

Impact of COVID-19 on the Transgender Community in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh: Some Observations

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ABSTRACT

Tirupati is a big pilgrimage centre in Andhra Pradesh, India. Various kinds of people were coming over here for their survival. Likewise, approximately 300 transgender are residing here. These transgender are the most vulnerable and marginalized people in society. Most of them are school dropouts because they are evicted by their parents and ostracized by society. Due to these reasons, they were pushed into poverty. Attributable to Covid-19, the Government of India has announced a countrywide lockdown from March 23rd, 2020, which it would be extended up to May 31st, 2020, into four phases. During the first phase of the lockdown (21 days) itself, transgender realized the world's grave contagious situation of coronavirus and got panicked. In the second phase (19 days), all community members collected their earnings, spent money on cooking food, and distributed it to the migrant poor labourers and beggars, revealing their humanity.

Later they came to know the wide prevalence of the virus, and they did not expect the extension of the second phase of the lockdown. And finally, whatever the small savings they have earned through the begging, their jewellery and everything have all gone, and no money is left in their hands. Due to the lockdown, they restricted themselves from stepping out of their homes and ultimately lost their livelihood. Consequently, they developed health problems due to the impoverishment risks, health-related issues, and depression that went into miserable conditions. Ultimately, the situation came that they seek help from others. Transgender people are already born as misfortune, and this coronavirus added to rubbing salt on their wounds.

Keywords: Covid-19, Lockdown, Vulnerable, Marginalized people, Transgender Community.

Introduction

Tirupati is the 9th most popular city and biggest pilgrimage destination in Andhra Pradesh, India, and also has been selected as a Smart City to be developed under the 'Smart Cities Mission' by the Government of India. As of the 2011 Census, it had a population of 287,035. Here Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) is famous for Lord Sri Venkateswara or Lord Balaji. Many people are visiting not only from Andhra Pradesh but also from different parts of the world. Every day, on average, 60 thousand people visit this temple. The everyday income of this temple is nearly 10 million Indian rupees through offerings and other sources from the devotees. There are many temples in and around Tirupati of various deities. This place is not only famous for divine centers but also for various universities like Agricultural University, Veterinary University, Sri Venkateswara University, Sri Padmavati Mahila Viswavidyalayam, Rashtriya

Sanskrit Vidyapeeth, Sri Venkateswara Institute of Medical Sciences (SWIMS), and Vedic University, etc. Tirupati is famous for medical treatment and good hospital facilities for curing all diseases in the entire Rayalaseema Region (Chittoor, Kadapa, Kurnool, and Anantapur Districts). The hotel industry also plays a very vital role. Various hotels are being established for pilgrims, from luxury to basic hotels. In united Chittoor District, 2 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were also established, and thousands of young people got opportunities generated by international and national companies. There is good connectivity by road, railways, and airlines to different parts of the nation. An international airport is also established by the central government and connected to various parts of India as well as the world.

As said above, Tirupati has plenty of educational and employment opportunities for the people to survive here. That's why many people from different parts of India have come here and settled. Likewise, transgenders also came here for their survival.

The transgender community is generally known as "Hijras" in India. They are called by different names like Hijras, Kinnars, Shiv-Shaktis, Jogtas, Jogappas, Aradhis, Sakhi, etc. In the Telugu language, it is generally called 'Kojja Gallu.'

As per the (2011) census, there are over 480,000 transgender people in India. In April 2014, the Apex Court had, in response to a petition filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), recognized the "Third Gender," paving the way for reforms aimed at ending discrimination against the community and recognizing their rights. This judgment was followed by the Transgender Rights Bill, 2014, introduced by private member Tiruchi Siva and passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2015.

Care and Support—Vihan Project: It is a community-based organization (CBO) established in April 2018 in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. The President, Secretary, Treasurer, CBO members, Outreach Workers (ORWs), and Peer Counsellors are all community members (who are from the transgender community), except the technical team, like the Project Coordinator and Accountant, are non-community. The funds allocated by the HIV/AIDS Alliance India Global Fund link up and are supported by the National AIDS Control Society (NACO) and Andhra Pradesh State AIDS Control Society (APSACS).

