



## INCLUDING TRANSGENDER COMMUNITIES VIA CHANGED SOCIETAL BELIEFS TOWARDS BUILDING GENDER SENSITIVE AND INCLUSIVE CO-LEARNING SPACES

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### ABSTRACT

The inclusion of trans communities - in an existing exclusionary framework of society and individuals who shun their rights due to a lack of empathy, awareness and a sense of indemnification - can only occur via altering mindsets and beliefs. By interactions and dialogues amidst hetero-normative people and the transgender folk, one can build inclusive spaces that are gender sensitive as basis and gender neutral in approach. The co-creation of learning spaces that include trans thought, emotion and experience - serves as a start towards the acceptance of diversity in sexual preferences, embracing pluralistic non-binary gender roles and anchoring in a positive process towards the formation of personal sexual identity. The theoretical framework for such inter-relations amidst 'the excluded' and 'the excluding' offers a fear-based reverence and regard for the divinity within marginalized groups based on gender, valuing emotional healing, fortune or abundance etc. as socio-psychological services offered by minorities to the larger society. A historical narrative of the role of trans communities in Indian culture needs serious reinterpretation amidst common people to dissolve superstitious apprehensions, thereby inviting dialogue with the third gender on their struggles, aspirations and needs. An essence of empathetic dialogue with 'trans practitioners' and immersion into their deep-rooted belief systems is much in need, to justly include trans people in a diverse and pluralistic society. The requirement of inclusion and diversity across the cultural landscape of India needs re-examining through the lenses of religious-politics, gender, class and caste etc. Trans communities need to be included not just in mere reserved seats and quotas but in the hearts of Indian citizens as equal and diverse beings. Theater and Art as modalities of such sensitizations amidst young learners are a success, if approached with the right intent. An educational space requires such conversations alongside sex-education - to include trans-teachers, trans-parents and children who are confused about gender roles and expectations - in their observations of societal behavior and tendencies.

**KEYWORDS :** Trans inclusivity, cultural diversity, gender sensitization, gender education

### INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of trans communities - in an existing exclusionary framework of society and individuals who shun their rights due to a lack of empathy, awareness and a sense of indemnification - can only occur via altering mindsets and beliefs. By interactions and dialogues amidst hetero-normative people and the transgender folk, one can build inclusive spaces that are gender sensitive as basis and gender neutral in approach. The co-creation of learning spaces that include trans thought, emotion and experience - serves as a start towards the acceptance of diversity in sexual preferences, embracing pluralistic non-binary gender roles and anchoring in a positive process towards the formation of personal sexual identity.

This paper examines extrinsic societal beliefs around transgender communities across India, signifying the viability of customary practices and traditional rituals followed by transgender folks, in maintaining harmony within the societies they interact with. Based on recent research, transgenders score far too less on a resilience scale in gaining access to amenities and resources. 'Transgender persons are rejected from their families and communities; they are exploited, ridiculed, and discriminated against in every aspect of societal life due to their gender variant behavior and roles. They are at high risk for mental health problems and psychological distress.' (Virupaksha, H. G., & Muralidhar, D., 2018).

The theoretical framework for such inter-relations amidst 'the excluded' and 'the excluding' offers a fear-based reverence and regard for the divinity within marginalized groups based on gender, valuing emotional healing, fortune or abundance etc. as socio-psychological services offered by minorities to the larger society. Restoring such tabooed customs and traditions in a dignified sense can help include transgender identities within mainstream society, mitigating their isolation from basic healthcare and education. Pre- and in-service 'teacher training programme(s) should be restructured by adding the content related to transgender community; like their historical background, life style, culture, rituals, customs,

life skills, psycho-social conditions, psycho-sexual aspects.' Their 'involvement in different money earning activities, involvement in sex work, legal provisions and schemes for their welfare must be included as an unit in present pre-service teacher training program(s) under Gender, School and Society subject/paper.' (Chandra, S., 2017). An integrative discipline like Gender, School and Society suggested in the above study makes gender sensitization and inclusion a normalizing process in any educational space.

A historical narrative of the role of trans communities in Indian culture needs serious reinterpretation amidst common people to dissolve superstitious apprehensions, thereby inviting dialogue with the third gender on their struggles, aspirations and needs.

