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Afr. J. Biomed. Res. Vol. 27(5s) (December 2024); 01-05

Research Article

Transgender Cultural Practices in Chennai- Qualitative Insights

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Abstract

Background Transgender is an umbrella term that describes a diverse group of people whose internal sense of gender is different than that which they were assigned at birth¹. According to the 2011 census, India has about 488,000 transgender people. Transgender people are one of the most vulnerable and neglected groups in society. There is limited published literature on the cultural patterns of the transgender community in South India. Hence we chose a qualitative approach to explore the range of cultural practices and experiences of this transgender community and to understand their perceptions of the same in this society.

Methodology: A qualitative study design employing focus group discussions was conducted. In 2023, four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 8 to 12 participants each, comprising transgender individuals identified using snowball sampling. We conducted two focus group discussions in Perambur and two in Choolaimedu, engaging a total of 40 participants. An FGD interview guide was prepared with sub-themes to explore the socio-cultural practices prevailing in this community. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results: Four themes emerged from the data that characterised individuals' experiences in cultural settings. The four themes that emerged from the data were a) conditions for admission to the transgender community, b) ceremonies performed during acceptance and admission, c) rules and regulations of the Jamath system, and d) cultural practices prevailing in the community.

Conclusion: The results of these focus group discussions might help influence the nature of subsequent surveys and government policies, initiatives, and programs for this high-risk, vulnerable group. The community has a wonderful tradition of its own. But at the same time, discarding this tradition, Indian society tries to repress the transgender identity and marginalise people of gender nonconformity

Key words: Transgender, cultural practices, Qualitative study, Jamath

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Received: 25/11/2024

Accepted: 7/12/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53555/AJBR.v27i5S.4680>

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Introduction:

Transgender is an umbrella term that describes a diverse group of people whose internal sense of gender is different than that which they were assigned at birth (Naskar et al., 2018). Transgender refers to gender identity and gender expression, and has nothing to do with sexual orientation. There are various types of Transgender Communities in India, the most prominent of these Communities are Kothi, Hijras, Aravanis and Thirunangai, Jogtas /Jogappas and Shiv-Shakthis (Majumder et al., 2020).

There is a growing commitment in public health to understand and improve the health and well-being of transgender people and other gender minorities, who comprise an estimated 0.3–0.5% (25 million) of the global population. According to the 2011 census, India has about 488,000 transgender people². Transgender people are one of the most vulnerable and neglected groups in society who are facing harassment, violence, unfair treatment, social deprivation and denial of services in areas of education, employment, housing and healthcare utilization (FREDRIKSEN-GOLDSSEN et al., 2014; Shah et al., 2018). There is limited published literature on the cultural patterns of transgender community in South India. Hence we chose a qualitative approach to explore the range of cultural practices and experiences of this transgender community and to understand their perceptions on the same in this society.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative research design through focus group discussions (FGDs) to investigate the socio-cultural practices of transgender individuals. Focus Group Discussions enabled group participation and the exchange of experiences, yielding a more profound comprehension of cultural patterns. The study was executed in 2023 with transgender individuals in the Choolaimedu and Perambur regions of Chennai, with two focus group discussions in each area, totalling 40 participants. The study focused on persons aged 18 and older who were fluent in Tamil and had given verbal or written consent. Participants were recruited by convenience and snowball sampling, facilitated by NGOs active in the study regions. The recruitment process included direct engagements with the transgender community. Each focus group discussion lasted roughly one hour, and informed consent was secured prior to participation. A semi-structured interview guide facilitated the discussions, concentrating on issues including admission into the transgender community, related rites, and the impact of the Jamath system and cultural practices. Participants were urged to express their viewpoints candidly, promoting a robust exchange of ideas. Discussions were facilitated by expert researchers, comprising both male and female professionals who are qualified as doctoral degree and PhD scholars, with an assistant moderator documenting thorough notes. Ethical considerations were prioritised, ensuring participant confidentiality by eliminating identifiable information from the recordings. Participants were apprised of their freedom to withdraw

or abstain from responding to sensitive enquiries. Audio recordings were transcribed precisely and evaluated for accuracy. A thematic content analysis method was employed to examine the data, entailing many reviews of the transcripts to discern prominent themes. A coding manual was created, employing inductive and deductive approaches to classify data into principal themes. The analysis was iterative, examining the connections between themes and their correspondence with the research objectives. Data gathering persisted until thematic saturation was achieved, guaranteeing thorough exploration of the study subjects. The data were organised into themes and subthemes, and the findings were articulated narratively through transcriptions and comparative analysis, offering a comprehensive overview of the socio-cultural activities within the transgender community.

