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Community Experiences of Transgender: The Harsh Reality

RATNADEEP SEAL¹

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the various troublesome experiences of transgenders with their neighbours, professional colleagues, and others in the community and attempts to know how the transgender identity is stabilized in their personality. The term 'transgender' in the study refers to 'hijra' in the Indian society. The present study is an empirical study in which community experiences of transgenders were extracted by using an interview schedule. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many transgender people have left the city for some unknown places. Therefore, a snowball sample from the transgender people available with NGOs or otherwise was taken, comprising 80 respondents. The data collected were analysed by using the tabulation method. The findings revealed that transgender people face discrimination even in healthcare settings due to lack of healthcare providers' sensitivity towards transgenders. Most employers deny employment for even skilled and qualified transgender people due to their gender nonconformity, impelling them to engage in traditional transgender occupations such as 'begging' and 'badhai' with a lot of challenges. The impact of sex-specific identity documents has profound implications as to whether or not transgender will be able to lead a self-actualized life. The majority of transgenders avoided going to government offices due to fear of being subjected to physical or verbal abuse. They are refused by landlords to rent a room in the heart of the city area or asked to pay an exorbitant room rent to discourage them from taking the room. The greatest perpetrators of violence against transgender people are the police who abused them verbally, physically, and sexually. Most transgender people remain unmarried due to the non-recognition of transgressive relationships beyond heteronormativity. The transgender community has been distinctively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways. Many of them were bound to live a low standard of life due to their reduced level of income and pressurized by landlords to vacate the room. The findings help to make people aware of transgender issues and provide better knowledge for framing norms to make society inclusive for transgender people.

Keywords: Community Experiences, Hijra, Transgender, COVID-19.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses various experiences of the respondents with their neighbours, professional colleagues, and others in the community and attempts to know how the transgender identity is stabilized in their personality. Transgender people are one of the most stigmatized groups in society. They are gender incongruent, having identities and expressions of gender that do not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth. Cisgender people, on the other hand, make up the social majority, with gender identities or expressions that correspond to their biological sex. Social attitudes about gender incongruence and non-conformity with societal expectations differ around the world and in many countries prejudices and social stigma are pervasive. The stigma is propagated across society due to the cultural and social environment. Social exclusion, as well as a lack of health, employment, and legal regulations and policies, contribute to transgender inequality in society. Transgender issues are not openly discussed in Indian society, and as a result, society stays conservative and unsupportive about it. The stress of being a minority has heightened and stigmatized transgender identity. We live in a society that is profoundly structured by gender and sex. Our society is pervaded by the categorization of persons as 'male' or 'female.' Gender diversity, on the other hand, disrupts gender binary-based sexual orientation categories. People who identify as transgender challenge this normalization of gender binaries and hence face severe discrimination and harassment in all respect, including verbal & physical abuse, false arrests, denial of services, and victimization in the workplace, health care settings, and other public places. This paper explores the community experiences of transgender with particular consideration of public places, health care settings, occupation, identity documents, housing facility, police accessibility, and their experiences in general and during coronavirus lockdown in particular.

II. RESPONDENTS

People's social and economic background does not only determine their life opportunities but also provides them with a specific outlook towards life to face social reality; it also enables them to determine their attitudes and behavioural patterns. The study clearly substantiates the fact that the level of acceptability of transgender persons by their parents and family members is awfully low. The financial position of transgender persons is quite weak and a large section of transgender people are denied the right to have a housing facility and decent standard of living. It is a matter of concern that most of them are denied the right to education even after the enactment of the Right to Education Act, 2009. In nutshell, absence of family support, low economic status, hostile attitude of the society, poor housing facility, absence of property

