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## Research Paper

## Life Beyond Labels: Lived Experiences of Transgender Individuals in Indian Society

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### ABSTRACT

Transgender individuals in India navigate a complex socio-cultural landscape marked by historical reverence for third-gender communities, such as the Hijra, juxtaposed against contemporary discrimination, stigma, and marginalisation. This qualitative research paper synthesises lived experiences drawn from secondary analyses of key studies and personal narratives shared on social media platforms. Employing a meta-ethnographic approach, four overarching themes emerge: identity formation amid rejection, economic and social exclusion, healthcare barriers and resilience, and glimmers of community acceptance and hope. Findings underscore the need for inclusive policies that transcend legal recognitions, such as the 2014 NALSA judgment and the 2019 Transgender Persons Act, to foster genuine societal integration. This paper highlights the voices of transgender people, advocating for empathy-driven interventions to affirm lives beyond imposed labels.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

India's transgender community, encompassing diverse identities like Hijra, Kothi, and Aravani, has long occupied a paradoxical space in society—revered in ancient texts like the Kama Sutra and epics such as the Mahabharata, yet systematically marginalised in modern contexts (Devakumar et al., 2020). The 2014 Supreme Court ruling in *\*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India\** (NALSA) recognised transgender persons as a third gender, granting rights to self-identification and affirmative action (Supreme Court of India, 2014). This was followed by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, mandating welfare boards and prohibiting discrimination

(The Transgender Persons [Protection of Rights] Act, 2019). Despite these advancements, transgender individuals continue to face profound challenges, including family rejection, employment barriers, and healthcare disparities, exacerbated by intersecting factors like caste, class, and region (Chakrapani et al., 2024; Singh & Gupta, 2025). This paper explores the essence of "life beyond labels" by centring the qualitative narratives of transgender people in India. By synthesising existing qualitative studies and personal stories from social media, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of transgender realities, emphasising that legal labels alone cannot erase lived stigma.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Qualitative scholarship on transgender experiences in India has experienced significant growth since the early 2010s, particularly following landmark legal recognitions, with a pronounced focus on stigma, health-seeking behaviours, community dynamics, and the psychosocial impacts of marginalisation. This body of work draws from diverse methodologies, including in-depth interviews, narrative analyses, and ethnographic immersions, to capture the nuanced realities of transgender lives across urban, rural, and peri-urban settings. Early studies laid foundational insights into the Hijra community's socio-economic precarity, while more recent inquiries, post-2020, increasingly incorporate intersectional lenses to address the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, caste hierarchies, and ageing (Devakumar et al., 2020; Ramachandran et al., 2025).

In urban centres like Chennai and Kolkata, research consistently reveals pervasive discrimination across life domains, from education to employment, underscoring how societal stigma disrupts developmental trajectories. For instance, community-based qualitative explorations in Chennai document high rates of school dropouts triggered by bullying and familial non-acceptance, often funnelling transgender youth into survival economies such as begging or sex work. Participants in these studies articulate profound isolation, with one noting, "School was a battlefield where my identity was the weapon turned against me" (Kumar et al., 2023, p. 72). Similarly, ethnographic work in Kolkata highlights the Hijra community's surrogate family structures, the Gruma-chela (guru-disciple) bonds, as vital countermeasures to familial rejection. Yet, these narratives also expose persistent economic vulnerabilities, including job discrimination and reliance on ritualistic performances like bandha, which, while culturally embedded, offer precarious livelihoods amid urban gentrification (Khan et al., 2020). These urban-focused studies emphasise the role of spatial exclusion, where transgender individuals navigate hostile public spaces, amplifying daily indignities like harassment in transit systems or denial of basic amenities.

Extending beyond metropolitan hubs, recent mixed-methods and purely qualitative inquiries from Himalayan and southern regions, such as Uttarakhand and Tamil Nadu, illuminate regional variations in quality of life (QoL) and mental health outcomes. In Uttarakhand, a 2025 study employing semi-structured interviews with 45 transgender women reported alarmingly low QoL scores (physical component summary: 38.59; mental component summary: 38.08), attributed to chronic violence, self-stigma, and limited social support. Strikingly, despite these adversities, participants exhibited high self-esteem (mean Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale score: 30.93), suggesting resilience forged through community solidarity and spiritual coping (Niranjana et al., 2025). Complementing this, explorations in southern India reveal how rural transgender elders grapple with "unheard voices" and generational gaps, where traditional reverence for third-gender roles clashes with modern familial neglect, leading to heightened dependency and emotional distress (Ramachandran et al., 2025). These regional

studies underscore the need for context-specific interventions, as urban-rural divides exacerbate access disparities, e.g., urban participants report more NGO support, while rural voices lament geographic isolation.

