

The Determinants Of Socio-Cultural Life Of The Transgender Community In Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

People in India are stratified on numerous factors, and these factors are used to either include or exclude people. One of such exclusions is gender non-conformity. Although the transgender community has some recognition in society, their gender non-conformity makes them socially excluded. Various researches reveal that transgender face a lot of discrimination right from their family of orientation and experience inequality and exclusion in all spheres of life. These factors affect their quality of life primarily. Hence the transgender community is pushed to poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, which leads to depression and powerlessness. Therefore, this article focuses on the factors that determine the socio-cultural life of the transgender community in Tamil Nadu.

Key Words: Exclusion, Transgender, Socio-cultural life, inequality.

INTRODUCTION

People in India are stratified on different factors such as race, religion, caste, gender and language etc. These factors are deliberately used to either exclude or include people in society. Social exclusion based on these stratifications predominantly occurs in Indian society. The majority of the people think of gender as ascribed status, as something they either are or have. Hence, when gender non-conformity is obvious, exclusion of that person is practised right from their family of orientation. Although the transgender community has some recognition in Hindu society, in the contemporary context, their gender non-conformity makes them socially excluded. The transgender community has been facing discrimination, inequality and exclusion from all spheres of life since the 1800s (Jebakani, 2017). The exclusion begins initially from their family and extends to society at large.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Transgender people in India encounter lots of problems in their lifetime viz poverty, powerlessness, exploitation, social exclusion, depression, emotional suffering and discrimination etc.(Vanitha, 2017). They are rejected right from childhood by their family members and discriminated against in society in all walks of life. Transgender people cannot withstand their social environment when deprived of basic support from

their family members (George, 2015). The stigma and discrimination start from home, wherein most family members do not accept when their male child starts behaving like a woman. They scold, threaten and even assault their son. Social acceptance or rejection of transgender people perhaps determine their position in society. They are forced to beg in trains and streets and very often get into sex work etc., as they were to face verbal and physical abuse, isolation, rejection and denial of property at their home (Vanitha, 2017). Hence, there is no single factor but multiple factors that affect the transgender community, and it perhaps affects the quality of their life largely (George, 2015). Though Tamil Nadu as a welfare state has taken a lot of affirmative actions for the upliftment of the transgender community by establishing a separate welfare board, namely 'Transgender Welfare board' in 2008; still, their position in the society is pitiful (Augustine, 2016; Subbiah & Velusamy, 2017; Subramanian, 2015). There were also factors such as employment, education and the family of orientation that seemed to play a major role in determining the life of the transgenders. And so, this paper focuses on the role of family, education and employment that determine the socio-cultural life of the transgender people in Tamil Nadu.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with the transgender community. Stratified random sampling was applied for the study wherein the transgender people were stratified on three criteria viz employed, unemployed but educated, and others with or without literacy. Three from each criterion were taken as the samples for the study. The rationale was to compare and correlate how the family of birth, between the respondent's family, education and employment status and to deliberate it into social acceptance and achievement of the respondent. Nine samples were studied using the snowball sampling technique. The limitations of the study were; first, the study covered the transgender people living in Chennai, Kanchipuram and Chengalpattu region alone. Second, despite in-depth interviews, it was observed that some of the samples were not entirely free in revealing certain information while some others exaggerated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family: The Primary Agent of Exclusion