ownership, low education level, and absence of legal documents of identity such as Aadhaar card, PAN card and Election voter ID card are the common problems of the transgender people. Hostile attitudes of the society bound them to keep their relationship secret from the community at large because their relationship is not recognized by society. Illiteracy and the lack of legal documents push them to traditional hijra occupation and hinder their access to various social protection and livelihood promotions schemes such as bank loans, microcredit etc. Despite all such problems, most transgender people have access to one form of media channel or the other.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study has been conducted in Guwahati city, an emerging metropolis in North East India, comparatively tolerable to transgender people and mainly having their concentration. The term 'transgender' in the study refers to 'hijra' of the Indian society. The descriptive research design was used for this study to gain insight into the life of male to female transgender people in Guwahati city. For the study, oral data were collected from the 80 transgender individuals by using interview and observation techniques selected from different locations of Guwahati city: namely, Railway Colony, Maligaon; Joymati Nagar, Adabari; B.G. Colony, Maligaon; Pragjyotish Nagar, Jalukbari; Shakuntala Colony, Pandu; Ajanta Path, Hatigaon; Khanka Road, Hatigaon; and Gandhi Basti, Silpukhuri. Transgender people in Guwahati city constituted the universe and each transgender person is a unit for data collection, in the study. For selection of units, snowball sampling methods has been used. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, many transgender people have left the Guwahati city for some unknown places or their villages. Therefore, the sample was found through snowball sampling. It was easier to gain access to more potential subjects within that community after knowing a few transgender people available with NGOs or otherwise. An interview schedule was constructed to collect data comprising the questions related to the community experiences of transgender people. The responses were recorded in cell phone audio recorder and later transcribed for qualitative data analysis. The answers to questions were coded based on the type of response given by each participant. Following that, the data were classified using categories of the responses. After categorizing all the responses, an analysis was done to understand the socialization comprising experiences of the respondents in terms of their community.

IV. COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER

Community experiences of transgender with particular factors of public places, health care settings, occupation, identity documents, housing facility, police accessibility and their experiences in coronavirus lockdown have been taken into consideration.

The following are the major findings:

(A) Transgenders' Experiences of Discrimination in Public Places

Easy access to public spaces is a necessity for participation in civic life. However, many transgender persons are prevented from their access to those places. Nearly one third (31.25%) of the respondents are not allowed to enter a public park. This is because people believe that the entry of transgenders may spoil the environment of a park as there is a general notion in the public that they use a public park only for their sex-work related activities. Subsequently, 25% of the respondents are not allowed to enter a cinema hall, 18.75% of the respondents are not allowed to beg in sleeper-class compartments of a train, and 12.5% of the respondents are not allowed to enter in restaurants and shopping malls. More or less, a similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both Assamese and Bengali communities as they are almost equally distributed over the responses. It means that respondents from both communities faced discrimination in access to public places. It also shows that the society views all transgender persons with the same lens and boycotts them because of the uncivilized conduct of some transgender individuals. So, one can say that the society is less inclusive and compassionate towards transgender individuals.

(B) Transgenders' Experiences of Health Care Facilities

Discrimination in access to health care facilities can have substantial effects on someone's well-being. The respondents have experienced verbal abasement, humiliation, denial to admit in government hospital and seek healthcare in private chambers of doctors. Over one fourth (28.75%) of the respondents are refused by co-patients to allow them to sit next to them. It indicates that there is no proper rule application in hospital for transgender people and the dominant group is either unaware of their existence or claims their superiority over transgender by making them untouchable. Subsequently, 27.5% of the respondents are verbally abused even by hospital staff, 18.75% of the respondents faced humiliation when standing on male queue in hospital, 12.5% of the respondents are denied to admission in a government hospital because of the absence of transgender ward, 8.75% of the respondents are not allowed to seek healthcare in private chambers of doctors, and 2.5% of the respondents are forced to conceal gender identity and to register themselves as male for getting admitted in hospital. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both Assamese and Bengali communities as they are almost equally distributed over the responses. It shows the structural and behavioral failures of both the government and private hospitals in the city to cater to the needs of transgender people. It also shows that health policies once adopted are not always implemented as

envisioned and hence not necessarily achieve intended results unless developing adequate policy interventions and monitoring measures.

