



## Empowering transgender population in India through community libraries

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The paper attempts to identify the dilemmas faced by the transgender community in India with respect to their social life and information needs. Through a study of literature, the possibilities of introducing community libraries or Library-cum-Resource Centres (LRC) dedicated towards the betterment of transgender community in India have been explored. READ (Rural Education and Development) - a successful community library model has been discussed in the paper which could be adapted and modified to create such initiatives across the transgender populated areas of India. The limitations and implications are also discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Transgender; Community libraries; Information Poverty; Library services

### Introduction

The world is for all. Every form of life has all the rights to live their life to the fullest and play their respective role on earth. This fact is known to each one of us. But the philosophy of 'Live and let live' is often forgotten. We find a wide range of disparity amongst us, the humans- the superior form of species. Humans have set standards for just about everything. There are certain expectations of the society in general which should be met by everyone to fall into the realm of 'Normal' - be it the life standards, family concepts, food, clothing etiquettes and so on. Certain sects of the human population across the world have always been humiliated, abused and ostracized based on their colour, creed and gender. Untouchability and inequality could be identified as one of the biggest banes in the Indian social structure.

Untouchability rising out of the caste system has been subdued to a certain extent (at least in open and interactive spaces) by means of numerous social reforms, proper education and reservation policies. Gender is regarded binary by most Indians. With all the advancements made in science and technology, India still seems to be too rigid and conservative for a transgender person to survive.

The term transgender includes pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative transsexual people who strongly identify with gender opposite to their biological sex (UNDP India Report, 2010 as cited in Kerala Development Society, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. In India, the prevalent

term used for transgender is *Hijra*, derived from the Urdu word '*Hich-Gah*', that carries the meaning "without a proper place or journey"<sup>2</sup>. There is many socio- ethnic variants or identities of transgender namely *Kinnars*, *Shiv-Shaktis*, *Jogtas*, *Jogappas*, *Aradhis*, *Sakhi*, *Aravani*, *Aruvani* etc<sup>1</sup>.

Transgender persons are often abandoned by their own family, or they are forced to leave the home due to intolerable humiliations from their own family members based on the sexual orientations they exhibit<sup>3</sup>. They find a haven in *Hijra* communities called '*Gharanas*', where they are adopted as '*Chela*' (disciple) to a family set up headed by a '*Guru*' (master). This is a community living system which has its own culture and customs. The members in a house often share a mother-daughter relationship. The relationship is not like what is seen in a conventional family. The disciples must earn a fixed sum of money at the end of each day which they have to give to their *Guru* as part of the expenses to run the household. Basic requirements of proper education and skill development of the transgender persons are seldom taken care of in such '*Gharanas*'. This render them vulnerable to begging and sex work to meet their financial requirements as the '*Gharanas*' are their only abode<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, this community style of living provides a special tag to the members of the community, further fuelling the chances of them being pushed to oblivion from the mainstream society<sup>2</sup>. It is high time that the society needs to be provided awareness about trans issues, the unending physical,

mental and emotional harassments they are subjected to and identify their rights to lead a life of dignity as any citizen of the country is entitled to. Absence of family support and lack of education make the transgender people the most ostracized community in India.

A first in the history of India, the statistics of 'transgenders' or 'others' was recorded in the India Census in 2011. The Official data shows transgender persons to form 4.9 lakh of India's total population. This may be quite low as many of them are still reluctant to disclose their gender identity due to fear of social stigma. The most important data was that of trans gender population among the age group of 0-6. There are 55,000 of them, revealing that parents were able to realize and accept their child's gender identity<sup>5</sup>. Much expected data was related to the literacy and employment rate among the members of the transgender community.

