hierarchies and to those who struggle at the margins. For some *tirunañkai*, especially those who come from lower caste or class backgrounds, the special connection to the goddess whom they embody through ritual possession provides public affirmation of their ritual efficacy and can lead to lifelong work. Hindu temples are terrains in which the instabilities of gender can be visible, where *tirunañkai* who are regular vehicles of the divine accommodate themselves to receiving the goddess in their bodies in order to mediate between the goddess and human devotees from a wide variety of social locations.

One central place for *tirunañkai* ritual activity is Mēl Malaiyañūr, which is considered the most important temple to the goddess Āñkālamman, or Āñkālaparamēcuvāri. It is built next to a cremation ground where the god Śiva is said to have come as a beggar after cutting off one of the creator Brahmā's heads; Āñkālamman then appeared in her fierce form to relieve Śiva of his curse of

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<sup>36</sup> A few of the dozens of *tirunañkai* whom Thavamani and I have interviewed over the years are Muslim or Christian, but the vast majority self-identify as Hindu, reflecting the Hindu-majority demographics of Tamil Nadu.

<sup>37</sup> Viswanath (2014) analyzes the "pariah problem" as an issue of labor exploitation.



brahminicide. According to the temple narrative, once when Ammaṅ (Aṅkāḷammaṅ) returned to Kailāsa, both Śiva and Brahmā were seated there (Meyer 1986: 36–38, 58, 176–84). Since each of them has five heads, she could not tell which one was her husband and mistakenly bowed down before Brahmā to receive his blessings. When Brahmā laughed because she had inadvertently betrayed her faithfulness to her husband, both Ammaṅ and Śiva got very angry. Śiva cut off one of Brahmā’s heads, and Brahmā in turn cursed Śiva to wander around in the cremation ground begging for alms. Śiva went begging for food, but Brahmā’s skull, which served as his begging bowl (*kapāla*), was stuck to his hand and ate all the offerings. Thus unable to eat, Śiva started rolling around in the cremation ground at Mēl Malaiyaṅūr. Ammaṅ saw Śiva lying there, so she scattered food in the cremation ground. All of the demons in the cremation ground came to eat the food, and Brahmā’s skull left Śiva’s hand and ate the food also. When the skull dropped off his hand, Śiva regained his normal state and ran to Ammaṅ, who trampled Brahmā’s skull and cursed him. Ammaṅ thereby attained her place of honor at Śiva’s left side.

*Tirunaṅkai*s enact this myth during the annual festival of *mayāṅkkoḷḷai*, “pillage in the cremation ground.” After Aṅkāḷammaṅ restored Śiva to his normal state, she took her place as part of him in his form as Ardhanārīśvara, half male, half female. *Tirunaṅkai*s identify with this divine form; as mentioned earlier, the word *tirunaṅkai* can be glossed as “half male, half female.” *Tirunaṅkai*s assert that they are therefore the ones Aṅkāḷammaṅ speaks through, *aruḷ vāḅku*, when they perform rituals of *kuṛi*, divination, and *karippu*, expelling malignant forces. As Velan from Chennai claimed:

Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari [says], *aravāṅis* are the most important children for her. Ammā says, half male and half female formed as a human. For me, all the *pūjās* will be done by that person. Ammā will never say *vāḅku* with a female form....She says *vāḅku* only through a half male, half female person. That *vāḅku* is the only real *vāḅku*....Three-fourths of people who get possessed by Māriyammaṅ are my people.<sup>38</sup>

Many non-*tirunaṅkai*s get possessed in Mēl Malaiyaṅūr by Aṅkāḷammaṅ, who is a lineage deity for many Hindus, and the temple draws all kinds of people. However, the connection between Aṅkāḷammaṅ and *tirunaṅkai*s is not just part of the *tirunaṅkai* community’s self-identification. Many devotees agree that *tirunaṅkai*s have a special connection to Aṅkāḷammaṅ and are particularly powerful ritual experts. In addition to identifying with Aṅkāḷammaṅ’s half male, half female form, many *tirunaṅkai*s explain their close relationship with this goddess in ways that resonate with the following statement by Gangadevi, a priestess in her own Kālī temple in Vellore:

We left our parents, mother, father, everyone. We think only the goddess supports us. Whatever goddess we worship, she supports us. So most of us will worship Aṅkāḷammaṅ. Because she has lots of *āvēcam* [being in a state of

<sup>38</sup> Velan, interview by Thavamani and the author, Chennai, May 5, 2009. See Craddock (2012) for a description of rituals to the goddess Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari.

frenzy or of being possessed], she is strong, angry; like that, *tirunaṅkai*s get *āvēcam*. The anger (*kōpam*) is too much with a *tirunaṅkai*. If anyone knocks into us on the road, the *tirunaṅkai* will ask, why did you hit and kick me? Like that *Aṅkāḷammaṅ* has so much *āvēcam*, like us, that's why we worship her. *Tirunaṅkai*s worship *Kālī* and *Aṅkāḷammaṅ* only.<sup>39</sup>