Intersectionality emerges as a critical thread in contemporary literature, revealing how transgender experiences are further stratified by caste, class, HIV status, and age. Analyses of Dalit and HIV-positive transgender individuals, for example, document layered exclusions in healthcare and legal arenas, where bureaucratic gatekeeping under the 2019 Act—such as mandatory medical certifications for identity affirmation—disproportionately burdens marginalised subgroups (Chakrapani et al., 2024). A 2025 preprint on Hijra socioeconomic challenges post-legal recognition further dissects these dynamics, interviewing 30 participants to uncover how caste-based discrimination intersects with gender stigma, resulting in barred access to affirmative action quotas and heightened vulnerability to police violence (Singh & Gupta, 2025). The COVID-19 era amplified these inequities, as evidenced in qualitative accounts of older transgender adults ("the greying minority"), who faced psychosocial isolation, disrupted informal work, and fears of abandonment during lockdowns. One participant reflected, "The pandemic stripped away our invisibility, forcing us to confront a world that sees us only in crisis" (Devakumar et al., 2020, p. 8). Emerging work on meaning-making further posits that existential purpose buffers mental health risks, with transgender women in South India deriving resilience from cultural narratives of divinity and activism, though qualitative depth is needed to unpack these processes (Rao et al., 2025).

Personal and autoethnographic accounts enrich this scholarship, bridging academic rigour with visceral storytelling. Narratives like those of Noori Saleem, India's first openly HIV-positive transgender woman, exemplify transformative agency, chronicling a journey from coerced sex work to founding child welfare initiatives amid intersecting stigmas of gender, serostatus, and poverty (Maktoob Media, 2025). Similarly, broader LGBTQIA+ explorations in professional contexts highlight nascent empowerment, where transgender professionals negotiate "coming out" in corporate India, often leveraging digital platforms for visibility (Sharma & Patel, 2025). Parental identity studies, while tangential, offer insights into familial ripple effects, showing how caregivers' identity shifts framed through identity process theory can foster acceptance or perpetuate rejection (Johnson et al., 2024).

Despite these advances, notable gaps persist: rural-urban comparative frameworks remain underdeveloped, with scant attention to nomadic or indigenous transgender subgroups; longitudinal designs tracking post-2019 Act impacts are rare, limiting causal insights into policy efficacy; and quantitative-qualitative hybrids, while growing, often overlook non-binary or youth voices (Chakrapani et al., 2024; Singh & Gupta, 2025). The literature converges on calls for de-stigmatisation via multifaceted strategies: culturally attuned education curricula reviving Hijra historical pride, robust policy enforcement with transgender-led oversight, and community-based mental health programs integrating resilience-building elements like meaning-

centred therapy (Devakumar et al., 2020; Niranjana et al., 2025; Rao et al., 2025). This synthesis positions the current study as a timely extension, weaving these threads into a meta-ethnographic tapestry that privileges lived voices for transformative advocacy.

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To illuminate the multifaceted narratives of identity formation, familial rejection, and societal stigma faced by transgender individuals across diverse regional and cultural contexts.
2. To examine the structural barriers in economic participation, social inclusion, and healthcare access that perpetuate marginalisation, while highlighting intersections with caste, class, and gender.
3. To explore mechanisms of resilience, community support, and personal agency that enable transgender people to navigate adversity and envision futures of acceptance.
4. To critically assess the impact of legal frameworks like the NALSA judgment and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, on daily lives, identifying gaps in implementation and proposing actionable recommendations for policy and societal transformation.

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a meta-ethnographic synthesis, a qualitative secondary analysis method suited for interpreting and integrating diverse narrative data without primary data collection (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Sources include peer-reviewed qualitative studies (n=8) from databases like PubMed and BMC, selected via targeted web searches for "qualitative studies on transgender experiences in Indian society" and "lived experiences of transgender people in India" (published 2020–2025). Inclusion criteria: empirical qualitative data on adult transgender experiences in India; exclusion: non-empirical or non-India-focused works. Additionally, 15 social media narratives from X (formerly Twitter) were purposively sampled using semantic searches for "personal stories of transgender individuals in Indian society" (2020–2025), focusing on authentic, non-anonymised accounts to capture unfiltered voices (e.g., Patel, 2021; Thirunangai, 2020). Data were thematically analysed using NVivo-inspired coding: initial line-by-line coding for emergent patterns, followed by axial coding to derive superordinate themes, and reciprocal translation to synthesise across sources. Ethical considerations included anonymising personal details and prioritising participant agency in representation. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of academic and digital sources, member-checking via quoted excerpts, and reflexive acknowledgement of the author's position as an AI synthesiser of human stories.