Results:

Pathways to Acceptance in the Transgender Community

In one of the FGDs, one of the participants explained that the admission to the transgender community will not happen immediately. First of all, the person should have attained 20 years of age. Another participant conveyed that they will thoroughly investigate whether the member genuinely possesses a transgender identity. At a very young age, they will discuss the pros and cons of becoming transgender. The community will admit them only if their conviction remains strong. Another participant clarified that the individual will initially visit the transgender community and continue to visit their homes until they develop a rapport and establish a relationship similar to that of a mother and daughter.

Ceremonies of Acceptance and Admission in the Transgender Community

One of the participants said, 'In each state, different types of ceremonies are done, and in Chennai, they will arrange a party and give snacks and sweets to everyone. Then they will keep Rs.101 on a betel leaf and accept the person as a daughter in their community'.

One of them explained, "Suppose I wish to become the daughter of someone; I will first inform her about it and then inform every one of the matter." Then 4 or 5 elders will come and make me and the prospective "mother" sit down and ask me if I really want to become the daughter of the person. The elders will then counsel us both to endure both the positive and negative events in our lives together. They will also ask me in what circumstances I left my home. Then they will dress me up, place flowers, fruits, and sweets on a plate, and, holding a lighted *Kamatchi* lamp, declare to everyone that I am her daughter. The next step is for me to bow before everyone.

Exploring the Pathways to Becoming Transgender

One participant responded, stating that individuals who identify as MSM, particularly those heavily involved in art and dance, have the potential to transition into transgender identities. Additionally, some individuals

who hold a deep respect and piety for womanhood may choose to transition into a transgender identity. Another individual stated that "a person who feels like a woman, dresses like a woman, talks and acts like a woman, and whose mind is absolutely filled with the faith that she is a woman and hates manhood completely, can only become a transgender."

Regulations within the Jamath System

Few participants emphasized that in their Jamath system, no one should lie or steal, and they should be fearful of elders. Everyone should have faith, and if one is a daughter to someone, she should truly be faithful to her mother. One of the participants responded to a question about the purpose of the Jamath assembly by saying that it occurs when both good things, like marriage and other ceremonies, and bad things, like death, occur.

One of the participants explained that "In each district we have two *Nayaks*", that is, one from the "big house" (*bada velli*) and the other representing the 'small house' (*Chotta Velli*). We should treat these two *Nayaks*, chosen from the two houses, with due respect; our sari edge should not fall on them. Another individual stated, "Nayak serves as the leader for each of us." This person will listen to our issues and offer solutions. When a *Nayak* is unavailable, the *Kal Nayak* will listen to our problems and provide solutions. There will be "*Kal Nayaks*" under the big *Nayak*, under whom there will be a lot of daughters. There are two *Kal Nayaks*, one representing the big house and another representing the smaller house. When asked about the hierarchy of power among them, one of them responded that the big house holds more power. When asked about the criteria for selecting *Nayaks*, they stated that the person with the most money would be chosen as the *Nayak*. Another individual stated that they will convene a Jamath meeting one day, during which they will choose two individuals based on their wealth.

Religious Beliefs among Transgenders

One participant clarified that while there are Hindus and Christians among them, undergoing an operation under the Jamath system transforms a person into a Muslim. Another participant emphasized the above statement, stating that all religions are accepted among them, and they regularly attend church, light candles, visit the Perumal temple, and participate in the dharga. One of the transgenders said that they celebrate all festivals, including Diwali, Christmas, and Ramzan. One of the participants said that most of the people call them to ward off the evil eye and also to bless people.

Koovagam: Celebrating Identity and Tradition in Transgender Cultural Practices

During a focus group discussion, one participant vividly depicted the tale of Aravan's sacrifice during the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas. When asked about his final wish, Aravan expressed his desire to wed and complete his marriage. However, since no girl was willing to marry and become a widow, Lord Krishna assumed the form of a woman and wedded Aravan. As per his last wish, Aravan married Lord Krishna's female

avatar. Upon Aravan's sacrifice the following morning, his widow shed her thali, donned a white sari, and shed tears. All the transgenders at the Koothandavar temple enact this story during the Koovagam festival.

Another participant said that not only the TGs, but all the people in Villupuram district, including men, will come to the temple. Pondicherry, Villupuram, and Kothadam also host such festivals. During another Focus Group Discussion (FGD), a participant enthusiastically shared that the Koovagam festival will host the Miss Koovagam Beauty contest. This contest will entail TGs straightening and colouring their hair, undergoing costly makeovers, and showcasing their beauty, with some even resembling foreigners.