The literature survey discloses that transgender people face discrimination and denial from their family, friends, peer group, neighbourhood and relatives, and this has been extended to wider society at the end. Vanitha (2017) clarified in her study that most parents and family members disapprove and do not accept when their children, especially the males, exhibit behaviours inappropriate to their respective gender, such as the males dressing up like a girl or woman etc. They often face verbal and physical aggression, isolation, rejection from their family members (Subbiah & Velusamy, 2017; Vanitha, 2017). And so, they decide to run away from the family and find aboard in transgender communities as they were unable to tolerate the continued torture and discrimination besides thinking of not wanting to bring shame to their family (Vanitha, 2017). Most transgender people were forced to leave their homes, and they were not welcomed by society (Mrinalini, 2016). Some parents had even outright disowned or evicted their male child for showing gender orientation opposite to their gender at birth. The reasons they cited were; while some considered it as disgrace or shame to the family, some others believed that there would be either no chance or fewer chances for their other children to get married in the future. In some cases, the parents especially who had only one male child considered it as the extinction of their generation when their child exhibited sex orientation opposite to their gender at birth (Chakrapani, 2012). When it comes to property inheritance, transgender people find it difficult even to claim their legal share, and they were often denied their property (Vanitha, 2017; Virupaksha et al., 2016; Subbiah & Velusamy, 2017). Hence, they are pushed into a reality wherein they are left with no other option but to beg or do sex work to make their living (Virupaksha et al., 2016). Sexuality or gender identity often makes transgender people victims of stigmatisation and exclusion in society. This social stigma not

only brings negative attitudes towards transgender people but also forces them to engage either in begging or sex work just for their survival (Subbiah & Velusamy, 2017). On the other hand, losing hope in life and the trauma of being abused had led to more than 31 per cent of transgender people committing suicide in India, and 50 per cent had attempted to commit suicide at least once in their lifetime. The sad part is that there is no documentation about the causes and rates of suicide among transgenders (Virupaksha et al., 2016). Though the transgenders face discrimination and exclusion from all walks of life, it starts from the family, friends, peers and the relatives, the primary agent of socialisation and construction of social world.

Education: Place of Social Segregation

The inclusion of transgender people in schools and colleges is a big challenge which is evident in their literacy rate and educational status. Nobody even thought to include the transgender community in mainstream society, and they were denied the right to education until 2004 (Mrinalini, 2016). Almost 93 per cent of the transgender people in India were school drop-outs. They could not continue their education due to discrimination and fear of threat (Subbiah & Velusamy, 2017). One of the main places they get excluded, next to their family, is their educational institution. Many transgender people drop-out of school at their secondary level due to physical, sexual and emotional violence, e.g. about 56 per cent of them discontinued their education at the primary or secondary level (Virupaksha & Muralidhar, 2019). A study conducted by Homes (2019) also revealed that while about 40 per cent of transgender people are well educated, about 58 per cent dropped out before grade 10. There is zero acceptance of the transgender community in high school, higher secondary, and college levels. Hence, they are pushed into a forced illiteracy state (Chakrapani, 2012; Vanitha, 2017). Moreover, it was not only the students who discriminated against them but also the teachers (Vanitha, 2017). They are even not allowed to share a classroom, pushing them to the status of isolation. Even if they are enrolled in an educational institution, they face numerous problems that discourage them from attending schools but implicitly direct them towards begging and sex work (Pattnaik, 2019). While the national literacy rate was 74 per cent in India, it was 80.3 per cent in Tamil Nadu. In comparison, the literacy rate of transgender was 74.4 per cent in Villupuram district, which is above the national average but below the state average. Out of 74.4 per cent, 32 per cent had undergone primary education, 16.8 per cent higher secondary education, 12.8 per cent SSLC, 11.2 per cent +2 and 1.6 per cent Under Graduation (Census, 2011; Mrinalini, 2016). Virupaksha and Muralidhar (2019) study also revealed an increased level of literacy among the transgenders that about 26.7 per cent of them had completed primary, 46.7 per cent high school (Virupaksha & Muralidhar, 2019). It is obvious from the above literature that transgender people are still unable to access the basic right to education. Thus, either government or private jobs remain inaccessible for transgender people because of low education.

Employment: Place of Social Discrimination

Lack of adequate education leads to deprivation of employment opportunities (Vanitha, 2017). Thus, government or private jobs remain inaccessible for the transgender community due to lower educational status (Mittra, 2017). The government and the business sector have arranged many employment opportunities, but their applications were rejected due to their gender identity (Vanitha, 2017). Once they express their gender and sexual identity, they are denied employment (Bund, 2013; George, 2015). Many companies refuse jobs to qualified and skilled transgender people only because of their gender identity, while some transgender people manage to sustain their job despite the social stigma and discrimination in the workplace (Suguna, 2013; Bund, 2013). Transgender persons face great prejudice, which leads to loss of job and in some cases, they would not be able to find a job at all. This perhaps leads to unemployment, and they are pushed into a state wherein they cannot support their family and themselves (Jayanthi, 2017). In Tamil

