

[Photostop] Mr. and Mrs. Koovagam

“Why wouldn’t you shoot me naked? Don’t you find me attractive?” asks Ruby , flaunting her newly acquired bustline while pushing the helm of her saree down to show off the tattooed scorpion on her navel.

I am at Koovagam village in Villipuram district in Tamil Nadu, to witness the annual Koothandavar temple festival. The previous day, I had checked into the least seedy lodge Villipuram had to offer – in a dingy room that was once painted green, and decorated thereafter by spit. (Or is it bodily fluids?). The dustbin is overflowing with used condoms, cheap makeup and filth that is nauseating to say the least, and the atmosphere reeks of cigarettes mixed with arrack.



My sleep, if it can be called that, is interrupted frequently by constant knocks on the door by pimps. Initially, I answer

the door to confirm that I am a woman and yes, a full woman. A photographer. And no, not available.

Time hangs heavy around me. The corridors outside ring aloud with claps, noisy chatter and unprovoked screaming. I eventually slip into sleep that is full of nightmares.

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I wake up the next morning to see women walking around in their padded bras and velvet petticoats (some found petticoats alone sufficient); brushing, combing and getting dressed. Others were chatting up with seemingly male like men.

I walked down to find Ruby, my neighbour, who had unpacked her bags by now. She treats me to a display of silk sarees, evening gowns, wigs, lingerie, jewellery and stillettoes, all that would be used up for the beauty pageant. She adds, "I have been saving up for this all of last year."

I get free beauty tips and am advised to wear sunscreen every time I go out to shoot in the sun. "...men love glowing skin, the whiter, the better," declares Ruby. She moves on to discuss sex and her demanding clients. On seeing me getting uncomfortable, she smirks. "It is to put food on the table. It is a job, just like yours. The better you are, the more money you get."



A man walks in, and I prepare to leave when Ruby said that I would be safe around him and winks impishly. She confirms in a whisper that he is homosexual and explains that I would meet aravanis (transgenders), kothis (feminine homosexuals) and panthis (so called straight male clients of kothis) at the festival.

I continue to walk all day on the hot streets of Koovagam, trying hard not to second guess people's identities or their sexual orientations.

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It is the day of the pageant – time to select Ms. Koovagam.



The show starts with a talent contest which includes dancing to sexually coloured songs. I hold my breath as I watch them dance in frenzy and wanton fury.

And then starts the beauty pageant organized by the Villupuram District Transgenders' (Women's) Welfare Association, which also doubles up as a forum to build awareness around HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. 84 transgenders walk the ramp, each trying to outdo the other in their glitzy costumes and flashy jewellery. The audience cheers with hoots, whistles and thunderous applause.

Winning the title means quite a lot admits Ruby, disappointment writ large on her face post her elimination. We start rooting for Chayya Singh, a contestant from Hebbal, Bangalore, a brilliant conversationalist who charmed everyone with her chutzpah.



Harini from Tiruvanmalai wins the crown with Chayya coming in runners up. Harini tells TV channels, "I spent Rs 1 lakh for my costumes, accessories and grooming. This is the first time I am participating. Tamil Nadu has given me refuge and support. I left my house in Kochi at the age of 14."

Chayya too has run away from home in Dharmapuri at the age of 14 with the help of the then local collector. She had scored 400/500 in her 11th grade and had won many debate contests back in school. Her parents were inconsolable when they learnt that their brilliant boy now wanted to be girl.

"Over the years, they have come to terms with it, or maybe they have resigned themselves to their fate. I wish I had graduated, got a decent job and then got the sex change operation done. I hurried in my insecure teens and like many others, moved to Mumbai," she says. This is a common thought and regret shared by many.

She now supports herself as a bar dancer in Bangalore. I quiz her on her present condition. "Well, at least I don't spend

every night with a new man nor do I beg at traffic signals,” she adds with a smile.

I wish her good luck for the impending wedding the next morning.

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D-day at the festival. Ruby and Chayya are dressed in their finest traditional kanchipurams, and are heading out to the koothandavar temple.