Gangadevi, as the priestess in her *Kālī* temple, hosts annual festivals, including the festival of *mayāṅakkoḷḷai*, that draw *tirunaṅkai*s and devotees from the larger community. Gangadevi is a powerful *tirunaṅkai nāyak* (leader); she has many *celās*, is widely respected, and wields a great deal of clout in the *tirunaṅkai* community. She has had the *nirvāṇam* surgery and speaks forcefully about the power that this embodiment gives an individual in the *tirunaṅkai* community. Although many women are ritual specialists for the goddess, priests are still most often men.<sup>40</sup> Yet Gangadevi has successfully assumed the role of priestess as a feminized *tirunaṅkai*, possibly due to the status that she has established for herself within the *tirunaṅkai* community, which then bleeds out into the larger society.

Other individuals who identify as *tirunaṅkai*s maintain a more masculinized persona that may permit them more “unmarked flexibility” than a feminized comportment, which can invite stigmatization (Dutta and Roy 2014: 324). Some of these individuals are also popular priests with their own temples. Kumar, for example, has their own *Kālī* temple in a small village near Pondicherry,<sup>41</sup> and, like Gangadevi, is from a Scheduled Caste (SC) or Dalit family.<sup>42</sup> They do not wear saris but dress as a male priest in everyday life and attend some *jamāths* but do not participate regularly in the *tirunaṅkai* social network. Like Gangadevi, Kumar also claims that *Ammaṅ* possesses only *tirunaṅkai*s because they have the strength and fierceness to be her vehicle. Kumar told a familiar story of a male discovering both a feminine or gender-fluid identity and a close relationship to the goddess beginning in childhood and continuing through the period of puberty. When asked how they perform rituals, they fervently say that it is *Ammā* (*Ammaṅ*), the goddess, who does everything; everything is her will. Like many mediums, they do not remember the possession, which highlights the complicated intercorporeal embodiment of *tirunaṅkai*s who serve the goddess (Ram 2013: 145–46). When asked if the devotees who come to their temple see them as a *tirunaṅkai*, they replied, “They see me as *Ammā*, as the goddess.”<sup>43</sup>

*Tirunaṅkai*s who are ritual specialists for Tamil goddesses such as *Aṅkāḷammaṅ* or *Māriyammaṅ* develop a subjectivity that includes the goddess. They adjust and accommodate to being possessed, developing the skills to negotiate ritual

<sup>39</sup> Gangadevi, interview by Thavamani and the author, Vellore, March 20, 2016. Gangadevi is a pseudonym.

<sup>40</sup> This claim is based on my own observations and was confirmed by Perundeivi Srinivasan in a personal communication, November 25, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Kumar is a pseudonym. As mentioned in footnote 19 above, in keeping with their gender-fluid presentation in different contexts, I use “they/them/their” pronouns for Kumar as well as for Velan, whom I discussed earlier, and for Raju, whom I discuss later.

<sup>42</sup> In our interviews people self-identified as “SC,” not as Dalit.

<sup>43</sup> Kumar, interview by Thavamani and the author, V. Mathur, April 28, 2016.

interactions between the goddess and devotees through the medium of their own bodies (Ram 2013: especially 142–56). The anthropologist Kalpana Ram claims that “[t]he agency of mediumship goes beyond mere acceptance. It entails developing a *skilled* form of comportment in relation to a...being that seems to want to consume a great deal of one’s life. The medium develops skilled forms of attunement” (2013: 154–55; emphasis in the original).<sup>44</sup> Central to Ram’s theorizing about the cultivation of agency in possession is the Tamil word *paḷakkam*, “habit, practice, familiarity”: over time, through the ritual practice of possession, a medium and those who come to her for healing become habituated to the embodied presence of the goddess. *Paḷakkam* also refers to intimacy, to the relational interdependence between goddess and medium that is most visible during possession rituals but that defines a medium’s entire life (Ram 2013: 132–34, chapter 5 *passim*). In addition, Ram notes that “habit is not the opposite of innovation, it is the prerequisite for it” (2013: 155). Successful ritual specialists learn to perform the goddess’s presence in response to their clients’ needs.

