

# IMPACT OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS ON TRANSGENDER COMMUNITIES IN KERALA

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**Abstract:** *This Paper discusses the impact of community-based organizations on Transgender Communities in Kerala. Community based organizations play a frontline role in fighting for the rights of transgender as a citizen of Kerala. CBOs cover a series of activities at the community level aimed at community development and community mobilization. They have a distinctive role as catalysts of social change. They are the instruments for establishing an identity and the legal recognition for collective endeavors. Another relevance of the CBOs is that they give courage and confidence for those who come out to claim their gender identity. Kerala has always been a step ahead when it comes to empowering and encouraging the transgender community. Most of the Initiatives of the Government are being with CBOs and they work as important linkage between the people at the grassroots level, the civil society and the state.*

**Key words:** *Transgender, CBO, Civil society.*

## Introduction

Kerala is one of India's most progressive states in terms of indicators of welfare and quality of life of people. The status of transgenders in Kerala should be taken into account while we assess the indicators in terms of to what extent we have achieved gender equality. In these days, attempts are being made to address the issues of transgender in Kerala than ever before. The state is proving that it is capable of going beyond prejudice through their transgender friendly policies and programmes. The general outlook of Kerala society which rests on false pride is intertwined with its morality notions. Kerala which ranks high in terms of literacy and development haven't had a mindset even to accommodate the transgenders in the state affairs before the year 2014. Upto this, Malayalees would understand their religious, legal and cultural consciousness only by confining themselves to the lens of gender binaries of men and women. Hence, many transgenders had to flee due to the gender insensitivity existed in the state. However, today changes are taking place gradually in terms of how we are looking at or perceiving transgender community. In the survey<sup>i</sup> conducted by the Social Justice Department of Kerala in 2015 in order to assess the number and status of transgenders in the state, it was revealed that, there are more than 25000 transgenders in Kerala. At present, Kerala is the first state in the country to develop an exclusive policy for the protection and promotion of transgenders. Indeed, it was the social discourses in the state and the relentless efforts of the transgender activists and CBOs that ultimately forced the Kerala government to initiate steps that finally resulted in the framing of a transgender policy<sup>ii</sup>.

## Transgender

The contemporary term "transgender" arose in the mid-1990s from the grass root community of the gender-different people. For the first time the word transgender was coined by Virginia Prince, a pioneer in the cross dresser movement in the United States in the 1970s (Valentine 2007; Stryker 2008; Bettcher 2009). By 1990s with growing activism and scholarship in the United States, the term transgender gained popularity. It was in the mid-1990s the term transgender started to be widely used. The term "transgender" is unsettled, but the term is generally used to refer to individuals whose gender identity or expression does not confirm to the social expectations for their sex assigned at birth (Currah, Juang & Minter, 2006).

'Transgender' is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity and gender expression does not confirm to the sex which they were assigned at birth. Transgenderism can be defined as the breaking of gender roles and gender identity and/or going across the boundaries of gender to another gender (Green, 2004). Transgenders differ widely in their degree of belief in the fluidity of gender identity.

## Community based organizations

Community based organizations cover a series of activities at the community level aimed at community development and community mobilization. According to Silverman, community based organizations are organized at a local level, within a community, as close as possible to the individuals they serve. A community based organization is an organization that provides social services at local level. It is a non-profit organization whose activities are based primarily on volunteer efforts. This means that CBOs depend heavily on voluntary contributions for labour, material and financial support. (Silverman, 2004)

Community based organizations are key to the capabilities of communities in responding to various risks and adapting to changing conditions. It helps communities to coordinate actions and take joint decisions. In addition, a community based organization is a foundation that enables local communities to voice and enforce their interests to influence the decision making process at higher level and to make the policy makers accountable.

Community based organizations have a distinctive role as catalysts of systems change. They are the instruments of establishing an identity and the legal recognition for collective endeavors. CBOs are the voice of the under-represented in society. Community development is the major objective of CBOs. Community development is a process of change from traditional way of living of rural communities to a progressive way of living; a method by which people can be assisted to develop themselves on their own capacity and resources; a program for accomplishing certain activities for the welfare of the rural people; a movement for progress with a certain ideological context. (Pieterse, 2001)

### Major role of community based organizations

- Engage in community development interventions in order to build capacity of community members.
- Socio-economic, educational and political empowerment of community members
- sustainable community development by promoting awareness among the people, providing skill development and capacity building, providing empowerment and encouraging
- Collaborate with the government schemes by mobilizing community members
- Provide relief and welfare services to alleviate the immediate suffering of the people
- Increased status, participation and powers of decision-making of Transgenders in the community and society
- Breaking cultural barriers to equal development of community members
- Raise key issues for the rest of society, serving as a conscience for the nation, advocates for change and sources of innovation and action

### Transgender community based organizations in Kerala

Transgender problem and suffering in India are multi-dimensional due to rigid gender binary system and sexual- gender discrimination. Kerala is one of the most developed states in India. In Kerala there are a number of CBOs working for sexual minorities including transgenders. CBOs are engaged in a variety of issues of community members like health, education, human right issues, legal issues, employment, community development etc., ensuring that the community members got their entitlement.

