



## Heritage as a Tool for Negotiating the Tritiya-Prakriti Social Identity: A Case Study

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### Abstract

The extensive history of the Tritiya-Prakriti community and the associated social stigma present a unique opportunity to explore the influence of this third-gender group on contemporary Indian society. Using the Koovagam festival as a case study, the present contribution explores the ways the Tritiya-Prakriti find a sense of legitimacy within their tangible and intangible heritage and negotiate social identity. The material culture and folklore of the Koovagam festival showcase how tightly the history is entwined and embedded in the group's social identity. It effectively suspends the perpetual discrimination and marginalisation experienced by the Tritiya-Prakriti members, affording them a temporary taste of mainstream living. Once exclusively the symbol of memory and resistance, the festival now serves as a platform for empowerment and social validation of their group identity. This way, as the Tritiya-Prakriti minority intersects with prejudice, folklore practices change and lead to a selective reconstruction of elements from the past, playing a significant role in redefining their new identity boundaries and influencing the preservation of group social values. As such, the contextualised discussion of the Tritiya-Prakriti social identity negotiations will be relevant to scholars studying minorities and heritage at risk from a wide range of epochs.

**Keywords:** Tritiya-Prakriti; Social identity; Heritage at risk; Third gender; Archaeology

### Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a significant shift in academia in acknowledging the limitations of the traditional binary classification. An increasing acceptance of gender identities that transcend this binary framework has also become evident in the legal recognition of alternative genders in several countries, including the formal recognition of non-binary markers, such as gender-neutral pronouns. In Indian history, however, alternative sexualities have existed since antiquity, as evidenced by their frequent mention in Sanskrit mythological texts, folklore and depiction in iconography (Mposo 2017). Unsurprisingly, scholarly contributions explored these in some detail, delving into the politics surrounding non-traditional modes of enactment and production entwined with the

third gender (e.g. Siva 2021). The others concentrated on the diverse expressions embodied and performed by third-gender communities (e.g. Mihalik 1988). On the other side of the scholarly spectrum, inquiries have been dedicated to the study of cultural transfer, specifically emphasising the amalgamation and alteration of behavioural characteristics in the context of interaction (e.g. Nanda 1986). From displacement to the establishment of cultural legitimacy (e.g. Agrawal 1997) and the complexities of group identity (e.g. Chaudhary and Shukla 2017), the past of Indian communities has been defined, redefined, and articulated through the reconfiguration of their pre-existing cultural elements. This way, spanning diverse analytical frameworks and period scales, several schools of thought offered multifaceted insights into the Tritiya-

Prakriti cultural change and diversity, putting forward theories on the dynamics of appropriation, resistance and assimilation (e.g. Dutta 2012), emphasising the role of power dynamics in mediating social interactions and shaping various forms of cultural contact (e.g. Babbar 2016). Nevertheless, India's third-gender communities have been largely overlooked in the context of material culture and folklore, which has resulted in the heightened invisibility of their heritage.

### **Negotiating the Identity: Mythology and Social Structure**

The Tritiya-Prakriti group predominantly worship Buhuchara Mata, a variant of the Indian Mother goddess, and generally consists of men who transition into women by adopting their attire and mannerisms, encompassing individuals who identify as transvestites, homosexuals, intersexuals, and eunuchs (Wilhelm 2004). Culturally, however, they are accepted as the third gender, neither men nor women and are characterised as a blend of religious factions and castes, encompassing a diverse spectrum of appearances that challenge and transcend conventional gender boundaries (ibid.).

The community has been an integral part of Indian history for nearly 4000 years as an organised and interconnected group (Kavitha 2019). A fundamental tenet in Hinduism is the perpetual suspension of disbelief, signifying that all possibilities are inherently attainable. This concept is iterated consistently across various Hindu texts. In contrast to the Judeo-Christian perspective, which posits a singular world created and ultimately annihilated during the apocalypse, Hinduism espouses the belief that the world undergoes an unceasing cycle of creation, dissolution, and subsequent regeneration (Kishore 2001). The concept of limitless possibilities becomes a significant factor in the context of Tritiya-Prakriti when viewed as a gender category. If all things are considered possible, then there exists no inherent necessity for gender to conform to a binary system. There is no archetypal Adam and Eve that one can reference to justify a two-gendered, heteronormative organisation of society. Undoubtedly, the relationships between men and women hold immense importance within Hinduism, as evidenced by the Ashramas, the

