



# The Socio-Cultural and Demographic Realities of Transgender Identities in India

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**Abstract-** This paper examines the evolution, socio-cultural status, and demographic realities of transgender individuals in India, focusing on the historical shifts from royal patronage to colonial marginalization and contemporary socio-economic challenges. Drawing upon pedagogical and sociological frameworks, including Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study contextualizes the community's transition across different eras. Furthermore, using 2011 Census data, we analyze contemporary population metrics, literacy disparities, and regional variations, with specific attention to the Western coastal states and vulnerable demographics such as transgender children.

**Keywords-** transgender community, Gender identity, India, Gender performativity, Judith Butler, Socio-cultural marginalization, Colonial legacy, Census 2011, Literacy disparities, Transgender children, Social inclusion, Demographic analysis.

## I. Introduction

The socio-cultural status quo of transgender identity in India is an effect of a long evolution of identity configuration. To comprehend contemporary systemic barriers, it is essential to trace how changes in the assignment of attributes over the years have determined social acceptance or dismissal. While mainstream traditions and rituals have historically validated transgender existence, modern socio-political realities demand a deeper deconstruction of gender binaries to secure civil, political, and social rights. As noted by Bollin (1998), transgenderism has emerged as a distinct pathway through which individuals construct their gender identity, transcending the rigid boundaries of man and woman.

## II. Historical Background and Institutional Shifts

### The Era of Royal Patronage (Delhi Sultanate)

The presence of the community in India specifically referred to historically by terms like 'eunuchs' (now used derogatorily) can be systematically traced back to the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century (Taparia, 2011). Under the masters of this empire, individuals were brought into the labor force to build the state. Key historical dynamics of this period include:

- **Forced Castration and Dependency:** Individuals were castrated to restrict them from sexual activities. This ensured they had no kin, rendering them solely dependent on their masters (Taparia, 2011).
- **The Harem Guardians:** They were perceived as 'gender neutral' yet capable of providing 'manly protection' (Reddy, 2006). Acting as loyal harem guardians, they could not impregnate women but maintained the masters' exclusive rights over their harems.



- **Institutionalization:** This royal patronage institutionalized the Hijra community as a 'metaphor of power' and established them as a recognized third gender (Taparia, 2011).

#### **Colonial Criminalization and De-institutionalization**

The advent of British colonial rule dismantled the socio-cultural fabric established during the Delhi Sultanate, rendering previous systems of caste and regional status insignificant (Reddy, 2006). The British administration systematically targeted sexual minorities, particularly Hijras, through institutional legal discrimination:

- The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871: Under this act, the community was classified not just as a caste, but explicitly as a "criminal caste" (Reddy, 2006). The law labeled them as criminal tribes who allegedly kidnapped and castrated children, effectively wiping them away from the mainstream social fabric.
- Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860): This statute condemned 'carnal intercourse' and actively suppressed the sexual expression of non-traditional genders (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

#### **Post-Colonial and Contemporary Structural Shifts**

In the contemporary era, the motivation for ritualistic castration (nirvana) has fundamentally shifted from historical religious obligations to stark economic considerations (Taparia, 2011). As structural opportunities in the Indian social layout shrank, the Hijra community was increasingly forced into marginalized survival strategies, such as sex work and prostitution.

The late 1980s marked a distinct shift in the internal sub-categorization of the community with the onset of the HIV-AIDS epidemic (Dutta, 2012). The academic and public health spotlight expanded from Hijras to include kothis (transgender individuals who do not perform castration) and Men who have Sex with Men (MSM). Consequently, funding for Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) surged, particularly via state AIDS prevention and control societies (such as in West Bengal). This era explicitly assigned institutional identities to these sub-groups based on their livelihood, sexual choices, and relative marginality, defining kothis through localized dynamics like parikh (receptive role) in West Bengal and panthi elsewhere in India (Dutta, 2012).

### **III. Theoretical Framework and Conceptualizing Self**

Understanding the lifecycle of a transgender person requires moving away from the notion of gender as a fixed, stable entity.

#### **Gender as a Continuum and Performance**

Judith Butler (1988) posits that gender is carefully constituted in time and established through a "stylised repetition of Acts." It is a formative accomplishment compelled by social action and taboo rather than an innate biological mandate. Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals openly defy these traditional norms by



refusing to perform the gender assigned to them at birth. Instead, gender and gender expression exist as a fluid continuum that can only be authentically felt and expressed by the self (Sennott & Smith, 2011).

#### **Frameworks of Self-Realization**

Primary field accounts highlight that transgender individuals place themselves at vastly different positions across this gender spectrum. This is visible in the varied milestones of physical and legal transitions, as well as linguistic self-determination:

"I would tell that I am a transgender, because even when I was born as a male, I always had a female attitude ...but cannot be called female because I don't want to do sex reassignment surgery (SRS)... I want to do breast implant and laser treatment to remove hair ...so I cannot be complete women .Legal sanction has been given for a third gender and so why can't I choose that identity. I choose to be a transgender."