Nadu, approximately about 60,000 Transgender people are living in poor economic conditions. They face lots of difficulties in accessing their basic needs such as education, healthcare etc. However, they can manage their livelihood as they mostly live in groups with strong fellowship bond. Gender discrimination is the biggest problem they are facing directly and indirectly (Mrinalini, 2016). Thus, they do not get proper jobs due to the social stigma attached to society. The lack of employment to their livelihood, pushes them to get involved into begging and sex work (Suguna, 2013; Vanitha, 2017; Bund, 2013; George, 2015; Mrinalini, 2016). It is evident from the the above literature that the transgender community struggle to get employment. Even if they get one, they have to struggle a lot to sustain in that position.

Results

Socio-Economic Profile

The total number of case studies were nine, of which seven falls into the age group between 20 to 30 years. The others fall into the age group between 35 to 45 years. Five of them have studied up to higher secondary level, and three of them were able to pursue undergraduate studies. Most of the respondents were not ready to reveal their community because they were afraid that they would be discriminated against in the future based on caste. Five of the respondents belong to the middle class, while the rest hail from a poor background. Most of the respondents said they were denied employment because of their gender identity, e.g. Two of them were terminated from the job once they revealed their gender identity at the workplace. Two of the respondents were working in private concerns, and one of them has become the director of an NGO. They were guided by the Transgender Rights Association, an NGO which works for the transgender community in Tamil Nadu. Two respondents had become trans-model and actors in short films and movies. Three of them were brought up by trans-mothers who have entered into begging and wage works. Those transgender people who were employed could hardly earn about Rs 10,000 to 15,000 and not more than it.

Family: The Starting Point of Discrimination

Most of them left their family at the age of 14 and above as they could not tolerate the torture and discrimination in their family. It is also evident that family, friends and society neglected them when they did not confirm their gender identity. Almost all respondents expressed that their family members were hesitant to accept them after sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). Hence, they move away from their family of orientation and get attached to the transgender community and re-socialise with the new gender identity. It is here that the transgender persons come to establish a new family or community wherein they get adequate physical, financial, emotional support from one another, trans-mother and the community who suffer from the same kind of tyranny. The community people empathise and provide physical, emotional and economic support. Ultimately, they form a new family in the transgender communities and get their basic needs fulfilled. This study reveals that transgender people face denial and discrimination right from their family, neighbourhood, peer group, friends and relatives and it eventually are extended to the broader society.

However, six respondents stated that they were accepted by their family and had a good relationship. Perhaps, they were invited to all the family functions, and they took part in them all. It can be observed that it was because they were not only financially supporting their family but also have achieved a recognised social position in the society, e.g. one respondent has become an actor, one respondent became a trans-model, and another became the director of an NGO which is working for the transgender community etc. These transgender people are accepted by their family and friends even though they identify themselves as transgender people.

Thus, the study observed that the concept of trans-mother, a new family for the trans-men or trans-women, emerged as they moved out of their family of birth. They begin to build a new family, new friends, new peers

and eventually a new social life. They are very happy with their present in-group and inmates and exercise their new gender orientation and self-actualisation fully. Consequently, most of them are entirely disconnected from their original family members and friends, more specifically after their Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS). However, it was evident in the study that family members were ready to accept them if they were successful in their life and attained social recognition.

One of the essential functions of the family is to provide basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter (Rao, 2009). The respondents in this study who represent the transgender community at large have been deprived of the basic needs because they do not conform to their ascribed sex and gender roles. Though people are born with specific biological sex, it is the society that determines a pattern of behaviour of their ascribed sex. And this is called gender and gender roles. However, some of them transform their biological sex to psychological sex, either 'transmen or transwomen', based on their sexual orientation. They are, in other words, called transgender, an umbrella term. The socialisation of the family members according to the cultural norms and values, folkways and mores, beliefs and ideologies of the society (Rao, 2009) is yet another important function of a family. But this does not take place in the case of transgender people.