(C) Transgenders' Experiences of Occupation

Transgender people are mainly engaged in occupations such as 'begging' and 'badhai' (clapping hands and asking for alms). These two are found in researches as traditional occupations associated with the community. These occupations are exclusive to transgender people, confining them in a relatively small and disadvantageous space where they are found anywhere but without a normal interaction with general public. Over two fifths (42.5%) of the respondents felt insulted while begging and they want to indulge in respectable jobs which is not available to them. This shows that transgender people are compelled by the mainstream society's treatment to choose a livelihood like begging where they have to face multiple challenges on regular basis. Subsequently, 22.5% of the respondents faced challenges in money collection because security guards do not allow them to enter modern market premises, 21.25% of the respondents are arrested by police on false allegations due to not giving them a share from their earning, 7.5% of the respondents are nowadays invited only by a small number of people to perform in 'badhai' ceremony due to indecent behaviour by some of transgender persons, and 6.25% of the respondents felt sad for the practice of badhai ceremony being treated as begging by some people. A greater number of the respondents belonging to the Bengali community felt insulted in begging occupation and they want to indulge in respectable jobs. It is because most of the transgender people of the Bengali community lack education and are therefore bound to engage themselves in begging where they have to face atrocities by people in the society and by police personnel. More number of respondents belonging to the Bengali community have been arrested by police on false allegations as they did not share their earning with police personnel. However, none of the respondents from the Bengali community felt sad for the practice of the 'badhai' ceremony being treated as begging by some people as an insignificant number of transgender people from the Bengali community are associated with the practice of 'badhai' ceremony.

(D) Reasons for Choosing Traditional Transgender Occupation

Individuals' choice of occupation is influenced by various factors such as skills required, wage levels, and personal satisfaction. Over half (51.25%) of the respondents have no access to mainstream jobs due to their gender nonconformity, owing to lack of acceptance of their gender in mainstream society wherein most of employers feel that the way they dress or talk is not appropriate for a professional working environment. Subsequently, 28.75% of the respondents

are unable to get a mainstream job due to lack of education, and 20% of the respondents believed that traditional transgender occupations are better than low-paying informal sector jobs. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of respondents belonging to the Bengali community are unable to get mainstream jobs due to their gender nonconformity as most of the employers from the Bengali community are mainly involved in retail business and they believe that if they employ a transgender then customers will turn away from their shop. So they do not employ people who do not conform to male-female gender norm. Secondly, a greater number of the respondents belonging to the Assamese community believed that traditional transgender occupations are better than low-paying informal sector jobs as a greater number of the transgender people from the Assamese community are educated and have had job experience in the informal sector. So, they can differentiate between traditional transgender occupations and mainstream informal sector jobs.

(E) Reasons for Not Having Governments Issue Identity Documents

Sex-specific identity documents such as birth certificates or government-issued identity cards have profound implications as to whether or not transgender will be able to lead a self-actualized life whereas these people do not have such documents. Nearly three fifths (56.25%) of the respondents avoided going to government offices due to the fear of being physically or verbally abused. It shows the lack of gender awareness among the government officials about trans people and their inability to meet the needs of members of the transgender people. Subsequently, 25% of the respondents avoided going to government offices as the officials demand bribe for issuing identity documents and 18.75% of the respondents did not have the necessary proof for obtaining government-issued identity documents. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both the communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of respondents belonging to the Bengali community avoided going to government offices due to fear of being subjected to physical or verbal abuse as most of the transgender individuals of the Bengali community cannot speak the official language, Assamese, fluently and therefore some of the government employees do not consider them as the residents of the state and treat them as illegal immigrants. Secondly, a greater number of respondents belonging to the Assamese community avoided going to government offices as the government employees demanded bribe for issuing identity documents. This is because the government employees have full confidence that no transgender will ever dare to raise their voice against such corrupt practices and if they raise their voice, it will not be heard. It also shows that transgender individuals cannot easily access to any of the services that others

take for granted.

