(Aikiyam)/Coexistence: Aravanis as Living Female Avatars *Myth, Marginalization, and the Politics of Coexistence*

Dr. S. Chandrasekaran
Senior Lecturer, University of the Arts Singapore, La Salle, Singapore

Abstract

The Koovagam festival in South India, an 18-day annual event celebrated by the Aravani (transgender) community, is rooted in the Mahabharata narrative of Aravan, the son of Arjuna, who consented to sacrifice himself to secure the Pandavas' victory after being married to Lord Krishna in his Mohini form (a female avatar). This myth serves as the foundation for ritual enactments in which Aravanis embody Mohini, marry Lord Aravan on the 17th day, and mourn his death as widows on the 18th. For Aravanis, embodying Mohini is not simply a performative act but a divine intervention that confers legitimacy on their identities. While this ritual sequence recalls an ancient narrative, its contemporary practice signifies much more: it provides a socio-religious lens through which the Aravani community articulates identity and belonging.

Drawing on ethnographic research, the study engages the concept of **ஐக்கியம் (Aikiyam, "coexistence")** as a socio-religious framework to reposition Aravani identity through the lens of bhakti, where devotional union with Aravan is expressed through dance, gestures, and mourning. These embodied acts of devotion affirm their presence not as marginal but as spiritually recognized within South Indian religious traditions. The analysis highlights how Aravanis claim divine sanction by negotiating their centrality within religious and social spaces. The festival also operates as a 'shared ritual space,' where Aravani and non-Aravani participation enables broader negotiations of social inclusion and the restructuring of ritual meaning within South Indian religious traditions.

By resituating myth, identity, and belonging within a single frame, this paper underscores the significance of Koovagam as a lived enactment of **Aikiyam**—a site of affirmation for the Aravani community and a challenge to normative gender boundaries, illuminating how ancient narratives, ritual, and bhakti continue to shape contemporary discourses of belonging in South India.

Keywords

Koovagam festival, Aravani, Transgender, Bhakti. Marginalisation, Belonging and **ஐக்கியம்**.