From the historical, archaeological and anthropological lens, the present contribution discusses the ways the Indian Tritiya-Prakriti minority uses tangible and intangible heritage as an instrument for negotiating their social identity. Focusing on the Koovagam festival as a case study, it first analyses how the community addresses its moral and identity wounds through Hindu sacred texts, material culture, and folklore and secondly, how they use the heritage to change their position in contemporary society.

four life stages delineated in ancient Hindu texts. These stages lay out the prescribed path for men, including taking a wife, becoming a father, and assuming the householder role. Similarly, the duties of women are explicitly detailed as wives and child-bearers within these texts. However, while the imperative to fulfil each of these stages may govern the lives of men and women, there is no indication that other genders cannot exist, although they may be relegated to a lower position in the social hierarchy (Mount 2020). Hence, as a conceptual category, the third gender is not necessarily incongruent with a comprehensive Hindu worldview.

A detailed analysis of the mythological canon associated with Tritiya-Prakriti and featuring characters undergoing gender transformations or existing as non-binary is outside the scope of this paper. Overall, the group is associated with two intertwined core concepts: sacrifice and cosmic unity. The latter is often achieved through individual sacrifice, highlighting the Tritiya-Prakriti as both positive and actively sacred (Penrose 2001). In the Puranas, for instance, the concept of gender transition is first referenced as Mohini, the female avatar of Vishnu. Ardhanarishvara composite also symbolises the perfect combination of god Shiva and his consort Parvati, signifying that male and female principles are inseparable. In the epic Ramayana, further, the protagonist, Lord Rama, faces a fourteen-year exile in the forest as decreed by his father, King Dasharatha. While many of his followers accompanied him to the forest, Lord Rama urges all men and women to return to the city of Ayodhya. However, Tritiya-Prakriti chose to remain with him. Impressed by their unwavering devotion, Lord Rama gives them the authority to bestow

blessings during significant life events such as marriages, childbirth, and inaugural ceremonies (Newport 2018). This gesture underscored the recognition and acceptance of Tritiya-Prakriti within the societal framework. The intricate interplay between their community identity and its historical context hence significantly influenced their intergroup relations and social cohesion early in Indian history.

Another factor that probably contributed to the centuries-long preservation of their identity is that they existed beyond the Indian social structure (Wilhelm 2004). The contemporary caste system is a result of thousands of years of evolution and progress. A more stringent system emerged in the later Vedic period under the influence of the priestly and ruling classes, emphasising intra-caste marriages. This strictness stemmed from the societal expectation of offspring through marriage, where children born from inter-caste unions were deemed impure and marginalised in society. The Tritiya-Prakriti's position within the caste system was hence unconventional, as their initiation was determined not by caste but by sexual orientation.

Moreover, infertility limited an individual's standing within their original caste, given that the caste system primarily revolved around marriage and procreation—responsibilities that were impracticable for Tritiya-Prakriti. They, therefore, have been operating independently without adhering to any discernible caste-based ritualistic practices as a collective. Consequently, the Tritiya-Prakriti developed their own kinship functions as a nonbinary family network characterised by a nonbiological discipleship-lineage system, which determines its continuity (Goel 2021).

Key associations drawn from mythology elucidate the identity of Tritiya-Prakriti as a community and hence reflect on their traditions and practices. The concept of Dharma, for one, single-handedly entails the belief that every individual possesses a unique role to fulfil (Khatri 2017). The ascendancy of familial influences in historic Hinduism and caste identities, some of which were codified by constitutional law and others symbolised as a legacy of historical oppression, have further contributed to the complex dynamics surrounding the identity of the Tritiya-Prakriti (Agrawal 1997). In this context, it is essential to consider the unique circumstances of this minority group, as they are culturally distinct

and often necessitate segregated enclaves for their protection. While Tritiya-Prakriti are conceptually respected as an integral part of the social structure, being confined to this role prevents them from fulfilling the traditional life stages, including starting a family of their own. As a result, they may be perceived as incomplete individuals whose purpose is to facilitate and uphold the social fabric.