In Kerala, there are several CBOs which function among the sexual minorities, including the transgender community. The community, though in small numbers, marked its presence in Kerala during 1999-2000. Initially, they belonged to the MSM (Male Sex with Male) communities. Its limitation was that all sects were grouped under the same head. This created a barrier for the free existence of the community. A majority of the CBOs in existence today were established during or after 1999-2000. In Kerala, the naming and recognition of this community took place only in 2010. Separate projects and organizational setup for these communities also began in the same year. The Pehchan Project (2010) was the first of its kind to reach the transgender communities in Kerala. Most of the community based organizations in Kerala are working with trans-gender communities as part of the "Pehchan" projects that started in 2010.

### Pehchan Project

The "Pahachan was a five year project initiated in October 2010 focused on the efforts preventing AIDS among the sexual minorities including transgenders in 17 states in India including Kerala. In Kerala except 4 districts (Alappuzha, Vayanad, Idukki, Malappuram) in all other 10 districts, this project was implemented. The word "pehchan" means "recognition" or "identification" in Hindi. To facilitate the smooth functioning of the project, it is imperative to find these sections in Kerala. Identifying these sections in Kerala was indispensable for the effective implementation of the project. This is possible only by those organizations within the community. It is from this realization that many CBOs were formed in Kerala and existing ones were considered for the implementation of projects. Interventions by such organizations have helped to create an active working environment within the community and to integrate community members. The organizational structure of all the organizations that was formed as part of the Pehchaan project was of great importance to community members. Most of the community members included the Director, Project Manager, Councilor, Outreach Workers, Peer Educators, and community members. This has helped to create an organizational leadership in community members, and to promote mutual correlation. Community members who are scattered across parts of Kerala are a squirt.

### Security Project

Suraksha Project, implemented in 2012 under the authority of Kerala State AIDS Control Board Society, also came into effect through CBOs. Its aim was to prevent and control the spreading of HIV/AIDS among the sexual minorities. The currently active CBOs in Kerala evolved out of the activities of the two above mentioned projects.

### Major community based organizations working among transgender in Kerala

There are a number of CBOs in Kerala have been playing a vital role in sexual minority including transgenders, besides government interventions. Because they realized that the government alone was not able to meet the challenges of transgender community issues. CBOs in Kerala were effectively works towards uplifting the socio-economic status of transgender community.

Sexual Gender Minority Forum Kerala- SMFGK (Trivandrum) Malabar Cultural Forum-MSF (Kozhikode), Snehatheeram (Kannur), Voice (Thrissur), Kshema (Kasaragod), Swanthanam (Pathanamthitta), Marvel (Ernakulam), Sahayi (Pathanamthitta), Love land Arts Society (Kollam), OASIS (Trivandrum), Querrytham (Trivandrum) and Dwaya (Ernakulam) are some of the community based organizations for the welfare of transgenders.

### Influence of Community Based Organizations (CBO) among the transgender community in Kerala

CBOs play a major role in making of transgender friendly environment in Kerala. Nowadays, Kerala have a very visible transgender community. Community based organizations play a leading role in the rights protection rights of trans-gender in Kerala. These organizations are aimed at social interactions and activities aimed at community development, community mobilization / coordination. The activities of such organizations have helped to shift the tender gender that prevailed in Kerala in the face of adverse social change. And act as a tool to ensure and enable the social identity and legal recognition of trans-gender through joint efforts. They have been able to bring community members the courage and trust they need to claim their moral identity and bring them to mainstream society. Major impact of Community Based organizations on transgender community are as follows:

### ❖ **Visually created the Transgenders in Kerala**

The CBOs have played a vital role in bringing the transgender community to the social fore, those who has been oppressed and hence forced to migrate to other states. These organizations induced in the community members the need to unite in order to bring a social transformation. CBOs have also carried out the praiseworthy role of fostering the capability of the minority to launch protests against inequality. These organizations also protest against laws and government policies that are not trans-friendly.

### ❖ **Activities for social equality and protection of rights**

The organizations have been involved in active interventions for social gender equality and protection of the rights of community members. The Transgender Survey in Kerala and the State Transfer Gender Policy in 2015 was the result of continuous work and pressure from the government. The organizations give priority to quarrels with those who deny equality.