The literacy rate among transgender members is a meagre 46 percent when compared to 74 percent literacy in the general population. Transgender people drop out of educational institutions owing to discrimination and other humiliating experiences. The employment rate is also quite low accounting to just 38 percent of the community. A study of transgender issues, conducted by National Human Rights Commission reveals that 60 percent of them never attend schools, 96 percent of them are denied opportunities for employment even if qualified. Ninety two percent of them are never allowed to take part in the economic activity of the nation. The study reveals that 99 percent of the transgender persons have experienced social rejection<sup>6</sup>.

There is a need to analyse the representation of different facets of the life of transgenders, especially in the Indian context and assess the information needs of the transgender community. The possibility of introducing the benefits of community libraries to this secluded section of the population is thought of in the light of knowledge shared by the reviewed literature. Providing a strong support system to the transgender members through the community libraries could make them more knowledgeable of their own physical, mental and emotional peculiarities, their unquestionable health and legal rights as the citizens of the country and equip them with the much-needed courage to stand on their feet and raise their voice.

### Objectives of the study

- To review the recent literature on transgender life in India and on the information needs of the transgender persons;

- To understand the role of community libraries in accelerating social inclusion and development of underprivileged in India; and
- To suggest an alternative for transgender development in India through community libraries.

### Methodology

Literature survey has been performed to collect the information on transgender issues addressed in Indian context. As the literature discussing information needs of transgender persons in India are very few, the global literature was also considered. Literature available on community libraries and librarianship were also studied to gain insights in suggesting a community library model for the goodwill of transgender community in India. The search for literature was performed through Google Scholar using keywords like "Transgender issues in India", "Social status of trans genders in India", "Information needs of sexual minorities and libraries", "NEP 2020 and trans gender education", "Attitude towards trans genders in India" and "Community library initiatives" and only publications not more than eleven years old only were considered as an effort to identify the contemporary issues or progress related to trans population. Required information was retrieved from journal articles, theses, newspaper articles online, READ websites and LGBTQ blogs. National Human Rights Commission Reports availed from UNDP, theses chapters downloaded from Shodhganga and informative papers from Research Gate helped to understand the lives of trans genders in India in a better way.

### Review of literature

Bhattacharya and Ghosh (2020) investigated the physical and mental health status among *hijra*, *kothi* and transgender community in Kolkata, India<sup>7</sup>. Poor mental health composite score (PCS) among *hijra*, *kothi* and transgender individuals was identified compared to their physical health. Their study yielded results purporting to the immediate necessity to divert attention to the physical and mental health concerns of the gender-diverse sect of the society. For this, the effective launch and conduct of awareness programmes were also noted poignant as the members of the community themselves required information on their health rights. The other members of the society should be made knowledgeable so that the social and structural hurdles to the transgender healthcare could be evaded. Grassroot level activities, health

interventions and proper execution of Government initiatives slanted to the community should also be considered.

Veena (2019) in her thesis entitled "A study on the role of education in the empowerment of Transgender/Hijras", aimed to understand the educational background of Transgender/Hijras, the challenges they face in accessing formal education, role and impact of education in their economic and political status in the society and most importantly their expectations from society and Government to improve their life standard<sup>4</sup>. Transgender persons from Lucknow, selected through purposive sampling method comprised the sample for the investigation. The findings of the study revealed that majority of *Hijras*, accounting to 57.8% live in community settings and half of them are deprived of formal education. The source of income was '*badhai*' for 44.7% and prostitution for 23.6% of them, with a menial of Rs. 5000 per month for the majority. All the respondents recalled experiences of stigmatization and discrimination in their daily lives but only few literate among them could overcome such situations. They dream of a future in which they could live with their family and lead an equally secure and dignified life. The literate respondents identified and demanded more awareness workshops, talk shows and media campaigns arranged by Government and NGOs. They also opined of including chapters regarding the third gender in the school curriculum as the lessons learnt at school and books read leave a lasting remark in the minds of students.