### **Negotiating the Identity: Material Culture**

In architecture, there is a preoccupation with religious structures above all others, offering the potential to understand the value of the worshipping community. This phenomenon is attributed to the prevailing influence of religion in most historical cultures, rendering the places of worship the most impactful, enduring, and expressive edifice within any given community (Taylor 1992). The typology of religious architecture, however, is a complex subject, as unlike domestic buildings, it lacks fundamental requirements common to all faiths. Any religion's multifaceted functions encompass various activities that evolve with cultural patterns. Places of worship also function as repositories for the images, relics, and sacred areas. Some are not exclusively intended for communal gatherings but are rather revered as the abode of the deity. Such sites are considered holy due to their extraordinary nature or their connection to the life of the founder or deities.

In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, for instance, communal participation in rites takes place inside the place of worship. The architecture of these buildings, therefore, evolved to feature worship practices, such as accommodating the crowds facing the focal point of the service. Understanding architectural styles and artistic expressions is hence important because they testify to the interplay of diverse traditions and function as community hubs where a wide range of spiritual and cultural activities take place. In the same vein, preserving historical records and artefacts serves as an invaluable repository of knowledge of the congregation and contributions of religious communities throughout history. This way, studying both architecture and religious activities can provide insight into the interactions between religious groups and the larger community, shedding light on their contributions to fostering social unity and cultural richness.

For the Tritiya-Prakriti group, one of the main shrines located in Koovagam village in the Viluppuram district of Tamil Nadu, particularly showcases the complex interplay of negotiating their group identity. The Koovagam temple (Figure 1) is dedicated to Aravan and commemorates the story from the Hindu epic poem Mahabharata, where the narrative recounts an episode from the Kurukshetra war, centring around a crucial moment involving a human sacrifice to please the goddess of war (Anupama 2019). According to the oracles, three individuals from the Pandava camp are considered worthy of this sacrifice: Krishna, Arjuna, and Aravan. Because Krishna and Arjuna held pivotal roles as the divine guide and the commander, the responsibility falls to Aravan, a son of demigod Arjuna and a serpent princess. However, prior to his sacrificial fate, Aravan expresses his desire to marry, but no woman is willing to become a widow so soon. In a remarkable turn of events, Krishna transforms into a beautiful woman known as Mohini and spends the night with Aravan, who is subsequently sacrificed. Notably, Mohini mourns for her husband as a widow after his sacrifice (Selvaraj 2022). The victory of the Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war is attributed to this event, emphasising the significance of Krishna's transformation into Mohini. The union of Mohini, an incarnation of the gods Vishnu and Shiva, results in the birth of another deity, Ayyappa, an event that some consider to be the root of the Tritiya-Prakriti community (ibid.).

Thought to have been built originally during the reign of the Chola Dynasty, the 11th-century Koovagam temple faces the east and exemplifies the traditional South Indian Dravidian style architecture characterised by elaborate carvings and lively embellishments (Figure 2), especially during the annual festival. It comprises a *sanctum sanctorum*, an *artha mandapam*, and an open *mukha mandapam*. The pillars within the *artha mandapam* exhibit architectural features reminiscent of the late medieval Nayakas period. The temple is decorated with a rich array of images and sculptures that depict scenes from Aravan's life and ultimate sacrifice, and the mandapam is adorned with stucco images showing a Chariot with Arjuna. Amongst other deities, the temple features depictions of Mohini and the central icon, Aravan, whose portrayal displays fierce and

notable characteristics, such as a prominent moustache, pronounced eyes, and large ears. He wears a conical crown with a Vaishnava tilak mark on his forehead and is adorned with earrings. In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas hang the head of Aravan on the battlefield to witness the war after his demise. The splashed blood of warriors is said to have smeared it, possibly explaining the redness in Aravan's face at the temple (Figure 3) and the fact that only his head without the body is depicted (Subasini and Vanitha 2022).