— Tinu, Transgender Woman

A germane understanding of the self is heavily reflected in names they choose while establishing their identity. Their names have also evolved with their processes of gender realization. While a small number of participants choose names that explicitly lean toward traditional masculinity or femininity, the majority select unisex names. This linguistic choice represents a deliberate attempt to assert a "gender-neutral space" that moves entirely beyond the established male/female binary, rather than merely conforming to pre-existing gender attributes even after physical transitions.

#### **IV. Socio-Cultural Dimensions: The Case Of Kerala And Regional Stigmas**

Heteronormative divisions of labor and power treat rigid binaries as 'normal.' Consequently, the inherent fluidity of a gender continuum is treated as a threat to the established societal status quo and hierarchy.

##### **Socio-Economic Marginalization**

In regions like Kerala, the transgender community faces multi-front discrimination spanning social stigmas regarding dressing, mannerisms, and tabooed livelihood options. To survive, many resort to restricted economic avenues:

- Begging for alms.
- Dancing at auspicious social functions (e.g., marriages, births of children).
- Sex work.

In instances where individuals refuse to offer alms, members of the community sometimes resort to unconventional, forceful means to secure money, further complicating social relationships.

##### **Superstition and Visibility Countermeasures**

Societal interactions are deeply contradictory, driven by a dual belief rooted in Hindu mythological stories that transgender individuals possess the cosmic power to either curse or grant bliss. This dynamic generates widespread apprehension and superstition-fueled fear within the general public.



Taking advantage of this "unfortunate" social vulnerability, mainstream systems have systematically denied transgender individuals access to basic foundational resources, specifically education and healthcare. This has rendered the community "visibility invisible" to society. To combat this, individuals must wage prolonged socio-political and legal battles to achieve familial acceptance of kinship rights and secure fundamental legal recognition.

## V. Quantitative and Demographic Analysis

The 2011 Census of India marked the first major state-led demographic accounting of transgender persons, formally acknowledging them under the category of the "Third Gender."

### Macro-Population and Rural-Urban Distribution

The census officially recorded an aggregate population of over 490,000 third gender individuals across the nation.

Table 1: Macro Population Metrics and Distribution Framework

Metric Category	Value / Percentage Baseline
Total Registered Third Gender Population	490,000+
Rural Demographics	Over 66% (Identified as living in rural areas)
National Rural Baseline (General Population)	69%

This distribution closely mirrors the general population's spatial layout, proving that transgender populations are fundamentally integrated across rural landscapes rather than being exclusively urban phenomena. However, all mainstream articles written about this census present a very limited picture of the status quo for third gender persons.

### Literacy Disparities and Regional Variations

The census exposes a severe structural deficit in educational access for third gender individuals when contrasted against national averages.

- **The National Literacy Gap:** The literacy rate among the third gender community stands at a critically low 46%, compared to the 74% literacy rate observed in the general population.
- **Depressed Literacy Regions:** Third-gender individuals living in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Meghalaya are, on average, significantly less literate than the rest of the states.
- **High-Proportion Disparities:** Notably, states like Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand simultaneously exhibit a higher overall ratio of third-gender individuals combined with severely depressed literacy rates, compounding vulnerabilities regarding sustainable livelihoods.
- **Parity and High-Performing States:** Conversely, third-gender literacy rates reach near-parity with, or even exceed, overall state averages within the Western



coastal states specifically Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, and Maharashtra—as well as the northeastern state of Mizoram. It would be interesting to examine which local and state policies lead to higher literacy rates for third gender persons in Western coastal states.

### **Vulnerability in Early Childhood**

The 2011 Census further indicated that children comprise a highly significant percentage of India's transgender population. The geographic concentration of transgender children is highest in the following states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. This specific baseline information is not just useful for counting purposes; it may help redefine healthcare, food access, and early childhood education in these regions to make these systems more inclusive of transgender children.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The academic literature regarding transgender populations in India has historically focused on cultural frameworks and ancestral backgrounds. However, contemporary global scholarship demands an emphasis on systemic identity construction, legal protections, and socio-economic metrics. The transition of the third gender from a position of institutional power during the Delhi Sultanate to legal criminalization under British rule laid the foundation for modern structural marginalization. Today, with a population exceeding 490,000—characterized by massive literacy deficits (46% vs 74%) and deep geographic disparities—there is an urgent need to reconstruct public policy. By utilizing gender-fluid pedagogies and targeting early childhood resources in vulnerable regions like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and the Northeast, state apparatuses can transition from exclusionary binaries toward genuine socio-political and legal inclusion.

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