Raju is a particularly innovative and popular ritual specialist who has built their own temple in a small remote village.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Gangadevi and Kumar, they come from a higher caste, the Mudaliar caste, but a modest economic background; they are not middle class. Like Kumar, they identify as a *tirunaṅkai* and participate in some *tirunaṅkai* community events, but they wear the male dress of a shirt and a *luṅḡi* outside of the temple. Raju told a particularly vivid narrative about how the goddess Māriyamman called them when they were a child, from which I give a few excerpts here:

When I was a child I love[d] Māriyamman. I used to keep stones [as images of the goddess] everywhere. Whether I played or talked I acted like Amman. While playing I dressed up like Amman. Like this I became mad for Amman. [One night a small girl] came in my dream and said, “I am the one, why are you afraid?” She came again later that night and said, “I am as a stone in the well, if you come and pick me up and worship me privately I will give you power.” I was twelve or thirteen years old. So the next morning I went to the lake to look for a stone. The Amman [stone] I have now is the Amman I took then. The villagers started to come one by one [to the place where I had installed the stone]...and said “Raju, you have the *cāmi* (deity), bring the *cāmi* on you.”...The *aruḷ* (deity’s grace) came. This was the first time I got the *cāmi*....I did not know what I was doing. It was Muthumāriyamman....Then slowly it got famous. No one told me to tell *kuṛi*, I got the wisdom [from her]. The *śakti* only speaks from inside. *Śakti* used to dress like Ammā, on my body she decorated herself as Ammā, with sari and half sari, earrings. In my heart I felt that I myself am Amman. I also have the power of Amman. So I don’t like

<sup>44</sup> Ram’s research focuses on women who are possessed by a variety of beings, some of whom are not deities, but the insights in her boundary-breaking work apply here.

<sup>45</sup> As mentioned in footnotes 19 and 41 above, in keeping with their gender-fluid presentation in different contexts, I use “they/them/their” pronouns for Raju as well as for Velan and Kumar, whom I discussed earlier.

men. Because of that I became [a *tirunānkai*]....Outside they call me Ammā only.<sup>46</sup>

Raju's temple is centered around a large Kālī image built near the road by a client, down a path from a small preexisting temple to the village goddess Piṭāriyamman that is nestled among the rocks of a hillside.<sup>47</sup> Raju regularly performs *kuṛi* and *kaṛippu* on full moon and new moon days. I observed the full moon *kuṛi* on February 7, 2012, which was sponsored by a woman from Villupuram. After an elaborate *abhiṣekham* (ritual consecration) of the Kālī image and of their beloved original Amman stone, which is set in front of the large Kālī image, Raju walked uphill along the path to the Piṭāriyamman temple. Behind the temple only the sponsor and a few of us were allowed to watch as Raju slowly transformed into the image of Kālī using the items that the sponsor had brought: they put turmeric paste on their face, *kājal* on their eyes and eyebrows, and red paste on their lips, and they donned ankle bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and glass bangles. They put flowers in their long hair and ash on their forehead, drew fangs extending from their mouth, and then tied a red sari around their waist and legs something like a Bharatanatyam skirt.

Raju came in front of the temple and worshiped the image of the goddess Piṭāriyamman, concentrated on her, then started hissing and throwing their hands and arms back, moving like a snake, sticking their tongue out, and dancing with a trident. Raju then assumed Amman's sitting position as they continued to dance on one leg. They then took a firepot, held it in their right hand, and danced awhile holding this increasingly fiery pot. I was close enough for the heat to be uncomfortable. Raju danced with the firepot on their head awhile, then took it back in their hand and started moving downhill toward their roadside temple centered around the image of Kālī. The crowd walked ahead of Raju, and then most people lay down on the path so that Raju could walk on their bodies all the way to the other temple. There Raju took the pot off of their head and told the helper to pour water on the pot so that it steamed and we could all see how hot it was, giving us proof that only the power of the goddess could allow them to hold it.

Many ritual specialists perform *kuṛi*, but this was the first time I witnessed devotees lying down on the ground for the goddess's vehicle to walk over them. Raju told us that some time ago they began carrying the firepot every Friday, and one day the goddess said to the devotees that she would take whatever disease they had into her body and that her feet only needed to touch their bodies for her to absorb the disease. So the devotees spontaneously began to lie down on the ground so that Raju could walk over them during their dance as the goddess. Having a publicly legitimated role as a vehicle for the goddess allows Raju to perform a fully female divine persona for devotees, who are not predominantly *tirunānkais*. But at festival time the boundaries

<sup>46</sup> These narrative excerpts are taken from an interview with Raju by Thavamani, Tandavasamuthiram, June 6, 2011. The description of the *kuṛi* event is a highly abbreviated synopsis of an elaborate function. Vasudevan (2020: 133–44) emphasizes the importance of others recognizing and validating the special relationship between a *tirunānkai* and the goddess.