In their study, Virupaksha and Muralidhar (2018) learnt the resilience aspect exhibited by the transgender persons in India<sup>8</sup>. Sixty respondents were contacted through a local NGO based in Karnataka. All were above the age of eighteen and gave consent to take part in the research process. They gained low scores in resilience scale, lowest of all population across the globe. The investigators suggested that having quality education and job opportunities were the key factors affecting resilience among the transgender persons and acceptance by society and own family. Providing them with education and employment opportunities would have a positive impact on their lives.

Elischberger, Glazier, Hill and Verduzco- Baker (2017) attempted a cross-cultural comparison of attitude towards transgender youth in United States and India<sup>9</sup>. The cross-cultural analysis was

exploratory in nature as there was a dearth of studies on transgender attitudes in India. The final sample constituted of 218 U.S residents and 217 Indians selected through Amazon MTurk and required data were collected via Survey Monkey. It was found that Indian respondents were more educated than their U.S. counterparts. Respondents were asked to go through vignettes reflecting eight-year-old or sixteen-year-old gender non- conforming persons, followed by few questions for assessing their attitude towards members of transgender community. The outcomes of the study reported positive attitude in general towards transgender youth in U.S, but negative in India. Political and religious construct, gender binary belief, environmental causes were the leading influencing factors among attitudes in U.S respondents. In India, the predictors were environmental causal attributions and religion-based disagreements. The researchers predict a possibility of Westernization of the Indian society adversely affecting the Gender-Pluralistic tradition of the nation. This could also result in accelerating trans- prejudice in the country. Transphobia is expected to get lower by disseminating information about the transgender youth.

In the report of a comprehensive research project sponsored by the National Human Rights Commission, the Kerala Development Society (KDS) (2017), information on the third gender in India, subjected to almost all variables such as age, caste, religion and education are included<sup>1</sup>. A detailed analysis of types of discrimination and violation of the basic human rights faced by the members of the community are chalked out in relation to UN Yogyakarta Principles of International Human Rights Law. Also, an evaluation of entitlements allotted to transgender individuals under various Central or State Government sponsored schemes or programmes have also been included in the report. The state of Tamil Nadu has been identified as a model state to emulate by the other states to adopt best practices for transgender welfare. The study recommends a pivotal need to provide counselling to parents, teachers and the society to evade the stigma prevalent in the Indian social construct. It calls out the importance for local governments to play their part in taking initiatives towards building a conducive environment with recognition and acceptance of transgender people.

Freeman (2011) emphasizes that the transgender persons yearn for a support system during their 'Coming Out phase'<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, the members of the

community's primary information requirement would be an assistance during this process. Mehra and Braquet (2011) proposes an exploratory practice-based framework that acknowledges strategic goals, objectives and activities for contemporary reference services with a focus on needs of LGBTQ individuals during the phases of coming out process- self-recognition, sharing with other LGBTQ people, informing family and friends, positive self-identification and integration of LGBTQ identity<sup>11</sup>.

Albright (2006) states that libraries as cultural archive and community centre, are obliged with the responsibility of providing materials, programs and displays representative of the diverse and varying segments of society including LGBT community. No controversies, personal beliefs and prejudices must hinder the authorities from rendering such services<sup>12</sup>.

The study of related literature has made it clear that how important it is to create a platform for the transgender people in India, where they could get access to quality education, knowledge about their basic rights and most importantly a space that could provide a sense of being accepted and addressed. Though the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and the new National Education Policy, 2020 are great strides taken towards the goal of achieving equality to LGBTQ people in the country, they are replete with inadequacies when it comes to handling different dimensions of the issues faced by the members of the community<sup>13,14</sup>.

Marching towards the stature of a modern society with scientific temper, India should work on 'Inclusive growth' embracing the marginalized or under-represented groups of the society. Revised policies and amendment of Constitutional provisions alone cannot bring change in the mindset of people. It requires consistent and collaborative efforts from grass root levels to decision making process of the society. As not-for-profit, service-oriented institutions, libraries have key functions to perform in creating awareness and disseminating information among the diverse user groups they serve. Libraries are democratic institutions where everyone has equal access to information sources suited to their information needs irrespective of age, gender, religion and social class to which they belong.