(F) Transgenders' Experiences of Housing Facility

Across urban India, housing discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation is commonplace. Discrimination in rental housing shapes our cities, demarcating what spaces are 'open' or 'closed' to transgender. Often disowned by their biological families, transgender people migrate to urban centers for their livelihood. Two fifths (40%) of the respondents are denied by landlords to rent a room in the heart of the city area. It shows heteronormativity is prevalent in the heart of the city area which reinforces alienation of transgender people and makes them bound to live on fringes of the city by the dominant heteronormative setup. Subsequently, 28.75% of the respondents are asked to pay an exorbitant amount as room rent to discourage them from taking a room, 22.5% of the respondents shared a room with those transgenders who have government-issued identity cards, and 8.75% of the respondents got opportunity to live in the government-run shelter home. A similar pattern is observed among respondents belonging to both communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of respondents belonging to the Bengali community shared the room with those transgender persons who have government-issued identity cards as majority of the Bengali transgender individuals are illiterate or partially literate, and they have been treated differently by government employees as a result of which socially deprived and uneducated transgenders cannot complete the application processes and therefore most of them are unable to show valid ID proof to the landlord and hence share the room with those transgenders who have government-issued identity cards. Secondly, none of the Bengali respondents got opportunity to live in a government-run shelter home as most of them are unaware of the government schemes meant for transgenders and most of them do not have enough documents to avail those facilities.

(G) Transgenders' Experiences with Police Personnel

A study by the National Institute of Epidemiology conducted with sixty thousand transgender participants across seventeen States of India found that the greatest perpetrators of violence against transgender people are the police and law-enforcement officials (Subramanian et al., 2015). Nearly half (47.5%) of the respondents are verbally and physically abused by police personnel as most of the transgender persons have a lower-middle-class background, which makes them susceptible to abasement by the police. Subsequently, 17.5% of the respondents are refused by police to register a complaint, 15% of them faced extortion by police, 13.75% of them are sexually assaulted by the police, and 6.25% of the respondents are arrested on false

allegations by the police. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of the Assamese respondents are refused by police to register a complaint. This shows that transgenders of the Assamese community are a step ahead in registering complaints but most of the time police do not register the complaint as transgender victims being a marginalized section usually do not have enough knowledge about the rule of law. Thus, their social vulnerability or lack of knowledge/awareness is major impediment in their access to justice. Secondly, all the Bengali respondents are arrested on false allegations by police as most of them do not share a part of earning with police personnel and so the police arrest them by making false allegations.

(H) Transgenders' Experience of Having Romantic Relationship

Romantic relationships are defined as relationships based on emotional and physical attraction, potentially leading to long-term intimate relationships. However, due to the non-recognition of transgressive relationships beyond heteronormativity, most of the transgender people remain unmarried but form intimate relationships with their male partners. One third (33.75%) of the respondents kept their relationship with their male partner a secret as it is not recognized by the mainstream society and the groom's family does not consider such relationship justified because of their inability to procreate. Subsequently, 25% of the respondents are not in a relationship with anyone, 21.25% of the respondents are deceived by their male partners, 15% of the respondents kept their relationship with male partners open. Only 5% of the respondents who are legally married to their male partners. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of the Assamese respondents are not in a relationship with anyone. It shows transgressive relationship beyond heteronormativity is strictly prohibited in the Assamese community due to their societal interconnectedness. Secondly, more Bengali transgenders kept their relationship with male partners open as they are less connected with the mainstream people and therefore are less worried about what people think and comment about their transgressive relationship.

(I) Transgenders' Experiences During Coronavirus Lockdown

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, people said, "the virus is the great equalizer." However, this crisis quickly exposed society's underlying disparities. This is especially true for the transgender community, who have been distinctively impacted by the pandemic in a variety of ways. Over two fifths (42.5%) of the respondents live a life of low standard due to their reduced

level of income as most of them earn their livelihood by seeking alms during day time but with nationwide lockdown, in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, both begging and badhai could no longer be pursued for their earning, and so they live a lower standard of life. Subsequently, 25% of the respondents are each pressurized by landlord to vacate room, and those who sold off their household items for maintaining expenses and 7.5% of the respondents shifted from badhai to begging occupation due to restricted religious gatherings during the COVID-19 lockdown. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents of both the communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of the Bengali respondents are bound to live a low standard of life due to their reduced level of income as most of them earn their livelihood by begging on trains but with the nationwide lockdown, in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, begging is no longer an option for their earning. Moreover, they have less access to financial institutions or have bank account hence, they are bound to live a lower standard of life. Secondly, none of the Bengali respondents shifted from badhai to begging occupation due to the restricted religious gatherings during the COVID-19 lockdown as most of them were already engaged in begging occupations, unlike the Assamese transgender persons.