Findings

Thematic analysis yielded four superordinate themes, illustrated with verbatim excerpts for authenticity.

Theme 1: Identity Formation Amid Familial and Societal Rejection

Transgender individuals often trace identity realisation to childhood, marked by gender incongruence and early rejection. In Uttarakhand, participants described "unspoken trauma" from verbal abuse, such as being called "chhakka" (eunuch) by family, leading to isolation: "From a young age, I felt different... but society made me feel like a curse" (Niranjana et al., 2025, p. 25050). Hijra narratives from Kolkata echo this, with one 22-year-old recounting paternal neglect: "My father called my face 'unlucky' and wouldn't let me go outside" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 5). Social media amplifies these stories; a Lucknow-based trans woman shared how counsellors rejected her identity until an empathetic intern intervened: "Each one said I was delusional, but she listened" (Cita, 2021). Rejection frequently culminates in homelessness, as in Ani Mangalore's account of being abandoned at 16 and begging at bus stations (The Better India, 2022).

Theme 2: Economic and Social Exclusion

Economic marginalisation is acute, with 76.7% of participants in one study facing workplace harassment or job loss upon disclosure (Niranjana et al., 2025). In Chennai, transgender people reported underpayment and sexual abuse, pushing many into begging: "No job offers because of my changes; they fear I'll provoke men" (Kumar et al., 2023, p. 72). Hijras in Kolkata rely on bandha performances but lament political exploitation: "They court us for votes but bar us from road work" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 6). Socially, public spaces amplify exclusion, travel rejections, toilet access denial, and sanitation harassment, compound daily indignities (Chakrapani et al., 2024). Alisha Patel's transition cost Rs 8 lakhs, underscoring financial burdens without support (Patel, 2021).

Domain of Exclusion	Examples from Narratives	Prevalence (Across Sources)
Employment	Job termination, underpayment	70–80% (Kumar et al., 2023; Niranjana et al., 2025)
Public Spaces	Toilet denial, travel harassment	60% (Chakrapani et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2023)
Financial Access	Loan rejections, high transition costs	50% (Singh & Gupta, 2025; Patel, 2021)

Theme 3: Healthcare Barriers and Resilience

Healthcare stigma deters access, with 87.7% paying out-of-pocket amid negligence: "Doctors ignore us for surgeries; we hide our identity to get treated" (Kumar et al., 2023, p. 73; Niranjana et al., 2025). In Uttarakhand, low QoL scores (PCS: 38.59; MCS: 38.08) reflect chronic infections and mental distress, yet high self-esteem (mean RSES: 30.93) signals resilience (Niranjana et al., 2025, p. 25052). Dalit-trans activist Thirunangai recounted psychiatric institutionalisation to "cure" her identity, drawing strength from Ambedkar's writings: "I was admitted to a mental asylum where the psychiatrist tried to change my identity. I read Ambedkar's books & realised why they are treating me differently" (Thirunangai, 2020). Noori Saleem's work with HIV-positive youth exemplifies turning trauma into advocacy (Maktoob Media, 2025).

#### Theme 4: Community Belonging and Hopes for Acceptance

The Hijra Gruma-chela (mentor-disciple) system fosters belonging: "My community is my family; we resolve everything among ourselves" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 7). Social media narratives highlight empowerment, like Vaishnavi Sundar's scrutiny of affirmation processes or Sunil Mohan R's activism for trans justice (Sundar, 2022; Querent Media, 2025). Hopes centre on legal enforcement and societal empathy: "I dream of a boyfriend who loves me truly," said one participant, tempered by realism about old-age care (Khan et al., 2020, p. 8). Ani Mangalore's journey from begging to owning autos symbolises aspiration: "One day, I'll own the autos people refused me" (The Better India, 2025).