### Tabooed Transgender Traditions - Superstitious Semi-participatory Beliefs And Practices

We partake - as onlookers, with our judgments - we interact without words or action. Thought and feeling dictate our sensory perceptions while witnessing a transgender beg for alms at a signal. With a universal payment interface linking our phones to our bank accounts, they sell us foreign chocolates on roads and request for money to be digitally transferred. In the age of technology, we can't refute their demands with no cash in our wallets.

In a constant formidable interaction that makes us feel normal, we cannot afford to ignore the curse they may bestow upon us, if we walk away from their wants. Their desires are exceptionally huge, and their vulnerability channels them to prey on the 'giver'. Body language and fear-induced behavior project onto them a way to meet their greed. This greed is out of denied rights, hardships of being ostracized from a society that lacks acceptance of anything beyond the hetero-normative.

As a queer individual, I reflect on the multiple agencies of trauma, neglect and isolation that made me identify with tags across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum at different phases of my life. Conflicts of social versus biological are as much an internal

struggle, as validated via external engagements with the world around us. My fear of meeting eye-to-eye with a transgender has subdued as I am able to accept my fluid self, the transient processes involved in my becoming and being. The interludes of dis-identification or non-identity have channeled through me composure, while the need to label oneself dissolves.

In a study that compared beliefs about transgender from an ecological / genetic standpoint versus the epigenetic condition pertaining to a mix of biological and socio-environmental factors, 'contrary to attribution theory, presenting information regarding the biological basis of transgender identity does not necessarily lead to more positive attitudes because (a) it triggers essentialist thinking and (b) the effects of biological attributions depend on recipients' authoritarian dispositions.' (Ching, B.H.H. & Chen, T.T., 2022)

Be it a socio-evolutionary externalized cause or a psycho-ecological inner dialogue that results in an individual's identity - the crux of being actively involved in a pluralistic society where assertion of minority rights in a majoritarian homogenizing community - offers a challenge to the vulnerable gender populace. They are only partially and temporarily included in fear-driven circumstances that benefit society from providing for them at that timely occasion.

#### **Discrimination Despite Divinity - The Excluder And The Excluded**

Expression of alternate gender, display of contrasting sexuality - are intolerable even though a vast history of scriptures, relics and narratives depict inclusive behavior. De-genderization seems to prevail as an unnecessary and abnormal choice by the macro-society. For an individual that is compelled by self-will to genderized transformation, societal frameworks disengage in supporting such transitions of body, attire of the opposite sex and gendered traits. The only respite is to seek divine protection in continuing through religious belief - one's identity and existence. Worshiping Gods by a display of flipped gender roles serves trans folk a purpose in continued ritualization of transgenderism.

In another research on the impact of colonial rule on homogenization of gender diversity, 'people who identified within the Hijra community were considered esteemed figures as a part of the Sultanate. Similarly, numerous depictions and sculptures in ancient temples, including the Khajuraho temples in Madhya Pradesh, point to a celebration of gender and sexual diversity. These stigmatizing notions around gender have since been cemented into law and become a part of Indian cultural norms. As a result, sexual and gender minorities have experienced systemic discrimination and marginalization, receiving minimal support at educational, medical, social, and policy levels.' (Shankar, P., et al., 2022)

Through dance-forms, through ceremonies arranged at a king's courtyard, through music and poetry on festive gatherings - the un-gendering and re-gendered processes are etched in the history of a culture. Negotiating self-alter-expression - communities foster homeless and astray disciples who want to be guided through such transitions of gender, altered physicality, dressing sensibilities and attributes of personality.

#### **Socio-psychological Interactions With The Intermediary Sex - Customary Rituals Governing Partial Inclusion**

The intermediate invites a dialogue between outer societal presumptions and the acknowledgment of qualms within the inner psyche. Identity formation involves a constant rift between intrinsic choices and extrinsic demands imposed by society.

In a recent survey on beliefs around the Hijra communities, 'belief in their forcibly taking away child(ren) born with sexual deformity (intersex); (belief in them) having strength in their curses and blessings; (and the belief that) shunning their demands bring adversities to the person; and hijras not liking anybody interfering in their social errands' predominated mostly in women. (Jami, H., & Kamal, A., 2017)

Men encounter interactions with trans members more often than women in India. Trans people approach men mostly for many reasons, unless it is a baby shower ritual or a mourning ceremony for the newly wedded or the demised, where the comfort levels with the feminine are enhanced within the confines of a house by taking on a motherly role. On the streets, trans individuals can't express vulnerable emotions, and hence display masculine and dominant personality traits. Their engagements with society-at-large are gender-skewed and gender-morphed to protect themselves from abuse and insult, and to gain rewards from obligatory social customs and ritualistic practices.

