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Othering and access to housing: a unique navigation of placemaking practiced by thirunangais in urban spaces of Chennai

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the lived experiences of historically marginalized transwomen known as *thirunangais* in South India in accessing housing through the postcolonial theory of othering. These spaces often become sites where the identities of gender, caste, and class converge, making it precarious and transient. After sustained protests, *thirunangais* in Chennai were allocated housing in two resettlement sites. Despite state-provided housing, they faced violence, threats, and economic insecurity. Some left, while others remained, using adaptive strategies to assert ownership over housing through solidarity networks, collective resistance, negotiating tensions by being 'out of place' and inhabiting 'in-between' spaces. The article argues that housing interventions for *thirunangais* must address not only physical shelter but also the broader social, political, and economic factors that contribute to their marginalization.

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KEYWORDS Sexual and gender minorities; othering; placemaking; trans geography; Chennai

1. Introduction

Gender-diverse populations, especially transgender individuals, are more prone to discrimination and harassment, even within the umbrella of the LGBTQ+ community due to their unique lived experiences and trajectories (Gorman-Murray et al. 2018; Nash 2010). Transgender is a Western¹ understanding that is used as an umbrella term to categorize a broad gender-diverse group representing 'transsexuals, transvestites, crossdressers, drag

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queens, drag kings, tranny bois and other genderqueer individuals who defy easy categorisation' (Doan 2010, 636). Trans individuals tend to reject the biological gender binary of man and woman and choose to be in the ambivalent zone without confirming any single identity (Johnston 2016; Kean and Bolton 2015). Yet, the use of the term 'transgender' in the Indian context carries complex and nuanced meanings, mainly because of its Western origins and understanding in reference to the male-female binary. In Tamil Nadu, where this study is situated, transwomen locally identify themselves as *thirunangais*, a unique gender minority. They are often born intersex or assigned male at birth. *Thirunangais* dress in feminine clothing and generally reject being categorized as either men or women (Pincha and Krishna 2008).

The study of gendered embodiment, alongside the subjective experiences of transgender individuals in navigating various social spaces, has emerged as a critical focus of contemporary research (Johnston 2016). Existing literature has explored the lived experiences, capacities, and skills present among transgender individuals in navigating spaces and their sexuality (Gaillard 2011; Gorman-Murray et al. 2018). The objective of this paper is to narrate the processes of *othering* and its influence in determining housing policy formulation and habitability of *thirunangais* in peripheral resettlement sites. Using a multi-sited in-depth qualitative approach, this study seeks to understand the historical and ongoing efforts of *thirunangais* to secure a safe habitat, livelihood opportunities and resistance in the face of disasters in urban areas.

This paper begins by situating the historical and socio-political context of *thirunangais* as a distinct identity. Further, it expands on the housing crisis and discrimination faced by the *thirunangais*. Drawing on theories of othering and placemaking, we analyse the inadequacies of current social welfare policies and the differential vulnerabilities experienced by *thirunangais*. Finally, we highlight how *thirunangais* use collective resistance, solidarity networks, and engagement with the state as tools to claim space and create safer environments in otherwise heterosexual spaces.

2. Who are *thirunangais*?

In Tamil Nadu, transgender individuals are referred to as *thirunar* (திருனர்), with transgender women specifically called *thirunangai* (திருநங்கை). This terminology reflects a cultural practice in Tamil Nadu where highly respected men are addressed as *thiru* and highly respected women *thirumati*. Historically, the community was identified as *aravanis*, a term rooted in the Mahabharata's story of Aravan, a character worshipped as a deity at the Koovagam temple in Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu (Reddy 2005). However, most of the *thirunangais* who participated in this study consciously

distanced themselves from the Aravani identity, highlighting the diversity of gendered self-identifications and the contested nature of identity categories within the community. They introduced themselves to the first author as *thirunangai* or *transgender*, as according to them, it offers greater dignity and self-respect.

Thirunangais as a community still face enormous vulnerability in their daily lives for accessing livelihood and other resources. The source of their vulnerability can be located in the dominant colonial discourse, which continues to shape their daily lives and experiences. Colonialism played a pivotal role in marginalizing certain groups, contributing to their 'othering' within socio-cultural structures (Spivak 1988). Fanon (1967) in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, discussed colonial otherness in the context of racism. For Fanon (1967), people were denied an existence outside of the colonized world if they did not conform to normative identities. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1986) examined the divide between the colonial 'Self' and the 'Other'. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha expanded on how colonial differences were fixed in time, leading to the reproduction of stereotypical discourses that reinforced the power dynamics of colonialism.

The marginalization of the 'other' thus becomes defined in opposition to the norms created by colonial powers (Spivak 1985). This process of othering was also applied to gender and sexuality. Colonial authorities, for example, criminalized homosexual acts and categorized eunuchs as belonging to a 'distinct caste or community', erasing their complex gender, sexual, and social identities (Reddy 2005 24–25). This marked the beginning of the systematic marginalization of *thirunangais*. The British colonial government introduced the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which mandated the registration of criminal tribes and eunuchs² along with their properties. The colonial criminalization of ethnic, gender diverse groups like *hijras*³ has an impact on how *thirunangais* are perceived by society (Hinchy 2019).