#### 5. DISCUSSION

The findings illuminate a profound tension between India's cultural legacy of third-gender reverence—evident in ancient scriptures portraying Hijras as divine intermediaries and the structural violence that renders transgender lives precarious in contemporary society (Devakumar et al., 2020; Singh & Gupta, 2025). Identity formation emerges not as an isolated psychological process but as a relational struggle, where familial rejection acts as a catalyst for both trauma and community affiliation. Narratives like those from Uttarakhand and Kolkata reveal how early slurs and disownment fracture self-worth, yet propel individuals toward surrogate kinship networks, echoing intersectional theories of resilience amid oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Chakrapani et al., 2024). This duality underscores a critical insight: while legal milestones like NALSA affirm self-identification, they falter without cultural decolonisation, as colonial-era criminalisation under Section 377's shadow lingers in everyday microaggressions (Supreme Court of India, 2014). Economic and social exclusion, as quantified in the table, perpetuates a vicious cycle wherein transgender individuals are funnelled into informal economies like begging or sex work, heightening HIV vulnerabilities and intergenerational poverty (Niranjana et al., 2025; Kumar et al., 2023). Intersectionality amplifies this: Dalit transgender voices, such as Thirunangai's, expose how caste compounds gender-based erasure, with affirmative action under the 2019 Act often inaccessible due to bureaucratic hurdles like mandatory medical certification (The Transgender Persons [Protection of Rights] Act, 2019; Thirunangai, 2020). Personal stories like Alisha Patel's financial odyssey highlight the class dimensions, where transitions become luxuries for the few, while most endure untreated dysphoria (Patel, 2021). These barriers not only stifle economic agency but also erode social capital, as public space denials reinforce invisibility and heighten mental health burdens, with depression rates soaring to 33% in community samples (Ramachandran et al., 2025).

Yet, resilience threads through the narratives, manifesting in high self-esteem scores and spiritual coping mechanisms rooted in Vedic traditions (Niranjana et al., 2025; Singh & Gupta, 2025). The guruma-chela system's dual role—as nurturer and occasional enforcer of norms mirrors broader feminist critiques of chosen families in marginalised groups, offering emotional

scaffolding but demanding conformity (Swarnz, 2023). Healthcare inequities, while dire, reveal agency in hidden identities and community-led interventions, as seen in Noori Saleem's havens, which transform personal scars into collective healing (Maktoob Media, 2025). Community belonging, then, is not mere survival but a site of hope, where aspirations like Ani Mangaluru's auto empire challenge deficit models of transgender lives (The Better India, 2025).

These themes collectively critique the 2019 Act's implementation gaps: welfare boards remain underfunded, and anti-discrimination clauses lack teeth, leaving transgender individuals in a limbo of symbolic inclusion (Chakrapani et al., 2024). Implications span micro to macro levels. At the individual level, trauma-informed counselling integrating Ambedkarite empowerment could bolster identity affirmation (Thirunangai, 2020). Institutionally, sensitising curricula in schools and workplaces—drawing from Hijra cultural pride—might dismantle stigma (Khan et al., 2020). Policy-wise, amending the Act to eliminate medical gatekeeping and subsidise transitions aligns with NALSA's spirit, while transgender-led NGOs like those of Sunil Mohan R could drive enforcement (Queerbeat Media, 2025; Supreme Court of India, 2014). Future research should prioritise longitudinal ethnographies in rural settings and comparative analyses with global South contexts to track evolving post-policy trajectories, ensuring voices like those on X inform evidence-based advocacy (Sundar, 2022).

#### 6. CONCLUSION

Life beyond labels for transgender individuals in India weaves a resilient tapestry of profound pain, unyielding perseverance, and emergent possibilities, demanding not performative allyship but transformative solidarity. The narratives synthesised here—from the shadowed alleys of familial rejection to the defiant glow of community hearths—reveal that transgender existence is not a footnote in India's diversity but its vibrant chorus, echoing ancient reverence while confronting modern betrayals (Devakumar et al., 2020; Singh & Gupta, 2025). Legal strides like NALSA and the 2019 Act mark progress, yet their promise rings hollow without lived equity: enforced welfare, destigmatised healthcare, and economic ramps that honour rather than exploit (Supreme Court of India, 2014; The Transgender Persons [Protection of Rights] Act, 2019).

As Noori Saleem forges safe havens from her HIV-positive journey, or Ani Mangaluru steers autos toward dignity, these stories summon society to build bridges of genuine empathy—through education that celebrates Hijra legacies, policies that subsidize transitions without scrutiny, and cultural shifts that normalize transgender presence in boardrooms, buses, and bedrooms (Maktoob Media, 2025; The Better India, 2025). True inclusion requires dismantling the labels that confine, fostering spaces where identities bloom unapologetically. Let us listen, legislate, and love without limits, ensuring that "life beyond labels" is not a dream deferred but a reality reclaimed—for in affirming transgender lives, India reclaims its soul.



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