



Case Report

What is it to be a Transgender in God's Own Country (Kerala, India)? An Explorative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In this brief paper, we present a first-person account by a transgender person from Kerala, India. Using this case study, we illustrate how life as a transgender person in Kerala is different from the rest of India and discuss this within the historical and socio-cultural landscape of Kerala.

Keywords: India, Kerala, Transgender

INTRODUCTION

Transgenderism in India has a recorded history of more than 4000 years, evident from its documentation in ancient Indian texts/scriptures such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Kama sutra.^[1] Transgender is “an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from expectations associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.”^[2] Terms used to describe transgender people in India are many: “Hijras,” “Aravanis,” “Tirunangais,” “Kothis,” “Jogtas” and “Jogappas,” “Shiv Shaktis,” “Kinnars,” etc.,^[3] whereas Kerala has just one term “Napusakam” (meaning neuter).

The existence of many words to describe transgender people in the rest of India as compared with just one word in Kerala is perhaps reflective of the “visibility” and acceptance of transgender people in mainstream society in the rest of India.

Transgenderism in India

The word “Hijra,” derived from the Urdu word “Hich-Gah,” means without a proper place or journey.^[4] Hijra culture prevails in transgender communities all over India except in Kerala, and it is particularly important to transgender people as often there is no family to support them. Hijras form close bonds among themselves and exist around their own cultural groups known as “Gharanas” (meaning houses). Gharanas identify as a self-contained community with an organized structure, well-delineated roles, unique social norms, and cultural practices.^[5] At the core of this culture is the relationship between the Guru-Chela or Master-Disciple also sometimes called Mother-Daughter, where the relationship has an authoritative and abusive style which monitors interpersonal relationship and friendships among Hijras and others.

When a “Chela” takes shelter under the “Guru” on estimating an amount to adopt the new member, once the price is put on a “Chela,” she cannot leave the community unless the amount

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which “Jammat” decides on them is collected. Every “daughter” has to contribute a fixed amount daily, irrespective of their work. They do either sex work or beg, which are the two main options available for a transgender person in India outside Kerala.

Transgenderism in Kerala

Kerala, one of India’s 28 States, located at the South Western tip of India, is often referred to as “God’s own country,” given its natural beauty. Kerala has the best rates of literacy, e-literacy, health care, infant mortality, maternal mortality, birth rate, life expectancy, or female literacy in India (<https://data.gov.in/catalog/human-development-index-and-its-components-states>).^[6]

However, the society in Kerala does not have a separate space for transgender people as in the rest of India, which is both good and bad for the transgenders in the State. In Kerala, not having a transgender community can be seen as a downside, but it also has the benefits that transgenders are less likely to be labelled and so makes it easier for them to integrate into society. In India, the total population of transgender people was estimated to be about 4,88,000, and the number in Kerala was estimated to be about 25,000, with <4000 revealing their gender status (<http://sjd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Survey%20Report/12157.pdf>).^[7]

The majority of the transgender people in Kerala live outside their homes due to gender identity issues.^[8] The Transgender Survey Kerala (2014)^[7] showed that due to societal and family pressures, 70–80% of transgender people enter into married life and have children, but most of them part ways within a month or a year. The survey also reported that 54% of transgender people in Kerala earn <Rs. 5000 as their monthly income, and only 11.6% have regular jobs. About 90% of transgender people in Kerala drop out of school due to taunting from fellow students, teachers, neighbors, and family.

In 2015, the Supreme Court of India ruled that transgender people had equal rights under the law and granted legal status to the “third gender,” giving them the right to marry and inherit property. Kerala was one of the first states to act on it and released a State Policy for Transgenderism and received much appreciation.

While all the above were activities explicitly done for the destigmatization and empowerment of the transgender community, the first step toward integration happened when in 2017, the Kochi Metro Rail became the country’s first government agency to hire transgender people to work in various positions with them.

The below is an excerpt from an interview with one of the transgender people employed by the Kochi Metro.

A transgender person’s life in Kochi: Radha’s (pseudonym) story

“I may not fit into your stereotypical transgender.” I come from a “normal” family. I am a sociology graduate. From my younger days, I liked dressing up as a girl. My mother initially supported me, but later on, she refused to do, and I left home.

Hijra community is the place where I use to live before I returned to Kerala. Such communities are not found in Kerala, though it exists in other parts of India. If “our” people do not have any house or relatives, in particular, to live with, our community will adopt us. Most people in the Hijra community work as sex workers or beg. However, in my case, I do not like to work or live like that. I know cooking, tailoring, and housekeeping, so I have never worked as a sex worker.

Life as a transgender person is not easy in Kerala. There are many transgender people in Kochi who cannot go to work during the day due to their identity issues. However, in my case and some of my friends, we had stayed in Coimbatore (outside Kerala) and lived in the Hijra culture, so had got used to not worrying about others’ comments. Other Kerala-based transgender people think that people will quickly notice their difference and discriminate, and this makes them hide. However, unless we go out and until society gets familiar with us, transgender people will not be seen as “normal” human beings. I see it mostly as an issue of unfamiliarity. Keralites (people of Kerala) are very conscious about society’s opinions, and though they, as an individual, may not have a problem in mingling with transgender people in private, in public they would be uncomfortable.

I had to face so many hurdles to make a living. I worked for 5 years for a local project. The salary was low, and the rent, food, and other expenses had to be met with Rs. 388 (approximately \$5.5) a day which was challenging. After a few years of trying out various jobs, I joined the Kochi Metro. I work shifts here, in housekeeping. It has given me a regular income and some status in society.

A job is one thing any human being requires the most. Even though a job is not high paying, it still enhances your self-esteem and offers some security. This job also gives us some respectability. There is a degree of greater acceptance due to my job at the Metro. The money I get from my Metro job is not enough, and the timing is not so suitable, but I stay on because I am an ambassador for transgender people now and the chance for employment in the future for transgender people will reduce if we leave the job.

However, there are still a lot of challenges and harassment while doing the job. Many people do not come and sit next to us or mingle with us. Some point at us and laugh at us, and they make jokes about us. Keralites do not want the Hijra culture to come to Kerala. Transgender people are mostly seen in the cities of Kochi, Calicut, and Trivandrum, and

perhaps, they are more accepted (relatively) in Kochi. Having all the laws, publicity, and policies is one thing, but our lives need to change for the better, and for that, a lot more needs to change. Let us hope it does.”

DISCUSSION

The above case study illustrates clearly that life as a transgender person in Kerala is not easy: They are forced to live in the margins of mainstream society and are discriminated against. Moreover, this is ironic because the Kerala state has the most transgender-friendly policies in place.

Reasons for why transgenders are sideline in Kerala could be many: The crippled perception of normal often combined with a lack of “exposure” to transgender people – for those who have not traveled outside Kerala; the lack of awareness of transgenderism; the Kerala society is seen as sexually repressed; and moral policing by society is common.

Given the above, it is crucial to think about what needs to be done to change the current state of affairs. In our view, two things are a must and rather immediate. First, much more needs to be done to raise awareness of transgenderism among the public. Second, immediate research is warranted to assess the impact of all the transgender policies and initiatives started by the government. It is time to recap and takes a critical look to see where things are.

CONCLUSION

Much more needs to be done to mainstream the lives of transgender people in Kerala. Their genuine integration into society is some distance away, and both State and National level policymakers have key roles to play in translating rhetoric into reality.

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Declaration of patient consent

The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate patient consent.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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