To that end, we adopt a post-colonial perspective to understand stigma and discrimination among *thirunangais* (Dhawan 2016). The counter-heteronormative movement in India gained momentum in the 1990s, with the first efforts to trace and reclaim the histories of gender-diverse groups (Dhawan 2016; Menon 2015). Aligned with broader women's movements, these efforts highlighted the challenges in defining the identities of gender-diverse groups to be associated with the categories and roles that reinforce the binary model of gender and sexuality (Menon 2015).

From the start of the 1990s, there was an increase in the visibility of the *thirunangais* in Tamil media. The visibility has grown significantly through coverage of their protests, talk show appearances, and efforts to meet with politicians to advocate for their rights. In April 2008, Tamil Nadu became the first state to establish a Transgender Welfare Board. The board formally recognized *thirunangais* as the third gender for the first time through

Thirunangai (then Aravani) identity cards, thus granting them right to apply for family cards, voter ID and other documents (Ramakrishnan 2018).

Some landmark judgements from Tamil Nadu towards *thirunangais* were, upholding the marriage rights of *thirunangais* and inclusion of 'third gender' for providing them employment in certain state government departments. In one of the interviews, a *thirunangai* activist from Chennai elaborated how post 2000 the *thirunangais* in Chennai were able to better organize themselves as they were on the streets mobilizing and protesting for their demands on safety and recognition from the state. She credited the rationalist and anti-caste ideologies of Dravidian politics for playing a crucial role in shaping their political visibility and rights during this period. The NALSA judgement specifically acknowledged the Tamil Nadu government's efforts for including *thirunangais* in state policies, positioning the state as a leader in transgender inclusion.

It is also crucial to distinguish *thirunangais* as a distinct identity from other transgender individuals in India. Scholars argue that *thirunangais* as an identity became more acceptable as it is popularized by Dravidian leaders with whom there is a 'collective self-identification and political representation by Tamil transfeminine communities' (Vasudevan 2020 19). Further, it is founded upon the ideology of anticaste and self-respect politics with 'pure Tamil roots' which linguistically and historically distinguishes them from other third sex identities and performativity (Nataraj 2019, 16). The occupational choices of *thirunangais* in Tamil Nadu also separates them from transwomen from rest of India. In Tamil Nadu, it is not culturally sanctioned or remunerative to get involved in life-cycle rituals like blessing newborns and newly married couples, a common practice among transgenders in Northern parts of India (Craddock 2024). This also compels them to choose more stigmatized professions such as sex work and begging.

3. Theoretical framework: a post-colonial approach to understand othering and identity

'Othering' is an important concept in post-colonial theory that explains the exclusion of certain marginalized groups from the normative social processes and dominant narratives (Spivak 1988; Thomas-Olalade and Astride 2011). The theoretical framework for this study draws mainly from the works of Gayatri C. Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Partha Chatterjee.

Spivak (1985, 1988) challenges the Western knowledge regarding feminism that is often considered universal for 'all women' and describes it as a form of cultural imperialism. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak talks about how subaltern women, devoid of any agency or historical contexts, are represented by the same forces who exploit them. This study, in that context, highlights

the importance of power relations in exploring the experiences of *thirunangais* during post-disaster placemaking in Chennai. To further understand the othering of *thirunangais*, the study extends Bhabha's lens that focuses on the underlying colonial processes of creating stereotypes (Bhabha 1994). The subjugated groups are 'othered' and exist only in relation to the dominant 'self' (Staszak 2009). Differences from the 'self' are constructed to prove dominance over the 'other' by highlighting the perceived deviance of such groups from the accepted norms (Staszak 2009; Wittig 1992).

Yet Bhabha, unlike Spivak, places stronger focus on human agency and the active formation of identities. Thus, bringing attention to the ability of the othered groups to negotiate with those in power through the processes of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' (Bhabha 1994). This is line with Chatterjee's (1998) idea of 'political society', where he talks about political negotiations between marginalized groups and the government agencies over the distribution of government services, bringing in a human rights lens to these processes. Chatterjee (2011) also focuses on the importance of collective action in such negotiations. This study draws from these ideas on negotiations and highlight the agency of *thirunangais*.

Further, identities of gender-diverse groups must be seen as intersections of multiple and overlapping identities based on gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity, age and more (Fothergill 1996, Mohanty 2003). Like gender, space, too, is socially constructed. It transforms into place depending on the relationship 'a person or group has *with* that place, in particular, whether they are experiencing it as an insider or as an outsider' (Relph 1976:45). Throughout their lives, individuals from gender diverse groups continue to experience spatial exclusion in accessing housing, public spaces, workplaces, government services, and neighbourhoods (Gorman-Murray et al. 2018).

