

ABTEILUNGSKOLLOQUIUM

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND THE TAMIL THEATRE AND FESTIVAL OF MAHĀBHĀRATA

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Over the last six decades, the traditional Kūvākkam Kūttāṇṭavar festival has transformed into a site of congregation and identity assertion for the transgender people from all over India. In this talk, I would like to situate the Kurukṣetra war sacrifice enactments, rituals, and festivities at the annual Kūvākkam Kūttāṇṭavar transgender temple in the more extensive Bhāratākūttu festivities of northern districts of Tamilnadu. Kūttāṇṭavar, more widely known as Aravaṇ is the son of Arjuna and the serpent princess, Ulūpī in the



epic. Aravaṇ sacrificed before the war is also an eternal witness to the war and unfulfilled love and desire. The twin narratives of being the chosen and the condemned in the Aravaṇ mythology drive the self-perception of the transgender people. Over the last two decades, the government propaganda machinery has converted the site of the festival an advertising ground for the prevention of AIDS and advocacy for sexual hygiene. If sexual differences and diversities accentuate the conflicts within the transgender community, the presence of governmental machinery and the media diminish the importance of rituals and accord prominence to beauty pageants and other spectacles. At Kūvākkam, while the grand epic themes of death, sacrifice, human longing, and the elusive sexual identity collide with mythology, history, the autobiographies of the transgender people, it also remains as the location of conflicts, media sensationalism, transgender advocacy and a liminal space of desires.

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SAI, Room E11