#### **Gender Sensitization And Empathetic Inclusion Within Educational Institutions**

Children born with gender deformities are kept protected within the family till they are able to cognize the hormonal and bodily aberrations of puberty in their late teens. Mentally challenged kids may have little cognizance of gender as a form of social expression. But the confused rebels savor choices of self-identification that are accompanied by harsh environments and tough choices subject to traumatic experiences. Very few complete schooling as they are heckled by fellow mates, and this dimenearning persists with peers at work spaces. Finding a semi-skilled job is harder for gender-swapped individuals than those who project themselves as gender-neutral.

'The educational scenario for transgender students in India in light of the inclusive education model' has been discussed by Jain, R., 2018, although in practice, systemic challenges persist.

In a transformative culture where westernized influences anchor oneself in embracing their psychic form beyond biological and social barriers, gender switching has been superficially normalized. The judgments still prevail and dictate limited opportunities for trans individuals to engage with and feel included in a stereotyping society with narrow perceptions.

Very few school admission forms and work-related forms accommodate the third-sex in enrollments and recruitment processes. The pluralistic culture of India has potential to work alongside religious multiplicity and gender / caste / class diversity - yet inequity persists and reinstates across economic status and creed differences, superimposed by the internal refusal by members of a faith to accept deviations of the given gender at birth.

#### **Dialogues Towards Including Trans Practitioners In Diverse And Pluralistic Communities**

Researchers documenting trans-issues and researchers who identify as trans must collaborate to establish NGOs and explore gender as a personalized and conceptual tool to understand psycho-sociological themes and constructs that interplay across generations and faiths. A supportive environment, that not only represents the emotional experience of being and becoming trans, but that nourishes the trans in voicing their needs and opinions - in a just and fair manner - is much required in current times. It isn't enough for third-parties to narrate the lives and plight of the trans community; a direct and impactful story-telling by a trans individual truly represents gender-parity in theoretical

research and action-practice. To enable spaces for opportunism from lived tales promotes true inclusion and representation of rights and reservations.

In a recent critical analysis of a biography of the first transgender principle of a school in India, it has been reported that 'cultural representations like literature undermine and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression and oppression of transgenders in society.' (Dasari, T., & Reddy, G. C., 2018)

The victim-narrative, the marginalized storyboard - must change. Revisiting instances of deprivation may not necessarily anchor trans folk in an empowered sense. A transformed outlook that harbors on success-stories manifests as true inclusion and reform. Mindsets and cyclical behavior of the oppressive and the oppressed must be broken to engage trans members with inclusive rights over access to amenities.

### **A Cultural Landscape Of Religious And Caste-based Exclusion Of Trans Communities**

Trans people are depicted in movies in scenes of comedy that continue to lighten the seriousness with which they suffer in reality. Marginalization of minorities based on gender discrepancies isn't projected in the film industry as a serious issue. Rather they use roleplay to mock trans traits, and exhibit the actor's credibility in enacting flipped gender roles with humor. Visibility is showcased as biased, stereotypical and void of their true struggles.

'The Male to Female (MtF) Transgender community emerges as the most visible queer culture in India. Cinema provides viewers the ideologies and beliefs sensationally through celebrities and distorts reality. Cinema (that) negatively propagates and maintains the dominant ideology about Transgender people in society, mutes the Transgender community and the unequal power relationship drives them to multidimensional social exclusion' (Shanmugavel, S. R., & Arulchelvan, S., 2016)

Demeaning their financial status, ridiculing their exorbitant demands and ways of achieving wealth, all encompass exclusionary tendencies amongst the masses. Refuting their representation in employment and education, politics of drafting policies that don't necessarily translate to availing benefits - persists in society. A cultural storm of resistance to exclusion often falls flat with power in the hands of heteronormative religious leaders and political parties.