Space has become a defining area in exploring how trans individuals navigate safety, disaster recovery and capacity. The meanings, purposes and practices within a space are derived by people 'with more power than others to define what is and is not appropriate' (Cresswell 2008, 27). Similarly, gender diverse group's spatial claim is deeply tied to their lived experiences within spaces governed by heterosexual norms under dominant binary narratives of gender (Gorman-Murray and Scott 2015). The othering of *thirunangais* in different spaces (within their biological families, neighbourhoods and workplaces) are also depicted by several transgenders in their autobiographies. Some of the most popular autobiographies include *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi (Revathi 2010), *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya (Vidya 2007) and *Kalki Subramaniam's* (Subramaniam 2021), *We are not the others: Reflections of a transgender activist*. These autobiographical accounts are significant for understanding 'othering' as they locate structural

marginalization within lived experience, revealing how identity, power, and exclusion operate in everyday life.

Drawing on these theoretical and autobiographical insights of othering and placemaking, we examine how *thirunangais* experience exclusion, negotiate power, and assert agency across diverse spaces in Chennai.

4. Methodology

The study is based on 11 months of in-depth fieldwork comprising interviews, informal conversations, and observation notes. It was conducted between 2022 and 2024, focusing on the resettlement sites. We followed the *thirunangais* who were allotted housing in the resettlement site, as well as those who had abandoned the sites and relocated to central areas of Chennai. Initially, the researchers focused on studying the new risks faced by *thirunangais* in the AIR-Thiruvottiyur⁴ (from now on would be referred as AIR) resettlement site. Through discussions with *thirunangai* activists and government representatives, we learned that a similar housing allocation was made for *thirunangais* in Kannagi Nagar. However, many of the *thirunangais* who were assigned housing in Kannagi Nagar eventually left the site and returned to their previous residences, which were closer to the city centre. Therefore, we chose to follow the *thirunangais* in both the sites to fully comprehend the risks faced by *thirunangais* across the two sites. It is also pertinent to note that AIR and Kannagi Nagar are the only resettlement sites in Chennai where government housing allotments were formally recorded in the names of *thirunangais*. *Thirunangais* are deeply community-oriented and often engage in solidarity networks, which makes any form of individual engagement with them challenging. In both AIR and Kannagi Nagar, the researcher was able to identify participants through collaboration with local *thirunangai* leaders, but it proved difficult to locate those who had left the Kannagi Nagar site. To address this, the researcher partnered with a *thirunangai*-based organization to reach out to individuals who had abandoned the resettlement sites. This process involved a gradual negotiation, relying on networks and referrals from friends within the LGBTQ+ community in Chennai. As Matthews, Poyner, and Kjellgren (2019) observe, research with LGBTQ+ communities often requires flexibility in sampling due to difficulties in direct access as such an approach ensures that multiple, often unheard, voices are included.

A total of 12 *thirunangais*, along with 10 government officials and *thirunangai* activists, were interviewed. An inclusive research approach was taken, allowing the *thirunangais* to share their lived experiences of navigating risks and securing housing in the resettlement areas. These individual narratives, when combined, helped to form a collective lived experience of the *thirunangai* community in the context of resettlement (Bailey 2021). As

researchers who do not belong to the *thirunangai* community, we adopted a 'listen and learn' approach throughout our fieldwork, seeking to foreground the voices, experiences, and perspectives of *thirunangais* in the research process (Gorman-Murray et al. 2018).

The findings were further supported by government orders issued by the Tamil Nadu state government, relevant Supreme Court judgements, and reports from non-governmental organizations. Additionally, *thirunangais* provided visual and documentary evidence, including photographs, site visits and infrastructural details of their living environments within the resettlement sites.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed following the ethical protocol. We employed an open coding process to analyse site-specific themes on placemaking and othering processes faced by the participants. This was followed by a second round of analysis to compare the unique and common themes from each site. This approach ensured that participants' accounts remained embedded within their social and institutional contexts, thereby minimizing the risk of context-stripping and premature thematic interpretation (Jenkins et al. 2018). All the names of *thirunangais* are anonymized to ensure their safety and privacy.

5. Lived experience of *thirunangais* and othering

As per rough estimates by transgender activists, there are about 60,000 *thirunangais* in Tamil Nadu (Jaiswal 2024). During preliminary fieldwork, many *thirunangais* shared numerous experiences of discrimination when seeking housing. In most of the cases either they stay with fellow *thirunangais* or within their commune called the *jamat*. Though it is also pertinent to point out that some *thirunangais* continue to stay with their biological families.⁵

The lived experiences of *thirunangais* extend beyond the domestic sphere to encompass public spaces, sites of livelihood, and spaces they inhabit during disasters. In these spaces, their bodily presence is constantly engaged with the material realities of their environment, impacting how they experience discrimination, exclusion, and survival (Gorman-Murray et al. 2018; Johnston 2016). This section explores the processes of othering in everyday material experiences of *thirunangais*, both in their homes and beyond.

5.1. Access to housing

Historically, *thirunangais* have faced systemic exclusion both from their families and broader communities. As a result, many *thirunangais* leave their homes to join collectives known as *Jamat* (Pincha and Krishna 2008). A *jamat* is a collective living and kinship structure among *thirunangais* that operates as a chosen family, providing housing, livelihood support, social

protection, and collective identity formation in the context of widespread familial and societal exclusion (Pincha and Krishna 2008; Reddy 2005).