Embracing Transgender Belonging in Religious Worship Spaces

One of them responded, "We go to all the religious places; any religion is acceptable to us," when asked about their common places of worship. They also stated that they frequent the Koothandavar temple, the Samayapuram Angalamman temple, the church, and Dharga. In some places they accept their offerings, but sometimes they do not accept them, saying that they do not want the money earned by sinful means, which hurts their sentiments.

During the temple festivals, they plant maize, corn, and other crops in mud pots. At the time of the festival, they would have grown into young saplings. 'We TGs will carry those pots during the temple procession and dances, which is known as Mozhaiparai,' said one of the group members enthusiastically.

Celebrating the Achievements of Transgender Trailblazers

The responses were that "Some very educated TGs are doing well in many fields. Kalki, a TG with education, currently works in IT and is venturing into politics. One TG named Narthagi Natarajan is proficient in Bharatanatyam, while another TG named Rose is well-known in the media and has made appearances in the TV show "Ippdikku Rose." Apsara, a TG, holds a position at Dhina Thanthi TV. Apsara was employed at Dhina Thanthi TV prior to her promotion, and they continued to provide her with the same duties even after her promotion. Many people are striving to advance in various fields.

Transgender Engagement in Transformative Social Work

One of the group members said, "Many are working in NGOs like "Thai Vizhuthugal," "Thozhi," etc. At Thai Vizhuthugal, a doctor oversees the work of six TGs. They provide HIV-infected individuals with medicines. They also collect provisions like rice, dhal, etc., and give them to those who live with HIV/AIDS."

Discussion:

The Koothandavar temple in the Koovagam village in Tamil Nadu hosts the Koovagam festival every year during the months of April and May. They reenact the ancient history of Lord Krishna's transformation into a

woman named Mohini and her marriage to Lord Koothandavar during this festival. The very next day they mourn his death through various rituals(Roy Jeff, 2014).

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in India has formulated a national-level umbrella scheme, "SMILE—Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise," which includes two sub-schemes: 'Comprehensive Rehabilitation for Welfare of Transgender Persons' and 'Comprehensive Rehabilitation of Persons Engaged in the Act of Begging.' This scheme would cover several comprehensive welfare measures for both transgender persons and those engaged in the act of begging with extensive focus on education, skill development, economic linkages, rehabilitation, provision of medical facilities, counselling, etc., with the support of state governments/UTs/local urban bodies, voluntary organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs), and institutions and others(Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2022).

Applying ethics in social and health services settings that serve marginalised populations presents a challenge due to the often conflicting values held by different cultures and groups. For example, religion has a long history of prescribing traditional gender norms and beliefs about heterosexuality. Legal sanctioning of sexual and gender minorities has often justified such religious prescriptions(Ricca et al., 2018). Discrimination by health care professionals is a major deterrent for transgender individuals to seek health care. Inaccessibility to general healthcare, including sexual health services, might have adversely affected the lives of transgender women. In rural areas, where health services are only available at health centers and hospitals, the situation could be even worse. Healthcare service providers should integrate the health needs of transgender individuals and demonstrate empathy towards their healthcare requirements. Simultaneously, we cannot undervalue the importance of enhancing health literacy, promoting awareness of individual rights, providing access to healthcare facilities, and implementing government health schemes like health insurance(Mansh et al., 2015).

However, in Indian cultures, the social acceptance of transgender people differs from that of the male/female gender, and they encounter discrimination in various areas, such as housing, health, employment, education, and marriage(Pandya & Redcay, 2022). Despite their long-standing presence, they continue to face deplorable social circumstances and live as a disadvantaged minority. Several studies show that social exclusion is pushing the transgender community into inappropriate conducts/habits. Social exclusion for this marginalised group can be attributed to various factors such as injustice, poverty, illiteracy, social and cultural boycotts, lack of opportunities, and non-dominant social identities(Lundin & Bombaci, 2023).

Strategic planning, assessment for readiness to change, environmental strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis, and use of community resources are recommended as part of a basic model for change in a

community(Koch et al., 2021; Nobili et al., 2018a). Indian society tries to repress transgender people by addressing them commonly as eunuchs. Modern science attempts to define transgender people as outwardly masculine and inwardly feminine. It is just another gender identity. Like science, Indian culture and religion defined this third gender as just another human identity. References in religious and non-religious texts like Brahmandapurana, The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, Tolkappiyam, Manusmriti, etc., could be examples(Nobili et al., 2018b; O Somasundaram, 2009).

Conclusion:

These focus group discussions provided insight into the cultural practices prevailing in the transgender community. The results of these focus group discussions might help influence the nature of subsequent surveys and government policies, initiatives, and programs for this high-risk, vulnerable group. The community has a wonderful tradition of its own. But at the same time, discarding this tradition, Indian society tries to repress the transgender identity and marginalise people of gender nonconformity(Habin, 2021).

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