During the Koovagam festival, the temple is adorned with images and symbols representing his life. This comprises vibrant Mohini iconography decorations for the marriage ceremony and sombre elements for the mourning rituals, connecting the participants who reenact this marriage. Ritualistic symbols include talis, bangles, and white sarees, which are integral to the ceremonies performed by the Tritiya-Prakriti community. The red-painted iconography against light blue pillars and walls may evoke anger, love, joy, and represent sexuality and passion. Devotees of Aravani believe that the deity's physical features alone provide them with an energy boost, seek blessings and prosperity in society and worship Aravan for happiness and good fortune (Subasini and Vanitha 2022). The Koovagam Temple, therefore, serves as a poignant representation of the enduring cultural acceptance and historical legacy of the Tritiya-Prakriti community. Its distinctive ritual of rebirth and rejuvenation underscores the group's significance. It provides an essential platform for them to express their identities and secure societal acceptance.

### **Negotiating the Identity: Ceremonies and Rituals**

Indian folklore has long served as a means to conceive diverse cultural and religious possibilities and has been a prominent source of entertainment since ancient times. While mythology is commonly acknowledged as a narrative source, however, folklore is often not given the same recognition. Yet, it constitutes societal living narratives, which continually evolve from the stories of their ancestors. Ceremonies and rituals that may seem ancient are therefore often surprisingly recent inventions, adoptions, or adaptations; otherwise, they would not maintain their

relevance. This way, folklore can shape understanding of the culture and facilitate meaningful transformation at both individual and collective levels.

Despite being inherently linked to places that possess their own stories and customs intrinsic to specific locales, the Koovagam festival folklore serves as an example of widely leveraging in the construction of community identity. In fact, its dynamic nature divided the Tritiya-Prakriti group by their regional names only, mainly Hijras in the north and Aravanis in the south (Kalra 2011). The Koovagam essentially serves as a re-enactment of the mythical episodes of Aravan's marriage and sacrifice. The 18-day annual festival centres around the night of the full moon in the Tamil month of Chittirai, culminating in the ritual enactment of Aravan's death. Highlights include the symbolic tali-tying wedding of Tritiya-Prakriti members dressed up as brides of Aravan, the 'Miss Koovagam' beauty pageant and commercial sex work tolerated by local authorities and society. On the day of sacrifice, the procession of the chariot carrying the idol of Aravan commences around the village. Participants ceremoniously cut talis, break their bangles, don white sarees to symbolise widowhood and sing lamentations in honour of Aravan's death, implying that the Tritiya-Prakriti group identify with Mohini rather than Aravan (Choudhury and Harini 2023). This way, Koovagam assimilates local myths, folklore, and legends and formalises the Tritiya-Prakriti social identity within the established social structure (Monro 2010). It represents a space this marginalised group have sought to establish for themselves over an extended period. Historically, the festival has evolved into an event that facilitates bonding, sharing, and coordination among the Tritiya-Prakriti individuals, providing a space of comfort and empowerment for the community. Through the rites and the substantive engagement, it has been shaped to serve as a poignant representation of the enduring cultural acceptance and historical legacy of the community (Herdt 2020). As such, it serves as a vital support system for members, offering respite from the societal pressures and discrimination they often go through. This celebration fosters participants' renewed sense of purpose and provides a platform for expressing their true selves amidst a

transnational audience. Such is the title of 'Miss Coovagam' cherished as a symbol of pride and serving as a significant token of societal acceptance.

What sets Tritiya-Prakriti apart from the rest of society, in particular, is the prominent role played by the main characters. At the centre is a man who transforms into a woman or cross-dresses as a woman to fulfil a particular purpose (Kuriakose 2018). Some of these narratives serve to bolster the courage of Tritiya-Prakriti in facing societal prejudice, allowing them to cast aside their sorrows momentarily. In contrast, others provide justification for their non-binary identity by portraying it as a curse (Subhan 2013). Either way, the transitional phase significantly impacts the Tritiya-Prakriti lives, and so the festival plays a pivotal role in empowering them to defy gender norms and celebrate their unique identities. They embrace and enact emotions related to marriage, spousal roles, widowhood, and motherhood without the burden of shame or discrimination, fostering a reprieve from the pervasive struggles of societal integration (Herdt 2020). Undoubtedly, the absence of these rituals would have led to disconnection and isolation among the Tritiya-Prakriti individuals; recalibration of the resistance mechanisms driving the construction of an impartial societal framework where this marginalised group can thrive is therefore essential.