The respondents in our study who chose to move away from their biological family shared that after moving out of their parental homes, they initially found shelter in *jamat* or as renters in low-cost informal settlements and resettlement sites. The *thirunangais* typically reside as tenants in low-cost informal settlements in North Chennai and in resettlement colonies on the city's southern peripheries, such as Perumbakkam and Semmencheri. As these areas are among the few spaces perceived as relatively accepting towards *thirunangais*. In contrast to the city centre, these neighbourhoods have been historically shaped by uneven development, resulting in persistent social, spatial, and infrastructural marginalization (Arabindoo 2011; Coelho, Venkat, and Chandrika 2012).

Within these neighbourhoods *thirunangais* continue to face multiple and persistent challenges in securing housing across Chennai. One *thirunangai* living in a rented place in Central Chennai reflected on the challenge of finding housing:

If they know we are thirunangais, they won't give us a house. Even if the landlord is considerate, the neighbours or other community members will pressure the landlord to throw us out.

This shows that spatial practices are often shaped by dominant groups (Cresswell 2008). The visible difference of the *thirunangais* in terms of their 'bodies' from the dominant heterosexual groups fuel the long-internalized stereotypes, resulting in such forms of discrimination (Bhabha 1994; Wittig 1992; Oyěwùmí, 2005).

After 2000, informal settlements across Chennai were progressively demolished as part of city beautification, development projects and disaster-led urbanization (Coelho and Nithya 2013; Raman 2011). The demolition of informal settlements from the city centre also led to a reduction of access to housing among *thirunangais* who were renters in those informal settlements. As they were renters, they were not offered any alternate habitat by the government during resettlement. With diminishing bargaining power over their habitat, they became further vulnerable in accessing housing as renters. A *thirunangai* living in an informal settlement in Central Chennai reported:

We often face discrimination in getting housing. As thirunangais we pay double rent otherwise, we do not get housing. The landlords will ask a thirunangai to pay Rs 6000 and to any other heterosexual person, the landlords will rent out the same property for half the price.

Despite paying higher rents, *thirunangais* are frequently evicted by landlords for arbitrary reasons. Such recurrent housing displacement generates

additional challenges, as repeated relocations require the updating of identification documents and lead to increased financial and administrative burdens. *Thirunangai* participants from North Chennai also noted that access to housing could be negotiated more effectively in neighbourhoods where there was presence of strong LGBTQ+ organizations more than in others. As these organizations regularly engage with landlords, government officials, and police personnel, thereby enabling more secure and dignified housing conditions.

5.2. Lack of control over their livelihood

Apart from discrimination in jobs, reservation systems, and everyday life, many skilled and educated *thirunangais* are denied pursuing the profession of their choice due to lack of individual housing ownership, family abandonment, and dependence on *jamat* structures. As a result, most *thirunangais* interviewed are engaged in precarious forms of livelihood. A recent survey found that more than 50% of *thirunangais* in Chennai are forced to engage in begging and sex work, primarily due to limited livelihood opportunities (Raman, 2024). One respondent from the AIR resettlement site described how she had an opportunity to work as an office assistant in an NGO but was opposed by her *thirunangai* community, leaving her with no choice but to continue begging due to prevailing circumstances. She stressed, ‘if at that time I had my own house to stay on my own terms, I could choose any kind of work that I want’. It is important to acknowledge that such intra-community tensions are shaped by limited livelihood opportunities, shared financial obligations, and hierarchical structures of care within *jamat* system without access to housing among *thirunangais*. Similar accounts appear in autobiographies such as *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by Revathi (2010) and *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya (2007). Therefore, Vidya (2007: 82), a highly educated *thirunangai* expressed in her autobiography,

As long as I did not want to be a sex worker, begging was my only option. All *thirunangais* had to face this cold truth. I prepared myself, and put my MA in linguistics into cold storage’.

A *thirunangai* activist from Chennai also highlighted how *thirunangais* who attain higher education rarely secure jobs in the formal sector due to vertical reservation.⁶ She elaborated,

few *thirunangais* are given certain positions as a form of tokenism, and most do not get to compete due to vertical reservations.

Lastly, several *thirunangais* reported difficulties in retaining employment due to pervasive discrimination and sexual harassment. During a nursing training programme, Magadhi, an elderly *thirunangai*, described experiencing

sustained harassment by institutional actors, including police personnel. Like several other *thirunangais* this experience ultimately led her to leave the training and she also abandoned legal recourse due to exhaustion. Beyond workplace discrimination, structural factors such as insecure housing tenure, familial abandonment, and dependence on Jamat networks further restrict educated and skilled *thirunangais* from accessing desired means of livelihood.

5.3. Effects of disasters and climate change

Thirunangais are one of the most disproportionately vulnerable groups during disasters and under climate change impacts (Pincha 2008; Pradhan 2023; Sen and Jerar Naqvi 2023). Their physical embodiment and forms of labour are closely intertwined with everyday socio-spatial conditions, shaping heightened exposure to environmental risks. The roots of their vulnerabilities can be traced back to colonial discourses as the attributes associated with *thirunangais* are constructed as 'deviant' from the normative binary gender groups (Bhabha 1994; Hinchy 2019; Wittig 1992).

