

THE THIRD

Nick Sethi

GENDER

Jyoti Dhar



Every year, the eighteen-day festival of Aravan, based upon a myth from the legendary Hindu epic the Mahabharata, sees thousands of members of the transgender community gather in the Indian village of Koovagam in Tamil Nadu. The rituals begin just as theatrically as they end: with a reenactment of the marriage of Lord Krishna (in the female form of Mohini) to the warrior Aravan, followed by a mourning ceremony in which Krishna/Mohini is widowed when Aravan is killed.

While daytime has more of a spiritual and communal tone to it, night transforms the village streets and fields into a rare safe space of sexual and social freedom. In 2016, Nick Sethi, a New York-based photographer of Indian descent, spent five days immersing himself in this dualistic setting. Having previously witnessed instances of abuse and aggression that can comprise the daily reality of the Indian transgender community, Sethi was keen to explore the more wondrous and liberated side that flourishes during the festival.

Such overt inconsistency, which the LGBT community currently lives with in India, can be epitomized by the Hindu nationalist government’s lack of a clear position on this segment of the population. Politicians, often comfortable quoting Hindu philosophy to make specific sociocultural points, tend to conveniently gloss over the fact that ancient Vedic scriptures actually contain detailed, sophisticated descriptions and a highly nuanced understanding of the *tritiya-prakriti*, or third gender.

In contrast to viewing homosexuality as unnatural or dangerous to society, Vedic culture is said to have regarded those of the *tritiya-prakriti* as essential to the balance of male and female genders, necessary for fulfilling particular professional roles, and auspicious for a range of rituals and celebrations. Centuries of invasions, and the introduction of a Victorian law, in 1860, by British colonialists criminalizing homosexuality and cross-dressing rendered the third gender community to the dark margins of society. Yet fragments of their celebratory past are occasionally brought to light in events like the Aravan festival.

Sethi’s conscious approach on entering this event as a cultural insider/outsider was to present himself as a kind of “spectacle,” allowing his encounters within the community to become an “even exchange,” as he terms it. Playfulness was key to Sethi’s strategy, and through his irreverent interactions he asked the participants to reimagine themselves: “Can a girl be a boy?” “Can I be you?” “Can you be me?”

Formally, Sethi employs the language of intimate family portraiture, with shots of couples standing in front of transient backdrops; of fashion photography, with “models” posing in ceremonial garb (one is especially evocative of a yesteryear Bollywood siren); and of the selfie aesthetic, with festivalgoers captured in spontaneous excitement. His images neither glamorize nor victimize their subjects. They retain an immediacy and ordinariness about them despite being set within a temporary, performative, and fantastical backdrop.

Sethi’s recent book project, *Khichdi (Kitchari)* (2017), which engages with the changing face of street culture and mass media in India, similarly questions cultural norms and hierarchies, being sensitive to, yet unburdened by, ingrained ways of seeing. This approach can also be seen in works by other artists from the South Asian diaspora, such as in Chitra Ganesh’s exploration of sexuality and gender in India and Cassie Machado’s poetic photographs of marginalized communities in Sri Lanka.

As Gayatri Gopinath writes in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), such projects refreshingly contest fixed narratives, including the “fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies.” With India marking seventy years of independence from colonial rule, images such as Sethi’s serve as timely reminders of the need to address current sociopolitical ironies, draw upon pluralistic and syncretic histories, and finally decolonize our understanding of the third gender.

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Attendees of Koovagam Festival, Tamil Nadu, India, April 2016
All photographs courtesy the artist



