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Stomping their foot down for an identity

How do we as a society, setting norms collectively, react to anomalies? What are our prejudices even in the year 2004? Should we be comfortable with our known norms which we too propagate by insisting on follow them? Or should we see if they are indeed unjustified?

Well, if you are one of those who wonder about such questions, then consider this situation. If a group of transsexuals seeks to assert their identity in your midst, how would you react?

Hard to tell from an ensconced circumstance, which, by the way is also not free of prejudices for even supposedly 'normal' persons to overcome. Hence, it would only be a mystery to guess what one may say on transsexuals away from the glare of diplomatic appearances one makes in public.

There is no doubting that society's

view of transsexuals (Aravanis) who appear to possess a 'confused gender identity' is one of scorn. But to society's discredit, it must also be said that apart from pouring scorn, society has done little to understand their problem. Which is precisely what a group of nine *Aravanis* calling themselves 'Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu' tried to tell by focussing their energy on staging a play 'Manasin Azhaippu (The heart calls)' to bring out their suffering into the open at the Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board auditorium in Chennai on Saturday.

The message presented through the play by them was 'let our identity not come in the way of our job opportunities' and 'save us from exploitation (both physical and economical)'.

For someone who is not in their shoes it may be difficult to understand why they should insist on asserting

their identity when all they need to do is settle for an accepted identity and have their job security intact.

Just like Muthamma, the cook who lost his job since coming out in the open about the hidden 'other' identity, and the others say in the play 'the (male) dress we wore did not stick to us'.

Their options today remain narrowed down to begging or prostitution. Every other career including 'Koothu' ('where we have a natural place') 'we faced nothing but harassment', they say displaying, what is often seen as a more than feminine coyness.

It is 'more than feminine coyness' which continues to keep society in doubt. At a time when feminists as also psychologists are saying that male and female identities are a result of the way one is brought up, the sexual identity mix-up needs some scientific and psy-

chological probe with society too being made a part of the efforts to understand.

The *Aravanis* too accept they would rather be part of society getting medical and other social comforts including scientific understanding about their condition rather than be seen as an outcaste, choosing to live on the fringes of society. 'Sirumai seithal nangal manitharai edirkirom' (Being belittled is something we oppose as human beings) they say in conclusion and also in unison. The play which was staged with the backing of M S Swaminathan Research Foundation was well received by the audience, which included the presence of the secretary of Social Welfare Department C K Gariyali and chairperson of State Commission for Women V Vasanthi Devi.

— RADHIKA G