Libraries in India have not been in the frontline to eradicate the stigma towards the transgender people that is deep rooted in the Indian society. It was only in 2016, a transgender library was opened in Madurai,

Tamil Nadu in a bid to serve as a resource centre to spread awareness on ambisexual people or people falling out of the conventional binary gender norms<sup>15</sup>. The State Central Library, Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala became the first public library to welcome a member of the LGBTQ community in 2016. The membership card was issued to Sheethal Shyam, a transgender activist by the then hon. Minister for Education C. Raveendranath, proclaiming the Government's support to trans-friendly initiatives. Sheethal expressed her wish to include more resources on transgender issues in libraries<sup>16</sup>.

In 2018, Government PDDU Divisional Library in Kota, Rajasthan issued lifetime membership to Sahiba, a transgender as a gesture to show its solidarity with the remarkable efforts echoing from different parts of the country to address transgender issues<sup>17</sup>. On February 14, 2020, R. Gunavathi, a transgender and postgraduate in psychology, established a library at NGO Colony, Dindigul in the state of Tamil Nadu with an intent to revive the lives of transgender people<sup>18</sup>. As a literate member of the community, she requested her community members to empower themselves with knowledge that would help them live a dignified life brimming with confidence and self-esteem. Transgender community in India is facing numerous hardships arising mainly due to their ignorance of rights, lack of access to education and information content addressing their issues. This could resonate to 'Information Poverty'-that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately (Britz, 2004)<sup>19</sup>.

### **Community Libraries—an effort to reach out to the marginalized**

Knowledge is always the mightiest of weapons to eradicate injustice and inequality from the society. In simple terms, the information required by people or their dependents in their daily lives could be termed as community information. This makes them knowledgeable, confident and capable to take part in the democratic activities of the society which they form a part of<sup>20</sup>. Community information, in a sense helps in social inclusion. It could be anything ranging from transportation to medical surgeries or information that documents and communicates the thoughts, deeds and identity of a distinct community<sup>21</sup>. There are two types of communities which need this kind of community information-

- Communities of interest, who share a common feature or trait or common heritage, and
- Geographical communities.

When library and information services are oriented towards specific needs of a community, it is called 'Community Librarianship'<sup>20</sup>. Expanding the horizons, community librarianship and its outputs could also be rendered to the communities through a voluntary agency, local level authority or an advice group. The legacy of community librarianship shares glimpses of successful stories of how such ventures helped to lower the threats posed by social exclusion of certain communities.

Community library means a distinct type of public library or an alternative to public library that is established and governed by local people with or without public funding normally in disadvantaged areas to supply miscellaneous studying facilities and community information services for the growth of the community and raising their quality of life (Mia, 2020)<sup>21</sup>.

In India, community libraries serve as alternatives to public libraries which are struggling to meet their user expectations due to lack of administrative support. Community library services are often concentrated to rural communities in India or in areas where people find it difficult to get access to a fair collection of reading materials. The Ramditti J R Narang Deepalaya Learning Centre, serves a community of waste-pickers, Sheikh Sarai, South Delhi<sup>22</sup>. Emulating the initiative, the program director of NGO Hasiru Dala, Lakshmi Karunakaran helms the Buguri Community Library Project to help the waste-picker community of Karnataka, which is in the evil grip of child marriage, substance abuse and domestic violence<sup>22, 23</sup>. Many similar efforts can be seen in other parts of India that take the information needs of the underprivileged into concern.

### **THE READ (Rural Education and Development) SAGA- stories of hope**

Among the many community library initiatives, READ initiative stands out with its unique aspects of functioning and services provided to a community in concern. Though a community project aimed at strengthening of rural lives globally, the working pattern of READ centers, called Community Library and Resource Centres (CLRCs) could be effectively incorporated into community libraries devoted to other community of interests. READ project is not

just a way to provide means to get users acquainted with reading habits or provide space for community information. Going a stride ahead, READ initiative also take care of launching at least one sustaining enterprise to ensure an income for the community members and make them financially self-sufficient.