### **Theatre And Art As Modalities Of Sensitizing Gender And Sexuality**

Art therapy helped me reconcile a balance of the feminine and masculine within me. It is a modality that engages in expression and perception of form, color and shades. Through meditative artistic engagements with the non-dominant hand, emotive expression through a language of strokes of paint on canvas is ensured. Assimilative reflection of one's vulnerable shadow-self emerges from deep introspection with a mix of hue, and depth-of-field obtained from layered spread on the medium.

A study on TV drama as a form of media influencing beliefs about transgenders 'investigates the role viewers' active participation and emotional reactions (termed as narrative performance) play in influencing their beliefs and attitudes about the transgender community. Narrative performance, a process by which readers bring cognitions and emotions to engage with a text, is an unexplored construct in narrative persuasion literature.' (Sharma, N., 2022)

In Indian cinema, the narrative performance of transgenders has largely been played in terms of comedian characters. This

narrative persuading by the film industry has isolated trans folks from true inclusion. Classical dance-forms have explored the expression of gender with seriousness and respect towards non-binary concepts of gender manifestations.

Street plays and on-stage drama are powerful modes of engaging actors and the audience in re-examining gender-constructs within themselves, in their families and friends-circles. Skits and mime-acting say more than articulated via novels and true-stories of trans individuals. Performance on stage must include trans people, as well as truly depict the life-experiences of identifying as transgender. In schools, epics that showcase and dignify trans members must be re-enacted to highlight prominent roles individuals played - irrespective of gender - in a history of trans-inclusivity.

### **Parental Participation And Societal Involvement - Inter-generational Shifts In Accepting Trans Folks**

The proactive engagement of the masses with efforts towards including the trans community in mainstream society can only be possible if the public dissolves a continuity of stereotypical beliefs and separatist mindsets about them as not part of normalcy. A social norm - predefined, dictates opportunities for inclusion, while at the same time can limit the entire society with a constraint that permeates exclusion of minorities. Thus, the norm must change. A new norm, accepted by society - can entrust minorities with roles that require interaction, as against ostracized roles that dominate an exclusionary agenda.

According to a report, 'the COVID-19 pandemic has diminished transgender individuals' access to the critical emotional and instrumental social support networks that are vital to their well-being. Many rely on Government, peer networks and voluntary organizations for social support (eg, Government supported centres, Community LGBTQ centers, Meetup groups).' (Ayyavoo, A. K., 2022)

The visibility of trans folk must be representative of their dialogue with macro-society. Establishing social-help groups and supportive networking for their well-being, must run alongside cultural exchange forums that address intergenerational shifts in embracing diversity. Trans-teachers and trans-parents must pave the way towards altered beliefs by rightly including a gender-sensitive generation in figuring out what trans means to them. The idea of ungendering must evolve at the school-level to promote gender-parity, diversity and inclusion through learning pedagogies. Curriculum must sensitize children with gender constructs that serve and include all forms of identities.

### **CONCLUSION**

An essence of empathetic dialogue with 'trans practitioners' and immersion into their deep-rooted belief systems is much in need, to justly include trans people in a diverse and pluralistic society.

The requirement of inclusion and diversity across the cultural landscape of India needs re-examining through the lenses of religious-politics, gender, class and caste etc. 'Trans communities need to be included not just in mere reserved seats and quotas, but in the hearts of Indian citizens as equal and diverse beings. 'Teacher education programs must prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways that take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people.' (Rands, K. E., 2009).

At the educational policy level, stories in classroom learning must age-appropriately sensitize children to gender as a biological-given versus a socio-personal choice. In a recent study '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.' (Dhanya, S., & Thanuskodi, S., 2021). This study bases its argument more on information dissemination and making knowledge available to children, youth and adults of trans populations. There is a need to sensitize the trans folks and the larger society on gender and sexuality that materialize as a mix of personal, psycho-social, religious and biological factors.

Theater and Art as modalities of such sensitizations amidst young learners are a success, if approached with the right intent. Within the schooling system, parental involvement in trans-inclusion programs is crucial to the intergenerational shift in mindsets around trans-identity. Many teachers as adults live a dual life of denied self-acceptance with an internal conflict around gender and personal preference. Youth take a longer time to empathize with their own emotions around contrasting gendered notions. An educational space requires such conversations alongside sex-education - to include trans-teachers, trans-parents and children who are confused about gender roles and expectations - in their observations of societal behaviour and tendencies.

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