### ❖ **Working for changes in the existing social structure**

The system theory associated with community organization focuses attention on the changes in existing society structure. To put in other terms, it holds that to ensure community protection, a reformation of the existing deep-rooted social systems and gender concepts is necessary. CBOs were helpful in reviving the identity of transgender in a society which is setup on dual gender concept (male and female). Such organizations have also taken initiatives to conduct advocacy programs and open forums for health providers, journalists, advocates, police officers and leaders of local self-governing bodies (district panchayat leaders). This has been beneficial in creating awareness about the community, bringing them under legal service and protection, ensuring social recognition and health protection, and minimizing discrimination.

'Pushpak – 2015', the one-day tour program from Kollam to Thiruvananthapuram, organized by Love Land Arts Society (LAS) is an example for this initiative. Its aim was to minimize social isolation of transgender. 27 members from the community participated in the tour program, aimed at creating awareness about the discriminations faced by the community members in public spaces, especially in the public transport system. Events like fashion shows organized in Kerala by CBOs like Oasis and Dhwaya were strong enough in questioning the existing social setup and empowering the transgender community.

### ❖ **Enable community members to recognize and approve their identity**

The role of CBOs is central in making the members of transgender community realize their individuality by giving proper awareness concerning their physical and mental state. Such organizations also spread awareness that their personality is not a state of illness and that they too have equal claim to the fundamental rights of an Indian citizen. CBOs lift them back to life from the darker pits of rejection and oppression. The main reason for the migration of transgender communities into other states was the prevalence of discrimination and isolation based on gender identity, along with lack of self-awareness. As a result of the incessant efforts by the CBOs, the transgender in Kerala have become capable enough to claim their rights.

CBOs play a major role in protecting the rights of transgender communities. They aim at community development and organization through social interference and other activities. These activities paved way to minimize the social adversities faced by the transgender communities. These organizations have played a pivotal role in ensuring the social identity and legal approval of these communities. They have succeeded in bringing this minority community to the social mainstream through motivation.

### ❖ **Organize cultural interventions and debates**

Constant interactions with the society foster people's awareness about transgender, which will ensure a better recognition for this minority group. Similarly, by raising the humanistic view of the problems faced by this marginalized section, CBOs provide ample platform for interactions between transgender and people from all walks of life. Such interactions help in resolving the false assumptions about the minority and thereby reduce homophobia. The debate, discussions and cultural events organized by the CBOs and proper interference through visual and social media have familiarized the face of transgender community in Kerala.

Effective measures by the CBOs are crucial in making the dual gender based society (based on male and female genders) broader enough to accept the third category of transgender as well. Lack of social acceptance and funds are detrimental to the existence of such organizations. The shutdown of Pehchan Project caused the closure of many other organizations. As a social minority, it is high time that the transgender unite to claim their rights and equality as enjoyed by their fellow citizens, which is proclaimed in the Indian Constitution. Only if the community members move ahead together with unfaltering steps, keeping at bay all internal conflicts, can they ensure their own rights as citizens of India and sustain independently.

### **Conclusion**

Each community based organization represents the anxieties, responses and responsibilities of the marginalized communities in a society. They are the ones that really intend to care the transgender community at the bottom of social stratum. Besides government interventions, a number of CBOs in Kerala have been playing a vital role in transgender community, with the realization that the government alone is not able to meet the challenges of this community's development. Therefore, transgender communities in Kerala require these types of committed and efficient organizations to protect their rights and maintaining gender equality. So, the government, activists, politicians, academic community should support these organizations for achieving their goals.

<sup>i</sup> The Social Justice Department of Kerala conducted a transgender survey as a pre-requisite of the Transgender Policy 2015 to understand the situation of transgender population in the state with respect to access to education, livelihood, hospitals, psychological well-being, etc. it was revealed that, there are more than 25000 transgenders in Kerala.

<sup>ii</sup> Kerala was the first to introduce a state policy for transgender community in 2015. It is for the protection and promotion of transgenders. The policy covers all the categories of TGs, including male to female TGs and intersex people. It also emphasizes the rights of the minority group to self-identify themselves as man, woman or TG as stated in the Supreme Court judgment. It also ensures them equal access to social and economic opportunities, resources and services, right to equal treatment under the law, right to live life without violence and equitable right in all



decision making bodies. It also recommends the setting up of a TG Justice Board with state Minister for Social Justice as its chairperson. The body will monitor and oversee the implementation of the policy and have Social Justice Secretary as its Member-Secretary and secretaries of various departments as members.

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