Similarly, with its group members amplifying transformative narratives and providing alternative solutions, ceremonies and rituals can also navigate and potentially resolve conflicts. Therefore, when conflict fractures the narrative, active practice can aid in mending it. Given the Koovagam's pervasive influence in the lives of the Tritiya-Prakriti group, it is not surprising that it has frequently been utilised to address community issues. By imparting knowledge on how to understand and accept the group through their past, it functions as a valuable lens, enabling focused examination and diverse perspectives while also serving as an adaptable tool in managing such matters (Subasini and Vanitha 2022).

The Koovagam indeed serves as a microcosmic narrative that provides a platform for the evolving societal position of the Tritiya-Prakriti group. It deconstructs the entrenched notion of gender by satirising the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, thereby

challenging and subverting its overarching narrative (Gayathri and Karthikeyan 2016). The festival embodies scepticism towards heterosexuality, transitioning from a micro-narrative to a counter-narrative that carves out a public space for this marginalised group (Romeo 2020). It emerges as a symbolic bastion of resistance, symbolising a plea for inclusion in mainstream society (*ibid.*). At its core, the festival serves as a public sphere where subaltern voices intersect, dismantling the narratives surrounding sex and gender and facilitating authentic interaction (Delliswararao and Hangsing 2018). By elucidating the relative nature of mainstream and minority cultures, Koovagam, therefore, fosters an environment where unconventional ideas can participate in public discourse. It allows the reordering of societal constructs.

During the festival, the members are celebrated as the divine avatars of gods, creating a temporary dissipation of social exclusion and stigma where individuals from various backgrounds seek blessings from Tritiya-Prakriti. This setting serves as an exceptional situation in which marginalised individuals are temporarily accepted into society, highlighting the complex interplay between tradition, religion, and social acceptance. As such, the public sphere effectively serves as a platform for activism and empowerment. While historically embodying cultural and religious importance for the community, the Koovagam festival has steadily shifted to function as a means to convey messages of empowerment.

### Conclusions

The Koovagam festival was discussed as a focal locus for the acknowledgement and validation of the marginalised and discriminated Tritiya-Prakriti minority. The ceremonial re-enactment during the event is construed as a poignant performance that articulates their suppressed sentiments pertaining to matrimony, motherhood, and conventional societal roles. It is argued that this performative aspect of the festival effectively symbolises a progressive step towards fostering inclusivity. Notably, Koovagam emerges as a pride march and a counter-narrative where the Tritiya-Prakriti individuals adeptly challenge and satirise the conventions of the purportedly heterosexual narrative. Consequently, it evolves into a public sphere wherein there is a conspicuous portrayal

of the destabilisation or inversion of prevailing power structures akin to the dynamics observed during the festival. This sanctioned subversion subsequently becomes a platform conducive to enacting the Tritiya-Prakriti activism and empowerment. It becomes an avenue for raising awareness of social, cultural, and psychological injustices and transgressions. As such, Koovagam evolves into an arena of agency and contention, a milieu where entrenched gender paradigms collide and new constructs emerge.



Figure 1: Koovagam Temple, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo by Branka Franicevic, 2025.



Figure 2: Koovagam Temple, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo by Branka Franicevic, 2025.

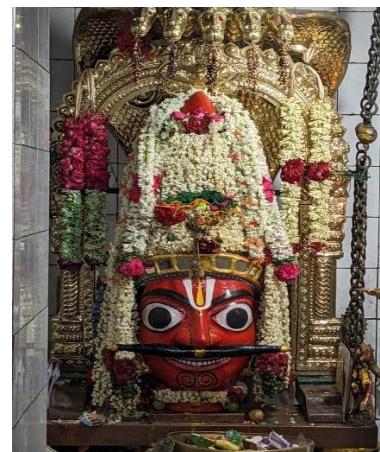


Figure 3: Aravan shrine at the Koovagam Temple, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo by Branka Franicevic, 2025.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare

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