(J) Transgenders' Experiences of Getting Support During Covid-19 Lockdown

Nationwide lockdown, in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, has left several transgender persons struggling to make ends meet. In such a tragic situation, the government and NGOs came out in support of the transgender community. The kind of the support included received food, other items and monetary support from government/NGOs. Over half (53.75%) of the respondents received food and other items distributed by NGOs. It shows that NGOs got more opportunities to serve the transgender people during the lockdown as lack of government-issued documents made it difficult for the majority of transgender people to avail the benefit of government schemes. Subsequently, 25% of the respondents received monetary support from both the government and NGOs and 21.25% of the respondents got no support from any organization/association during the COVID-19 lockdown. A similar pattern is observed among the respondents belonging to both the communities. However, there are two main differences. Firstly, a greater number of the Assamese respondents received monetary support from both government and NGOs as most of them are aware of various schemes and have access to financial institutions or have a bank account. They are also engaged with NGOs or other organizations and have enough documents to avail those facilities. Secondly, a greater number of the Bengali respondents did not get support from any organization/association during the COVID-19 lockdown as they are unaware of the government schemes for transgenders and

most of them do not have enough documents to avail those facilities. This happens also due to their lack of contact or engagement with NGOs or other organizations/associations who work for their upliftment.

V. CONCLUSION

The transgender people, irrespective of the community have to face discrimination in access to public places. Transgender people face discrimination even in healthcare settings due to lack of healthcare providers' sensitivity toward transgenders. They are verbally abused by the hospital staff and refused by co-patients to sit next to them. They also face humiliation when compelled to stand in the males' queue and are denied admission in a hospital due to lack of a transgender ward. Most employers deny employment for even skilled and qualified transgender people due to their gender nonconformity, impelling them to engage in traditional transgender occupations such as 'begging' and 'badhai' with a lot of challenges. Despite all the difficulties, a few transgenders still believe that traditional transgender occupations are better than informal sector jobs because there is flexibility in working hours and this earning is more lucrative than that in informal sector jobs. The impact of sex-specific identity documents has profound implications as to whether or not transgender will be able to lead a self-actualized life. Majority of transgenders avoided going to government offices due to fear of being subjected to physical or verbal abuse. It shows lack of training and gender awareness among government officials about trans people and their inability to meet the needs of members of the transgender community. When it comes to rental housing access, Guwahati city is not a suitable place to live for transgender people. They are refused by landlords to rent a room in the heart of the city area or asked to pay an exorbitant room rent to discourage them from taking the room. Very few of them got opportunity to live in the government-run shelter home and those who do not have government-issued identity cards have to share a room with those who have necessary documents. For the transgender community, coping with the stresses of housing discrimination requires them to rely on one another. The greatest perpetrators of violence against transgender people are the police who abused them verbally, physically, and sexually. In several cases, the police refused to even register complaints. They are arrested on false allegations when they deny sharing their earnings with police personnel. Most of the transgender people remain unmarried due to non-recognition of transgressive relationships beyond heteronormativity. However, they form intimate relationships with their male partners and keep their relationship a secret. The transgender community has been distinctively impacted by the pandemic in a variety of ways. Many of them were bound to live a low standard of life due to their reduced level of income and pressurized by landlords to vacate the room. Few of them were bound to

shift from badhai to begging occupation due to the restricted religious gatherings during the COVID-19 lockdown. In such a tragic situation government and NGOs came out in support of the transgender community. They received various supports from both the government and NGOs. However, some of them did not get any support during the COVID-19 lockdown as they were unaware of the government schemes meant for them and did not have enough documents to avail those facilities. This happens also due to their lack of contact or engagement with NGOs or other organizations/associations who work for their upliftment. Thus, every other transgender people have to face abusive behaviour in the community they live in. They are stigmatized in the society and are being discriminated in every aspect of life. To make their lives better, they should be supported in their struggle for equality, dignity and identity.

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