

## Embodying ஐக்கியம் (Aikiyam): Aravanis as Living Female Avatars

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Myth, Marginalization, and the Politics of Coexistence

### Abstract

In South India, the Koovagam festival—an 18-day annual event—is conducted by the Aravani (transgender) community, drawing upon the mythological narrative of the *Mahabharata*. According to the epic, on the final day of the Kurukshetra war, Krishna advised the Pandavas to sacrifice one warrior to ensure victory. Aravan, the son of Arjuna, volunteered, but before his death expressed a desire to marry. No woman agreed to wed a man destined for imminent sacrifice; thus, Krishna assumed the *Mohini* (female) form and married him. The next day, Aravan was sacrificed, securing the Pandavas' victory.

Within the Koovagam festival, this myth is ritually re-enacted: on the 17th day, Aravanis embody *Mohini*, entering into a symbolic marriage with the deity Aravan. On the 18th day, Aravan's death is commemorated, and Aravanis mourn as widows, marking the end of the festival. This act of mourning symbolically reflects the community's experiences of loss, marginalization, and resilience.

For the Aravani community, embodying Mohini is not merely performative but an affirmation of divine ordination—an assertion of being “blessed among Others” (binary-gendered individuals). This paper examines the Aravanis' socio-religious identity through the Tamil concept of ஐக்கியம் (*Aikiyam*, “coexistence”), proposing it as a framework for reimagining their position within broader society. Drawing on ethnographic research, the study situates Aravani identity within ritual and Hindu mythological contexts, demonstrating how these narratives articulate their inherent right to coexist alongside Others. The paper further explores how non-Aravani participants seek inclusion in Aravani cultural spaces, and how the Aravanis themselves negotiate centrality within the social fabric, challenging their marginalization through ritual, myth, and lived practice.