Thirunangais staying in Southern India are connected and rooted in nature due to their religious rituals and socio-cultural customs (Sheth and Shah 2024). Additionally, *Thirunangais* usually stay in low-lying areas, often in informal settlements or on the peripheries of the city due to which they face heightened vulnerability to floods, heatwaves, and other climate-related risks. Their livelihoods are also dependent on being outdoors, increasing their exposure to flood, heatwaves and pollution. A *thirunangai* respondent highlighted how they and fellow *thirunangais* staying in low-lying areas in Chennai during the 2015 severe flood event were rescued after three days and within those three days, they did not have any safe place to turn to. During annual floods in Chennai *thirunangais* are reported to have limited access to relief materials and compensation (Pradhan 2023).

Similarly, during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, *thirunangais* were severely impacted. Not only did they face physical displacement, but they were also excluded from official records. There were no government records documenting the deaths or missing persons from the *thirunangai* community. Therefore, no compensation was provided for loss of life, livelihood, or personal belongings such as costumes, makeup kits, and jewellery that are integral to their identities (Pincha and Krishna 2008). In the aftermath, *thirunangais* faced discrimination, were denied relief materials, and endured sexual harassment (Knight and Sollom 2012; Pincha 2008; Pincha and Krishna 2008).

In recent years *thirunangais* are particularly vulnerable to heat. A 42-year-old *thirunangai* named Nida who makes a living from begging and sex work from Central Chennai explains:

The heat is extreme these days we could hardly go for collection on all days. After going for one day, I have to take rest for two days. It is difficult to function for long hours in heat as our bodies are operated during the feminisation process. The heat makes it hard to function, even to urinate, and we experience hormonal imbalances if we stay out for too long.

Nida is also a beneficiary of individual housing in Kannagi Nagar. However, like many other *thirunangais*, she chose not to reside in the allotted housing and instead continues to live in central Chennai in order to sustain her livelihood and maintain access to employment opportunities. Therefore, for *thirunangais*, housing is more than shelter. It is central to their everyday survival and negotiations within socio-spatial contexts to access livelihood, safety and a sense of belonging.

6. Demand for adequate housing and habitability

The demand for safe and accessible housing for *thirunangais* first started in Chennai with a group of 70 *thirunangais* living in an informal settlement located in the HLL Nagar Tsunami Settlement in Thiruvottiyur (Tejonmayam 2015). These *thirunangais* were regularly harassed in the settlement and were asked to leave the place due to their non-conforming gender expressions and choice of dress. A *thirunangai* who was previously a resident of the informal settlement recalled:

They were not accepting us. Some of them did not like the cross dressing and had objection with our dresscode. They said our attire was 'ruining the children, and that we should not live here.

Another *Thirunangai*, who is now a *Thirunangai* activist, expressed, '*Many of the locals were afraid of thirunangais staying in the settlement as many of them were engaged in sex work*'.

Drawing on the work of Sibley (1988), this situation exemplifies the process of spatial purification, in which certain bodies are viewed as impure or disruptive and are excluded from particular spaces. This exclusionary practice leads to spatial othering, perpetuating a divide between the 'acceptable' and the 'deviant', that is, the dominant 'self' and the subjugated 'other' (Bhabha 1994; Staszak 2009). Spivak's (1988) idea of 'othering' explains how *thirunangais* are positioned within the social structure and institutional systems as 'subjects' who must justify their claims to rights repeatedly.

This continuous rift with the local community ultimately culminated in a significant protest by the *thirunangais* and ultimately the local police had to get involved in 2012. During this period, *thirunangais* began to unify their social networks and form a collective identity and unified themselves into a social organization. Aligning this with Chatterjee's (2011) idea of 'political society', this collective solidarity and the formation of the organization is

a reflection that trans-individuals do have the capacity and agency to utilize their social capital to organize themselves in social groups to manage crises.

Through this organization, the *thirunangais* reached out to different government departments, police authorities and housing boards on several occasions to advocate their need for housing. Their protests and demands for housing were persistent and systematic, continuing from 2012 through 2016. In 2016, Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB) announced that 36 *thirunangais* out of the 70 *thirunangais* would be allotted individual tenements in a resettlement site called AIR. After this success, the organization was joined by other *Thirunangai* organizations to strengthen their demands for housing rights. In response, the housing board registered a list of 254 *thirunangais* who were granted housing in AIR, a resettlement site situated in the northern periphery of the city. Their mobilization shows how *thirunangais* actively negotiate power within state structures, consistent with Bhabha's (1994) argument that through 'mimicry' and 'hybridity', opportunities for resistance arise. They draw on the very identity that is used to discriminate against them to exercise their agency and claim their rights (Bhabha 1994; Garcia, 2012). By 2019, an additional 256 *thirunangais* were allotted tenements by the TNUHDB in Kannagi Nagar, a southern peripheral resettlement site in Chennai. While other state housing initiatives, such as Garima Grehs, rental assistance or the allocation of plots of land in the names of *thirunangais* have existed earlier. Yet providing housing to *thirunangais* within an urban resettlement site marked the first instance of formal housing allotments issued in the names of *thirunangais* within an urban resettlement site, signalling a significant shift in housing policy and inclusion. Both in Kannagi Nagar and AIR the *thirunangais* faced various forms of risks and discrimination from the host community. Both sites managed the risks in two different ways to negotiate their placemaking.