CBO goals are prevention of HIV/AIDS in the Transgender community, improving health by giving medicine, nutrition, and psycho-social counseling, and providing government services to the Transgender community.

As per the records of the Care and Support – Vihan Project, in the Rayalaseema region, they have identified 300 transgenders; in Tirupati, they have registered only 55-60 people. Basically, they are divided into four categories as Begging/Basti (Traffic Signal Basti, Highway Basti, Tollgate Basti, Shop Basti, etc.). Sex workers/paid sex work, Blessing/Bhadai Group (giving the blessing to the newly born children, newly married couple, and shop opening ceremonies), and Dancing group, etc.

This lecture note is intended to present major socio-economic changes that happened in the Tirupati Transgender community during the Covid-19 pandemic period. The research collected data from October and November 2020 through the Transgender leaders (gurubhais), outreach workers, care and support officials, and conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with the Transgender community.

Pre-Covid-19 period Socio-Economic Conditions:

This community of people living in and around Tirupati, these people have to wander from Tirupati to Kadapa, Chittoor, Nellore, Renigunta, etc. due to their profession. Out of 60, 20 members are between the 18-25 age group, 30 members are between the 25-45 age group, and 10 members are between the 45-60 age group.

Mostly (18-25) age group transgender go for sex work/paid sex, and sometimes they even go Toll Gate for basti also; by 6 o'clock in the evening, they start with a group consisting of 4-5 people, hire a regular auto, and go to their sexual hotspots, and they return in and around early in the morning between 3-5 am. The range of earning money will be around 200-2000 rupees, and it depends on their customers.

The age group (25-45) transgender will go to Train Basti (they travel from Tirupati to Renigunta, Koduru, Rajampeta, Kadapa; Tirupati to Pakala, Chittoor, Tirupati to Puttur, etc.); sometimes they act as a bhadayi group also. They will travel 5-6 days a week, and on Sunday they will wash their clothes, go to the market, and purchase provisions and groceries for their daily needs & enjoy them in their homes with their grooms. Some of the TGs spend time with their life partners or boyfriends or customers and satisfy their luring things, and their routine works go on. Some of them will go for Traffic Signal Basti and Temple Basti.

The age group of (45-60) transgender do not go anywhere, and they just sit in their houses and cook food for their community members. The rest of the people will take care of their elders with their money. Occasionally they will go for blessings.

Before Covid-19, all the TG community members were happily leading their lives; they were participating in functions, ceremonies, and parties in huge numbers without any fear. They were traveling wherever they wanted to go without any restrictions. They were purchasing things like cosmetics, clothes, and ornaments and spending money lavishly. They don't bother for tomorrow. Each and every day they enjoy themselves with their community members. They react very rapidly when a problem comes to their community members, and they will take quick decisions. They are not permanent settlers. They can move or shift easily into big cities like Bombay, Vijayawada, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai, etc. They are showing much interest in Sexually Reassignment Surgery (SRS), Hormonal Therapy, laser treatment for the removal of body hair, and genital reconstructive surgery, etc. They want to transform completely into a woman. Once they transform, they would feel very happy and celebrate joyfully with their fellow mates.

After the Covid-19 Pandemic Situation:

The coronavirus disease pandemic has caused a lot of disturbances and threatened global public health. After the announcement of a countrywide lockdown for 21 days (lockdown phase 1 starting at midnight on March 24, 2020, until April 14, 2020) by the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, the entire nation was in shock. On April 14, 2020, the Government of India extended the countrywide lockdown until May 3 (phase 2). The lockdown was then extended again on May 1 by a further 2 weeks until May 17 (Phase 3). On May 17, the lockdown was extended by the National Disaster Management Authority until May 31 (Phase 4) (Livemint, 2020; Sharma et al., 2020a; Sharma et al., 2020b; Lancet, 2020; Tribune News Service, 2020). On May 30, it was announced that the continuing lockdown would be additionally extended up to June 30 in containment areas, with services resuming in a phased manner starting from June 8, 2020; this was termed 'unlock 1.0' (Sharma and Ghosh, 2020). The Indian Prime Minister later clarified that the lockdown period in the country had ended and that 'unlock' had already begun (The Hindu, 2020). The second phase of unlocking, 'unlock 2.0,' was declared for the period of July 1-31, with more easing of restrictions (Tiwary, 2020). This nationwide Covid-19 lockdown increased residential mobility as people remained in their places of residence. All services and shops, except pharmacies, hospitals, banks, grocery shops, and other essential services, remained closed during the lockdown period. Suspension of all nonessential, public, and private transport. The lockdown restricted people from going outside and self-arrested them in their homes.

In this community, people are the most vulnerable and have a lower level of immunity compared to the general population. On March 18th nearly 2000 people gathered in Kadapa town for the election of 4 district leaders from their community. It was a 3-day program (from 18th to 20th March 2020), and they spent 2 lakh rupees for celebrating this function. All the community members spent money on whatever they had during the function. After the completion of the function the very next day, Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi ji announced a 'Janatha Curfew' from 7 am to 9 pm Sunday, 22 March, to stop the spread of coronavirus. "On that day we were stuck in Kadapa with at most 300 people, and some of our chelas (a follower of a guru) and Nayakis (leaders) went by a different mode of transportation and reached their homes," said Hasini (Chittoor District Nayaki). After the Janatha Curfew, the Prime Minister continued a country-wide lockdown for 21 days in the first phase.

Hasini said that during the lockdown period we observed the situation for 10 days, and most of the poor people, migrant laborers, and beggars suffered a lot because of the complete lockdown. No necessary food & commodities were available, and they starved. We saw all the bitter situations through the news channels and social media, and we, the community people, collected whatever small savings we had and prepared food for 200 people. We prepared food like lemon rice, curd rice, vegetable rice, etc., and distributed it continuously for 16 days. We spent all the money completely; after that, we never expected the second phase of the lockdown, and it continued for 19 days. The researcher asked Hasini, why were you feeding the poor people? Then she replied, "Many times we were on empty stomachs; we know very well what is real hunger. That's why we want to see the happiness in poor people's faces by feeding them; that's enough for us.". Many laudable appreciations came from government officials. The district collector also appreciated their good work, and an article was also published in the local newspaper. After seeing the newspaper, one person came forward and donated 10 thousand Indian rupees voluntarily and asked us to spend this money on poor people. At that time, we felt very proud.

After that the real problems arose; all the money we spent had gone, no more money had left, and we stayed in empty hands. Now it's our turn; transgender people are the real sufferers, and we seek others for help. "We sold our jewellery for our survival," said Anu (leader of the Transgender community).

But at that time, the Care and Support Centre distributed provisions, groceries, and medicines. The government of Andhra Pradesh also gave each one 3000 rupees for our community. Commonly, the real tragedy is that out of 60 people, only 28 people have government identification cards like pension cards, ration cards, voter ID cards, and health cards. Because they are evicted by their parents and most of them are school dropouts, that's why they don't have any proof and are not eligible to apply for these cards. Hence, they are not getting any benefits from the government. They are really unfortunate and disadvantaged people.

Different political leaders, local rich people, and voluntary organizations distributed free rice and provisions for them during the lockdown period. Nevertheless, it was not sufficient because they want to pay the house rent, electricity bills, take medicines, and other essential needs.