The seeds of READ Global were sown in the mind of Dr. Antonia "Toni" during one of her memorable trips to Nepal. An education researcher and former language teacher, Dr. Toni had ventured into a travel business, Myths and Mountains. It was a noble dream of a trekking guide to have a library for his village. This thought sparked Dr. Toni's bid to offer something sensible to the people of Nepal. She started READ Global in 1991, with its first center in Junbesi, Nepal<sup>24</sup>.

A Community Library and Resource Center (CLRC), READ Center acts as a focal point within the community, which spurs educational and economic growth of its members. It offers reading materials, free access to internet, basic knowledge of computers, a training hall and a space for community meetings. Jointly owned and managed by the community, READ works in collaboration with other organizations and local government agencies and caters to community-specific information needs<sup>24</sup>. This would vary across the communities which they serve. Women empowerment, livelihood skills, healthcare services, literacy programmes and technology training etc. are few among the numerous noteworthy programmes offered at READ centres. As a token of recognition, READ Nepal was bestowed with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Access to Learning Award (ATLA) in 2006<sup>24</sup>. The foundation also offered READ a replication grant to extend its services to Bhutan and India. READ India has 36 centres and 14 extension centres across India<sup>25</sup>.

### **Why READ inspired models of community libraries gain importance**

The global pandemic COVID 19 has not spared any part of the world from adopting a new way of life- 'the new normal'. The advantageous group of people who had access to quality education, schooling and social life, all have been pushed to a much personal space within the confinement of their homes. It is often read through media that people are finding it difficult to meet their daily expenses to run the families and fall prey to psychological and emotional discomforts. Some are unhappy with their present financial condition; some are facing technological

challenges and there is indeed a large sect of the society for whom life has become a great confusing question. The marginalized populations across the world are staring helplessly at the tremendous change, especially those happening in the domains of education and employment.

COVID-19 has further worsened the lives of the underprivileged. They are forced to compromise with their livelihood and for a few, even with their shelters. This is the time when Government authorities of a country are trying their best to keep its people aware of what is happening around them. Right information is the key to efficient management of the system. Public libraries are expected to broaden their extension services lending a support to the community they serve. There are areas in India separated geographically or economically or socially from the mainstream society. For such people, the dedicated services rendered through community librarianship would be a great solace.

Transgender communities in India, already facing the banes of social exclusion, have been in a state of dilemma in the covid times. Their menial sources of income like 'badhais', begging at crowded areas of the city all have stopped in the much-required social distancing policies reiterated by the Government. Many of them have turned homeless or jobless. The community members are more being humiliated within their homes and even resort to end lives on their own<sup>26</sup>. They are in dire need of a support mechanism where they would access right health information, engage in group discussions creating a feeling of oneness and confidence to face the hard days with courage. The community members need to be taught some livelihood and technical skills to keep abreast of changing times. It would be miserable for the transgender persons to live a better life even without basic skills in a society becoming largely technology dependent.

In this scenario, establishing community libraries for the benefit of one of the most secluded or stigmatized group of the society should be taken into consideration by the Government and Non-governmental organizations. There are many Communities Based Organizations (CBO) working sincerely for the goodwill of the transgender community in India. Sankalp Trust, Udaan Trust, Humsafar Trust, SAATHII and Queerhythm are a few to name<sup>27</sup>. These initiatives should also devote more attention to develop a READ like resource centre model for the goodwill of transgender people in India.

The state government could explore possibilities to join hands with the trans-friendly initiatives of their respective states and take necessary measures to equip the community members with the power of literacy and knowledge. The authorities could think of strengthening the public library system of the state and open exclusive Library cum Resource Centers (LRCs) for transgender people as part of extension services in areas where they are densely populated across the state.