In the Mahabharata, it was prophesized that the Pandavas would win the battle of Kurukshetra only if they sacrificed a ‘perfect’ male from among themselves to please Goddess Kali, who is the keeper of the Kurukshetra grounds. Prince Aravan, a son born out of an illicit relationship Arjuna had with a certain Naga princess, offered himself up, provided a few conditions of his were satisfied.

For one, he wanted to consummate with a partner before being beheaded; since no woman was willing to marry him and be widowed the next day, Lord Krishna took the form of Mohini to marry him.

The following morning, Aravan was beheaded and his head left on the grounds of war for him to watch the rest of the war, the other of his conditions. He saw his widow Mohini beating her chest and wailing inconsolably, bemoaning his death.

This tiny village of Koovagam has a temple dedicated to Lord Aravan, the prince warrior who is deified here. And it is here that the transgender community assembles on the first full moon day of the Tamil month of Chittirai to marry their Lord.



The marriage ritual is followed in letter and spirit, and for that one day, they attain a position the human society continues to refuse to them, the status of a wife.

On the temple grounds, thousands of Aravanis (as they call

themselves) are dressed in their best sarees and jewellery, all lined up to get married.

The sanctum sanctorum allows a very narrow strip of light to penetrate through and is presided by the local priest or pujari. He makes an offering of coconut and bananas, offers camphor to the deity, and recites various mantras to invoke the spirit of the Lord. He then ties the thali.

“This yearly marriage and revelry brings us huge solace, it is this gaiety that we await all year long,” says Sonika, an acquaintance. Soon enough, she excuses herself to celebrate her wedding night.

There are countless men–panthis, lined up along paddy fields and coconut groves. Sex is regular fare here. I see shadowy figures of copulating couples at night while I am rushing back home.

I run into Sonika much later in the night, only for her to plead with me, “Can you buy me dinner? The cheapo gave me just Rs.100 and didn’t even use a Nirodh (a brand of condom).” She hurls a few abusive Tamil words. I cringe. I pay.

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On the last day of the festival, a procession of the Aravan effigy travels all around the village before being ceremonially beheaded and consigned to flames.



What follows is a tragic event that would make any ancient Greek philosopher proud. Lord Aravan's death is mourned through a high pitched wail emanating from the transgenders who have just lost their coveted status as a wife. They cry, they weep, they scream, they whimper; bangles are broken, the sacred sindhoor is washed off their foreheads, the string of flowers gets yanked from their hair and finally, the thali is torn off their mortal bodies.

I stand amongst the Transgenders and try to capture all the frenzied action through my view finder. The broken glass bangles and thali fall on me. They sing songs about their ill-fated life, and wish their sexual status was only incidental. They cry over their birth, their mixed identities and their craving to find a soulmate. I sense that these tears however go much deeper.

All the self-flagellation rends my willpower to be objective about the shoot. I fail to separate myself from what is going on, I draw in the pain of the place and people. I wail.

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The Koovagam festival is an eye opener for anyone interested in understanding the transgender community.

Over the years, transgenders have gone through continuous discrimination, humiliation, oppression and continue to live on the fringes of society.

Most members of the community live in slums, eking out their livelihoods by begging at traffic lights or through sex work. They continue to be hated and feared for their sexual non-conformity and outrageous sexuality. Equally disturbing is the violence and exploitation within the community. For instance, the strong belief and practice of “Nirvana”- voluntary surgical removal of male reproductive organs by a dhai/ mid wife without anesthetic and how the date of Nirvana determines the seniority, power and respect to a TG in their community.



Legal victories such as revoking of Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code and the Election Commission's inclusion of "Others" in its electoral rolls and voter identity cards have done some good to the community. However, there are many issues of inclusivity, sensitivity, gainful employment etc. that needs addressing. But such societal changes will take a lot of time, and call for persistent deliberate effort from all stakeholders to the system.

As for you and me, we can begin by making an attempt to educate ourselves about the community and work towards changing our attitudes towards people with gender-non conforming appearance or behaviour.

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Before I bid goodbye and leave Villipuram, I ask Ruby, "What did you pray for?"

She smirks. "Year after year I ask koothandavar for just one thing. Love."



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