Socio-Economic Changes:

Socioeconomic status measures the sociological and economic standing of an individual. It determines the socioeconomic position based on income, occupation, and health. Transgender are living in a poor condition and have very limited employment opportunities, and society also always discriminated against them. Most of the jobs are only for males and females. If the jobs are reserved only for the third gender, unfortunately, they don't have the qualifications to get that job and also have a lack of awareness. Although

the Transgender community is socially ostracized people. During the lockdown period, Transgender people stopped sex work/paid sex due to the coronavirus. They have participated only with their husbands and boyfriends. They don't entertain anyone, especially during the lockdown. All the shops closed, and obviously, all the ways of income have stopped. They approach pawnbrokers and money lenders for money to pay house rent, electricity bills, and other utility bills. Due to the lack of money, they went into depression; psychologically, they felt insecure. Hence, the transgender way of social life is completely changed. They adopted new things like washing hands, hand sanitization frequently, wearing a mask, avoiding sex work, taking nutritional food, herbal-rich foods, etc.

But it is a critical situation to maintain isolation/physical distance because most of the transgender community lives in slum areas and in tiny houses that comprise 2-7 people. It is difficult to maintain in such cramped rooms. They strictly followed the rules and recommendations that were given by the state government as well as the World Health Organization (WHO). There are 18 key leaders in the entire region, and they registered a separate WhatsApp group. And many of their chelas are also having separate WhatsApp groups; if any message is posted by a leader in the group, that message will circulate to all the groups. Transgender are also active on social media like Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter also. So that they know everything about the pandemic and spread the news to their followers.

In general, if the coronavirus attacks a mother, the son will abandon his mother. For that, if the husband got affected, the wife would abandon her husband. But if a transgender woman is affected by the coronavirus, the co-transgender person will abduct her mate alone. This is what the researcher observed in the study. COVID-19 has brought social ties stronger than in previous situations in the entire transgender community.

The Corona Virus Effect on the Transgender Community:

During the second phase of the lockdown, firstly, one transgender person was affected by the coronavirus, and later 4 people got affected. They have gone to the government quarantine centre themselves. In the quarantine centre, the government treated them very well without any discrimination. Transgender leader Anu told me, "Doctors and health care staff took care of us in a good manner; they didn't show any discrimination among us." But unfortunately, one transgender person, aged 60 years old, died because of the coronavirus. She was already HIV positive, and she was also an alcoholic and tobacco user. She was having low immunity, and that's why we lost her, said Regina (Transgender leader). She belongs to a Muslim community, and after her death, all the trans people collected money and performed her funeral ceremony as per the Muslim formalities/procedures. That shows strong unity among them. The rest were discharged from the hospital. Later, one by one, a total of 28 people got affected by COVID-19; they took treatment and were discharged from the hospital safely. After this incident, all the community people got frightened, and Regina said that "March, April, and May, these 3 months, were the worst situation in our lives; we faced a lot of difficulties and trials in our lives. We never faced this kind of bitter situation ever in our whole lifetime."

Out of 60 members, 23 transgender people are having HIV, 10 people are suffering from urinary tract infections, and most of them are alcoholics and tobacco users. Obviously, these people also faced a lot of difficulties during the pandemic period. In general, they have gone through viral fever, cough, and cold. Shanthamma, aged 60 years, suffers from kidney problems and arthritis. During the lockdown period, 4 people did Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS). Out of 4, one trans woman suffered from a urinary tract infection, and others had anal cancer, and she is taking proper medicine.

Suggestions and Conclusion:

- During the continuous 4 phases of lockdowns, transgender people lost their livelihood opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic situation, which left them vulnerable to unemployment and a miserable situation. They are a poor, forsaken wretch.
- The government has to issue identity cards like ration cards, voter cards, pension cards, health cards, etc., to all eligible transgender without any bias.
- The government has to sanction free housing facilities and provide medical facilities to the community.
- The government has to take care of them by providing employment opportunities and giving bank loans to uplift their economic development.
- People in society have to change their mind set on transgender. They have to treat them equally in society and shouldn't show any discrimination.
- The Ministry of Law, the Ministry of Social Justice, and state governments need to recognize the deprivation suffered by transgender people and work on much-needed reform. There is no conflict of interest.
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