Exclusion in Education

Gender identity becomes an important factor, especially in the case of transgender people that determines their education. Five out of nine respondents have been school drop-outs in the study. They could get financial support from their parents to pursue their schooling until they expressed their gender identity. Since then, they have had to face constant discrimination and insult. They get separated from the family and lose their financial support too. Hence, it is not possible to continue their education. This struggle and dilemma had led to physical and emotional trauma and eventually pushed them to discontinue their schooling. The transgender community faces a great struggle to get access to the fundamental right to education. In some cases, not only the students but also the teachers discriminated against them. They were unable to continue their education and became drop-outs. However, three respondents had pursued their higher education but had undergone a lot of struggles and challenges. They could meet their economic needs through different support from their in-mates, trans-mother or by doing a part-time job. All case studies disclose that the transgender community could not pursue their education with a gender change and their educational status is very low. In fact, 93 per cent of the transgender people in India are school drop-outs. Sometimes, either the trans-mother or inmates support their fellow transgender people to pursue their education.

Providing education to the children is also yet another primary function of the family. Also, there is a constitutional provision of providing compulsory education for up to 14 years. But the study has revealed that all respondents had to drop-out or discontinued their schooling due to discrimination and victimisation from their fellow students and teachers.

Elimination in Employment

Gender discrimination is the biggest problem they are facing either directly or indirectly in the place of employment. The public and private institutions refuse to give them employment due to prevailing social stigma. Many companies deny jobs to qualified and skilled transgender people because of their gender identity. Some of the transgender people manage to sustain themselves in their jobs despite stigma and discrimination in the workplace. It has been observed from the case studies that employment opportunities were refused to the transgender community. Hence, they are employed with their ascribed gender, but there were cases wherein they were removed from their job once they revealed their gender identity. For example, two respondents were dismissed from their jobs once they revealed their gender identity.

Transgender people are unable to get decent jobs as most of them were school drop-outs. And therefore, their employment status remains significantly low. This apparently affects their economic status in society. Sometimes they have to depend on their inmates or trans-mother, which perhaps increases their dependency for survival. Hence, most of them take up begging and sex work as their last resort for their survival. Of course, a handful of them either become self-employed or become professionals in their respective areas of expertise and talents. There were instances wherein transgender people supported their families financially.

While article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019 safeguards exclusively the transgender people in terms of employment and get acceptance in mainstream workplaces. But the study reveals that some transgender people were denied employment, while some were continuously discriminated against at their workplace.

Conclusion

It has been evident from this study that the socio-cultural lives of the transgender were determined by their family of orientation, education and employment. None of the cases was reported wherein the parents and family members had accepted their gender-oriented behaviours and lifestyles; instead, they faced disapproval and aggression, both physical and mental. The same situation prevailed in educational institutions as well. Hence, the transgender people were not only moved away from their house once they realised their gender and sexual identity but also had moved out of their schools and colleges as well. In these two-places, the transgender people decide to move away, but in terms of employment, the organisation forcefully dismissed them. Hence, they are left with sex work and begging etc. secondly, because of their educational status they are unable to equip themselves for employment. Few respondents who could not pursue education and get proper employment were economically supported by their inmates and community. It is evident that transgender people are excluded in every sphere of life, and they are pushed to the periphery. This eventually determines their socio-cultural life in society. Though Tamil Nadu has taken a lot of affirmative actions for the upliftment of the transgender community, even by establishing a separate welfare board through which various welfare measures are implemented for them, their position in society is still pitiful. The government of Tamil Nadu had proposed to relocate the transgender community by establishing a new model village in Cuddalore district. Though it appears to be affirmative action, it has to be critically evaluated. Because Cuddalore district is one of the remote and poor districts in Tamil Nadu and by relocating them to an impoverished area where there is no availability of employment opportunity will worsen their plight. This would perhaps not only push them to the periphery geographically but also exclude them from mainstream society. This would, in turn, deprive them of other opportunities that are available to everyone in society.

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