The Union Government should make necessary policy amendments making library services accessible to transgender community. Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation functioning under the Ministry of Culture provides support to public libraries across the country to improve their services<sup>28</sup>. Financial help and technical support for establishing such exclusive community centres under the local library authority may be thought of. Taking lessons from Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board, other state governments should dedicate their efforts to create Self Help Groups (SHG s) of transgender persons<sup>1,29</sup>. Activities of such groups could be monitored at the Library-cum-Resource Centers (LRCs) and necessary training and skill development programmes could be made part of the routine activities of such centres.

Following the READ model of community library and resource centre development, establishing community libraries along with launching at least one 'for-profit' enterprise would help the members of the transgender community to keep themselves away from begging and sex work. This in turn, results in creating self-respect and confidence among the community members. Engaging in other means of income generating activities would also enhance the chances of transgender persons interacting with various other groups of the mainstream society which in the long run, lower the social and cultural gap existing between them. In this way, stigma towards the transgender community can be reduced and the transgender persons would be accepted as they are, with their self-declared identities.

A community library or library-cum-resource centre should provide the following services to the transgender community:

- Community specific information
- Basic literacy skills
- Computer literacy
- Skill development programme and training support

- Health and counselling services
- Legal services

Gradually but steadily, the Indian transgender community would gain visibility in the mainstream society. Their human resource could be effectively utilized for the prosperity of nation.

### Limitations and Implications

Government authorities at both state and union level could attempt a feasibility study regarding the pros and cons of establishing library-cum-resource centres for the transgender community in India, investigating the major hurdles they would face while revising the existing policies and at formulating effective and practical strategies for implementation of such resource centres in collaboration with NGOs.

The professional library associations in India may direct their activities to formulate rigorous and intensive training programmes to enable the professionals to deliver adequate information services to the underprivileged groups of the society especially when it requires dedication and patient efforts from them to interact with the members of transgender community. Identification of their information needs and locating appropriate information sought by such users would demand certain skills in interpersonal communication and basic knowledge of the transgender rights and issues. The authors of this paper are pursuing deeper research to learn the perspectives of library and information professionals in making libraries transgender friendly.

The paper has been prepared based on evidence from the literature survey and insights of authors. The practical impediments to initiate such community libraries have not been taken into consideration. The perspective of library professionals in India regarding community librarianship and community-oriented information services for marginalized communities are also not covered in the present paper.

### Conclusion

The transgender community in India is one of the most underprivileged in India. It is only in the recent years that media and youth have started to increasingly express their solidarity for transgender persons. The state and central government also have come up with transgender friendly policies and welfare schemes which is a positive sign to the community. But still, the transgender friendly initiatives are only a few to cater to the needs of each member of the community. For a community which lacks visibility in the mainstream

society, first requisite is to create awareness among them regarding their rights and need to stand united for their good cause. There are several inhibitions the members face within themselves, within their community and from the other groups of the society. There is a need to build a sense of togetherness among the community members and provide formal or non-formal means of education for them which would make them more confident enough to overcome the traumas caused by the negative experiences.

Libraries are not just repositories of information or knowledge. They have immense potential to be 'Agents of Change' in the society. It is unfortunate that even the census data is considered inaccurate by experts regarding the statistics of third gender. Many members still fear the reaction of the family or their society once they come to know their actual gender identity. Uttar Pradesh, having the highest population of transgender persons in India had laid the foundation for the country's first transgender university in 2019<sup>30</sup> and the state has opened first transgender toilet in 2021<sup>31</sup>. Though these are very positive initiatives, it should be thought about why it was too late to happen. Drafting education policies and constituting welfare board in favour of the community is not just enough for removing the stigma towards the community that prevails in the society. Community libraries in this regard, would pave the path for enlightenment and empowerment of the transgender persons. A community empowered with education and knowledge drift towards a life of dignity and hence trigger acceptance of their identities in the society.

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