7. Two sites and two different housing outcomes

The *thirunangais* exerted unique tactics to resist and negotiate with dominant groups for their rights and access to public housing and services. Historical forms of community living, networks and occupation of trans-space have managed to come together as different forms of solidarity. These collective forms of resistance are characteristic of what Lefebvre ([1974] 1991, 26) termed 'representational space' – a space that is produced through the destabilization of the established order, where marginalized groups reshape their spatial and social realities through resistance. This section examines how the *thirunangais* in Chennai have used their differential tactics to navigate the challenges of resettlement and secure housing by drawing on their social networks, political alliances, and collective action.

Resettlement sites in Chennai are post-liberalized urban imagination comprising large scale, homogeneous clusters of vertical housing amassed over vast tracts of land on the peripheral part of the city. These sites were initially constructed to house individuals displaced by development projects, floods, the 2004 tsunami, city beautification initiatives, and the removal of informal settlements from urban centres. Despite being marketed by the Slum Board as ‘integrated townships’ with basic amenities, the resettlement sites often lack essential infrastructure and are located in flood-prone low-lying areas (Coelho 2016). Furthermore, safety is a major concern, with reports of theft, abduction, and abuse, compounded by a lack of adequate state protection and infrastructure such as streetlights (Viswanathan 2024). For those displaced, including the *thirunangais*, these sites present multiple ecological, economic, and social risks.

Due to their identity, distance from the centre, and discriminatory practices by the non-trans population, it was challenging for the *thirunangais* to attain accessible and sustainable forms of livelihood after moving to the resettlement sites due to the following reasons. Firstly, begging and sex work (the two most common livelihood practices among the respondents) are deeply embedded in specific urban spaces through long-term social negotiations. Access to these work sites is contingent upon established relationships with local residents, clients, and, in some cases, intermediaries who regulate territorial access. Such relationships are built over time and governed by informal norms related to visibility, safety, and mutual tolerance within neighbourhoods. Moreover, livelihoods in these urban areas are often territorially controlled by different *thirunangai* groups. Therefore, displacement to distant peripheral locations does not automatically translate into the ability to secure or shift livelihood opportunities to nearby areas.

Furthermore, the tenements provided to the *thirunangais* are in the farthest corner of the resettlement site, where the nearest bus stop is 2–3 kilometres away, making it very difficult for them to be connected and thereby restricting access to build any sustainable form of livelihood. Finally, social othering within the resettlement sites prevents *thirunangais* from engaging in livelihood practices that are commonly adopted by other households highlighting the structural inequities (Spivak 1988). For instance, many families in the resettlement sites have created temporary extensions in front of their houses. These extensions serve multiple purposes, including the establishment of small shops, additional space for accommodating larger families and as a coping mechanism to manage harsh weather conditions. However, in the tenements where the *thirunangais* live, they are unable to construct such extensions specially to build shops with extensions. Sambhavi from AIR resettlement site explains,

Initially, due to lack of access to other livelihood opportunities, I opened a tailoring shop outside my house. Yet on the second day itself, everything was stolen and after that, none of the *thirunangais* built any extension-based shops. Two of the *thirunangais* are still engaged in tailoring business within the resettlement site, but they run their shop inside their house.

Thus, perceived deviation from dominant social and cultural norms renders *thirunangais* particularly vulnerable even in these uninhabitable resettlement sites (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2008). Despite facing retaliation in both Kannagi Nagar and the AIR site, those residing in the AIR settlement were able to remain, while residents in Kannagi Nagar were compelled to abandon their tenements shortly after gaining access.⁷ The subsequent section explores how *thirunangais* navigated these conditions through differentiated place-making strategies that involved being within, outside of, and in-between spaces.

7.1. AIR site

In 2016, the first group of *thirunangais* relocated to the AIR resettlement site and encountered immediate hostility from the host community, including physical intimidation aimed at forcing them to vacate. In response, the *thirunangais* temporarily left the site and filed a complaint with the TNUHDB, raising their safety concerns. They collected signatures from senior TNUHDB officials and circulated these assurances to neighbouring households and block leaders to secure their right to remain in the resettlement site.

Through sustained advocacy and continued engagement with state institutions, *thirunangais* were able to retain their housing. *Thirunangai*-led organizations and solidarity networks actively facilitated this process by cultivating political capital and leveraging institutional support. This resonates strongly with Chatterjee's (2011) idea of 'civil society' and 'political society'. *Thirunangais* who are left out of civil society, negotiate with the government structures not as rights-bearing citizens but as populations within the political society who have to mobilize and prove their legitimacy to access their rights. Several *thirunangai*-led groups in Chennai held meetings, collaborations and representations in government events. This developed a relationship with crucial government departments like the Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Department and the Transgender Board. These organizations have enabled the *thirunangais* to garner political and social support, leveraging established relationships with politicians, bureaucrats, and law enforcement to assert their housing rights. Despite facing resistance from their neighbours, the *thirunangais* in AIR were able to mobilize more effectively, securing their place in the resettlement area. This success can be attributed to

the strength of their networks and the political capital they had built over time.