<sup>47</sup> *Piṭāri* means "a village (female) deity with protruding tongue and a trident in the hand" (Kriyā Dictionary 2001: 719).

between the two worlds grow more porous. At an even bigger function later that year, in August 2012, Raju again danced the goddess, and a small group of *tirunānkais* including Raju's *guru* attended this festival event. The *guru* is from the same caste as Raju and also lives as a man in a regular day job in an office. During this festival to the goddess at Raju's temple, both Raju and their *guru* were wearing saris in a public space. In an interesting moment of shifting hierarchical roles, as Raju gave out *prasād* and put ash on their *guru*'s forehead, the *guru* touched Raju's feet. In this arena porous boundaries of body and community are open to desirable encounters with the goddess that allow fluid constructions of self.

## Modernizing Subjects

Ramberg's (2014) work on *devadāsīs* in Karnataka highlights another context in which nonnormative gender and sexuality coexist with religious practice. *Devadāsīs* are ritual specialists empowered by the goddess who exist outside of normative kinship structures. Girls are given as *jogatis*, wives, to the goddess Yellammā, so they never marry human men. Property passes through them, not men, to their children, and they may conduct sexual relations of their choice, including transactional sex. *Jogatis* perform the work of the goddess, cultivating exchange relations with her, embodying her, and performing rites that they learn through apprenticeships (Ramberg 2014: 87). Their livelihood depends on devotees' offerings to the goddess and to them. However, these *jogatis* have been the focus of several modernizing reform efforts, which resulted in the 1982 law that criminalized *devadāsī* dedications; dedications continue to occur, but they are waning. *Jogatis* are Dalits, and Dalit men see these women as historically exploited victims without agency and seek to give them respectability by reintegrating them into patrilineal marriages. Secularizing reform efforts focus on *jogatis*, as in the case of *tirunānkais*, as a high-risk population for AIDS. Ramberg remarks:

The reform of devadasis is a story about what kind of work the body is made to do to become modern...[and] how categories of sexual and religious personhood come to specify who does and who does not qualify as secular, modern, and thus admissible to the rights and protections of citizenship in its broad sense as positive state recognition....Devadasi dedication is subject to reform not as a marginal form of kinship or religion but as illicit sex and superstition. This character of reform is a feature of modernity as a normalizing project (2014: 13).

One highly visible sign of the goddess's presence is matted hair, and women who are chosen this way are seen as more capable of possession and oracles (Ramberg 2014: 94). But the reformers view the matted hair as the locus of dirt and disease, and in some cases it has been forcibly cut. Cutting the hair severs the *jogati*'s body from the goddess. Ramberg comments regarding the cutting of a *devadāsī*'s hair:

The body figured in *jade*-cutting campaigns is a whole in itself, atomistic, and self-contained, and matted hair is a matter of unwanted intrusion of dirt and

disease. In contrast, the ecstatic body is open to incursion, which can manifest itself as affliction but may be cultivated as a form of power...Cutting reorients the sexuality of dedicated women, turning it from the generalized cultivation of auspiciousness and the devi to the reproduction of the heteronormative patrilineal family form and the state (2014: 101).

*Devadāsīs* are like sons in their natal homes, but they are not men; they are reproductive women who exist outside of the patrilineal network. Ramberg dedicates only a few pages of her book to *jogappas*, individuals designated as male who are tied to Yellammā and become sacred women. The *jogappas* whom Ramberg interviews define themselves through their ritual service to the goddess and are seen as particularly powerful priests, serving at large popular temples. Some *jogappas* engage in behaviors that parallel those of *hijras* and *tirunānkais*: they live in groups led by a *guru*, some have male partners, and some engage in sex work. Some *jogappas* move between the Yellammā kinship network and their natal families in that *jogappas* traditionally give up fathering children when they marry Yellammā, but some perform the other roles of a son in the house. As Ramberg notes, because of the reform efforts against dedication to Yellammā, more individuals are opting for “normal” conjugal life (2014: 200–211).

## Concluding Remarks

The state government of Tamil Nadu is not targeting Tamil *tirunānkais*' religious practices, but Ramberg's analytical insights about how reform campaigns can destroy lifeways sheds light on normalizing projects in Tamil Nadu. Much has been written about how moral and ideological battles are fought on the bodies of women such as *devadāsīs*, and I would argue that the reforms aimed at feminized, gender-fluid individuals such as *tirunānkais* expand the categories of bodies over which modernizing projects are battling. Some *tirunānkais* affirm that the legal recognition of a transgender identity and the accompanying reform measures have bestowed more legitimacy and respect on their community, and consequently life is better for some. However, governmental normalizing efforts to integrate *tirunānkais* more fully into mainstream society are insufficient, at least at this point, to eradicate the long history of stigmatization and marginalization that *tirunānkais* have endured. Some *tirunānkais* construct their authentic selves in ritual spaces, and in particular serving the goddess provides the spatial and temporal terrain for *tirunānkais* to construct fluid and porous gender identities that accommodate divine embodiment in a public sphere, thereby achieving a social legitimacy that does not depend on bureaucratic affirmation.

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