These alliances also remained crucial during the Covid-19 pandemic. While most families in the resettlement sites faced extreme vulnerability during the lockdown, the *thirunangai* community found unique coping mechanisms through their horizontal and vertical solidarity networks. Kaveri, a *thirunangai* from AIR, explains:

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when we couldn't go out to get food and other resources, my amma created a WhatsApp group, added all the transgenders from the resettlement site, and reached out to the government and social organisations for help. We got food, vegetables, and snacks through that group, and we never went hungry. We also reached out to our known networks like higher officials and priests in the church. We maintained the group until the end of the pandemic. The only thing is that we didn't have money in our hands. No one gave us money, but they gave us food, so we were never hungry

In the literature on transgender communities, networks of solidarity are recognized as essential coping mechanisms during crises and disasters (Gaillard 2011; Gorman-Murray et al. 2018). While these networks are primarily horizontal, connecting individuals within the *thirunangai* community. Here we witness the crucial role of networked solidarity, not only within the *thirunangai* community but also through vertical alliances with authorities and other community leaders. This dual network of horizontal and vertical solidarity has allowed the *thirunangais* to not only navigate crises but also to assert their rights and secure housing rights. Notably, the *thirunangais* in AIR were able to engage with public authorities despite extensive documentation of police violence and institutional discrimination against *thirunangais* in both autobiographical accounts (Revathi 2010; Tripathi 2015; Vidya 2013) and interview narratives. Therefore, the collective and strategic engagement have enabled them to negotiate, and at times secure, solidarity from these same state institutions.

7.2. Kannagi Nagar Site

In 2019 an additional 256 *thirunangais* got housing in Kannagi Nagar resettlement site. As in AIR, their tenements were located in peripheral and poorly serviced sections of the site, characterized by isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to public transport. Although initial allotment generated optimism, residents soon experienced repeated acts of vandalism, including the destruction of electricity and water infrastructure, accompanied by threats from neighbouring households aimed at forcing them to vacate. Sumati, a beneficiary of housing in Kannagi Nagar informed the researcher about the initial few days in the site-

Two days after house warming we found that the power lines were pulled out, pipes and water tanks were broken. It was impossible to stay without electricity so we went back and spent Rs 5000 on repairs.

Sumati further explained that since the initial incidents of vandalism, her house had been repeatedly damaged, with essential infrastructure such as water and electricity amenities were destroyed each time.

As a result, most *thirunangais* abandoned the site, with only six currently residing there, largely due to co-residence with biological families allocated housing through other schemes. Despite non-residence, many continue to maintain spatial claims over their tenements by renting them out, regularly visiting for upkeep, paying maintenance fees, and sustaining social and institutional ties within the resettlement.

Few of the *thirunangais*, who were allotted houses were able to rent out their tenements either to other *thirunangais* who do wish to live in these resettlement sites or to non-trans persons specially the low-wage migrant workers. The others who could not rent out their houses regularly visit their tenements for a few hours in the week, attend community meetings, pay monthly maintenance towards the TNUHDB and continue maintaining their social alliances in the resettlement site for the upkeep of their tenements. Sumati, an allottee of Kannagi Nagar who now stays in Central Chennai near her workplace explains

Every week, I go to my house to see its condition and to clean the garbage. On several instances, I changed the locks and again they were broken by the miscreants. Currently, I do not have any electricity in my house (at Kannagi Nagar) as my tube light and fans were stolen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The tenements that were once allocated to them, located at the farthest corners of the resettlement, have increasingly become uninhabitable. *Thirunangais* report a growing sense of marginalization and a rise in criminal activity within the area. Over time, these tenements have transformed into spaces of neglect and vulnerability, a sharp contrast to their original promise of housing security. Malashree, one of the six *thirunangais* still residing in Kannagi Nagar with her biological family, shared:

No one goes to the part of the resettlement site allotted to the *thirunangais*. It remains dark and empty. It is considered a place for anti-social activity, and none of the *thirunangais* are ready to move back here.

Malashree, is a graduate and an elected President of the Resident Welfare Association (RWA). She serves as the key contact between government officials and *thirunangais* who have left the resettlement site.

The question of placemaking within the resettlement site among *thirunangais* is further complicated by differing outcomes between the two groups. The first group, resettled in AIR, chose to stay in the resettlement

site, making it a space of habitation, while another group, placed in Kannagi Nagar, decided to abandon their homes. This occurred because *thirunangais* from AIR were successful in holding on to the resettlement site as they had formed a strong vertical and horizontal solidarity network. As they participated in the protest to have housing for several years, they were also much more invested in getting access to the housing. Lastly, the informal settlement in northern Chennai where they were located was comparatively closer to the resettlement site so they did not form extreme disconnection with their previous livelihood, unlike the *thirunangais* from Kannagi Nagar who were moved about 20–25 kilometres away from their original habitat.

Additionally, *thirunangais* from Kannagi Nagar did not relinquish their ownership of the spaces completely; rather, they chose not to live there due to the distance from their workplaces and concerns for their safety and security. They continue to rent, invest considerable time and resources in maintaining their ownership of the space, even though they no longer reside there. These ongoing efforts reflect the innovative ways in which they engage with the space, navigating the tension between being ‘out of place’ and ‘in-between’ spaces. As Katz (2017) suggests, these ‘in-between’ temporalities are adaptive responses to crisis, allowing the *thirunangais* to maintain a form of agency over their spatial claims despite their physical absence. This dynamic also resonates with Bhabha’s (1994) notion of mimicry, whereby marginalized subjects simultaneously comply with and subvert dominant institutional expectations. While *thirunangais* formally conform to the state’s vision of successful resettlement through the retention of housing, their selective occupation and alternative spatial practices challenge the normative assumptions embedded within these recovery frameworks.

Further, these practices also reaffirm that for many residents the prospect of formal resettlement is not perceived solely as displacement or loss, but also as an opportunity for legal recognition (Anand and Rademacher 2011; Doshi 2013). Drawing on Relph’s (1976) distinction between space and place, the tenements allotted to *thirunangais* may not always function as places of everyday dwelling, but they nevertheless remain embedded in meaningful spatial practices that mark partial forms of insiderhood and belonging.

8. Conclusion

The *thirunangais* in Chennai have long fought for adequate housing, driven by their experiences with displacement during disasters, ongoing housing insecurity, and the precariousness of accessing basic services such as healthcare and livelihoods. Through the lived experience of the *thirunangais* in the resettlement site the article reiterates the argument that access to adequate housing is not merely a shelter. Our findings bring out

the complex dynamics between placemaking and processes of othering and how *thirunangias* formed solidarity networks to successfully demand housing rights. The horizontal and vertical solidarity networks made it possible for the *thirunangais* to continuously resist and keep engaging with their claim to housing in the complex spatial process of othering. Moreover, these solidarity networks, both vertical and horizontal, were not short-term arrangements formed solely to access housing; rather, they were actively nurtured by the *thirunangai* community and continue to play a central role in everyday life. Later, these solidarity networks were instrumental in provisioning of food during COVID-19 and the upkeep of homes vacated by fellow *thirunangais*.

The article also emphasizes that *thirunangais* also do not simply inhabit or abandon state-provided housing. Rather, they engage in these spaces through multiple pragmatic ways like practices of renting and sharing allotted tenements. Such practices reveal how boundaries of state-defined housing are quietly reworked from within to reconstitute the broader debates of placemaking and spatial inclusion.

In conclusion, this article underscores the importance of recognizing the lived realities of *thirunangais* and the need for more inclusive, context-specific approaches to housing that go beyond the provision of physical space to address the broader dimensions of safety, security, and social justice. We also argue that *thirunangais*, through their solidarity and resistance, demonstrate agency in their placemaking efforts, and these capacities must be acknowledged and supported in the design of urban policies and practices.

Notes

1. The 'West' in this context refers to more of a historical construct rather than a geographical one as result of dominant discourses reiterated through a long period of time. It represents a process of 'othering' of subjugated groups, that are the non-Western societies in this case, through the presence of power (Hall, 1992).
2. In the Act an eunuch was recognized as 'all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear, to be impotent'. It also included within its purview as eunuch to persons who appears, dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place or who dances or plays music, or takes part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house'. More details about the Act, its penalties and rules can be read about the act in the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871.
3. *Hijras* are a gender-diverse group, often categorized as transgender, but they hold a unique socio-religious position in the Indian subcontinent.
4. AIR-Thiruvottiyur is often known as Eranavur locally. We preferred to use AIR-Thiruvottiyur as that is how it is referred in the government documents.
5. The researchers met two *thirunangais* who were living in Kannagi resettlement site with their biological families

6. In India, *thirunangais* are categorized under 'Socially and Educationally Backward Classes' (OBC), a classification that blurs gender identity with caste identity. After persistent advocacy from *thirunangai* organizations, horizontal reservations were recently implemented, allowing *thirunangais* to claim their caste-specific reservations (Sigamany and Fathima 2024).
7. While AIR and Kannagi Nagar respondents frequently reported experiences of hostility it is important to clarify here that these dynamics are not uniform across all resettlement sites in North Chennai. In older tsunami resettlement areas such as Tondiarpet and other scattered areas in Southern Chennai, some *thirunangais* described more ambivalent or even convivial relations with non-trans residents. These differences appear to be shaped by factors such as the mode of allotment (for instance, in Tondiarpet and Kanagi Nagar there were *thirunangais* staying with their biological families and the tenements were allotted to their family on pretext of other government scheme), the duration of residence and resulting familiarity with neighbours, and the presence of established *thirunangai* networks within particular sites. Further, longer periods of co-residence in some settlements have enabled everyday forms of negotiation such as shared use of space, informal support, and routine interaction that made it possible to co-exist.

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