

Beyond the Brinks: Social Attitude towards the Third Gender Community of Assam and Nagaland


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Social attitude, according to the American Psychological Association, refers to "a person's general disposition or manner toward other people" which can be "friendly or hostile". History reruns factuality of the dominant who mostly are the privileged people/groups. They face friendly attitude from society at large, while the marginalized are the underprivileged ones, who mostly face hostile attitude from society. The Third Gender community is one of those marginalized categories who face negative attitude from society. Under the backdrop, it was sought to take up this study which is part of a larger project. Based on interviews from third gender people of Assam and Nagaland, conducted through snowball sampling method, the research was conducted. The primary data so analysed using mixed methods of research, suggests that majority of the third genders from the two states have faced unfriendly and unpleasant social attitude. Hence, I argue that such attitude further propels the third gender community outside the brinks of society, which in place of inclusion enhances the gap towards exclusion. It is essential to minimise this gap so as to reach the ideals of social justice.

Keywords: social attitude, third gender, hostile, social justice

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1. Introduction

Gender diverse people have been called by different names throughout the world. The common terms used are gender queer, gender fluid, gender neutral, transgender, transwomen, transexual, transvestite, *Hijra*, *Kotis*, *Kinnar*, "panthis, *jogappa* (Karnataka), *jogta* (Maharashtra), *shivshaktsis* and *ganacharis* to describe themselves" (Babar, 2016, p. 71; Kumar, 2014, p. 8). Intersex, however, is used for a person who has taken birth "with both male and female genitalia, or genitalia that are not clearly male or female" (Glossary of Gender and Transgender Terms, 2010, p. 9). As it happened in the case of few respondents of Assam that "the situation remain unclear until adolescence when either the individual remains unsuccessful to develop assured secondary sex attributes, or establishes some unassured attributes (Glossary of Gender and Transgender Terms, 2010, p. 9; Nanda, 1999, p. 169; Sutradhar, 2020, p. 121). For the present study, however, the term, 'third gender' have been used given the fact that this particular term was used by the Supreme Court while giving recognition to the gender diverse people. According to judges Radhakrishnan and Sikri, "hijras and eunuchs can legally identify as third gender" (NALSA vs The Union of India, AIR 2014 SC 1863).

2. Review of Literature

Several authors have written on the situation of third genders and transgenders in the world. When it comes to the Indian subcontinent, researches have been conducted on the status of third genders in Bangladesh and Pakistan, along with India. While Adnan Hossain (2022) has been a prominent name in researching third genders of Bangladesh; Serena Nada is one of the earliest researchers in case of India. Hossain, Claire Pamment, & Jeff Roy in the book entitled *Badhai, Hijra-Khwaja Sira-Trance Performance across Borders in South Asia* (2022) have discussed on the badhai, the way of earning livelihood by Hijras in Indian subcontinent, Jessica Hinchy's *Deviant Domesticities and Sexualised Childhoods: Prostitutes, Eunuchs and the Limits of the State Child "Rescue" Mission in Colonial India* (2014) and *Governing Gender and Sexuality in colonial India, c. 1850-1900* (2019) are much acclaimed works in India. There are several works from the scholars of West Bengal which includes Ajay Majumder, Niloy Basu, Swapnomoy Chakraborty and so on.

Ajay Majumdar And Rabin Tarafder's *A scientific aspect of Transgenders* (2019), Swapnomoy Chakraborty's *Holde Golap* and the recently published books like *Transgenders In India: An Introduction* (2023) by Veerendra Mishra and *Embedding Subversion And Gender Identity: "Ulti" The Secret Language Of The Hijra-Koti Community* (2024) by Enakshi Nandi are worthwhile. While these texts provide an outlook on different aspects of the Third gender Lives, the Hijra or Third Gender autobiographies do employ the ground showing the real life experiences of gender deviant people. Some of the recently published memoirs include like Sasindran Kallinkeel (2021); Kalki Subramaniam (2022); Akkai PadmaShali (2022); B. Manjamma Jogathi (2023); Santa Khurai (2023) which shows the life journey of third genders in different parts of India. Santa Khurai's *The Yellow Sparrow* is a memoir from Northeast India where Khurai, a transgender from manipur talks of her journey as a makeup artist and how negative social attitude had eventually pushed her to become a drug addict. In the light of literatures as such present from other states, it is very important to know the lives of third genders in Northeast India which constitutes gap for the research. Hence, this study was sought to address the prevalent gap in research.

3. Research Methodology

The present study have been conducted using personal interviews of third gender people in Assam and Nagaland. Field surveys were conducted through snowball sampling method. The primary data so collected from 83 respondents from Assam and Nagaland, was analysed using mixed methods of research with both qualitative and quantitative data. Jamovi was used to analyse quantitative data. Secondary sources were also used wherever essential, to interpret the data and present findings.

Figure 1: Map of Northeast India



(<https://www.surveyofindia.gov.in/documents/uploads/document-84485-north-east-map.jpg>). In the public domain.

4. Gender Deviant People in the Tribal and Non-Tribal Society of Northeast India: A Comparison

Assam and Nagaland are two of the states from Northeast India. Assam, the largest of all the states of Northeast India is a homeland of not only tribal communities but non-tribal communities alike which includes Bengalis, Biharis and Marwaris. Nagaland has a different picture. While Dimapur, the largest city of Nagaland has several tribal and non-tribal communities, with a majority of tribal Naga community, the rest districts of Nagaland is predominantly inhabited by Naga population with a meagre population of other communities. The demographic composition of Dimapur shows that it is a mixture of different communities given the fact that the city is a major business hub of Nagaland. The present research found that there is difference in attitude towards the third genders among different communities, but it is mixed across the tribal and non-tribal communities. The findings are based on interviews of third genders across the districts of Assam and Nagaland. Many respondents, who themselves are from the Assamese community,

stated that the Assamese community is very conservative, and they have faced rejection from their community the most. While, acceptance level is less with the Bengalis, Bihari and Marwaris accept them more. Kinnars/hijras are most respected and accepted in the Marwari community. Most of the respondents who do Toli badhai have had a good experience with the Marwaris.

Contrasting to Assam, Nagaland society is extremely conservative; there is no gender diversity. Because majority of them are Christian and according to the holy book of Christianity (Bible) there is no acceptance for the third-genders. Trans people were present in early naga age as mentioned by one of the respondents'. The respondent, who identify as a transgender, have known about the presence of trans people, from older generation people. At the times, some people took birth with both male and a female organ, so from that time only. Cross-dressing was not allowed in earlier times. There, the third-gender are not allow to enter the Church, due to non-acceptance of their gender identity. Rejection of transgender in church not only stops with the transgender but is also extended to her mother and family. In church they face verbal and mental harassment, leading to poor mental health status. Due to mental harassment, many transgenders commit suicide. It so happened one time, that one Naga tantrik wore women's clothing and one day some army men caught him and tried to reveal whether he is a man or a woman, and sexually harassed the tantrik. In Naga society, cross-dressing is strictly prohibited, even the family would not talk to them if they cross-dress. In many cases, the transgender people of Nagaland join the hijra community to survive. According to Mamta, a respondent from Dimapur, one incident happened last year. There was an occasion and they wore local naga traditional dress. Due to this cross-dressing, the local naga people, threatened them to kill, if they further wear their dress. They also told, the hijra community people to leave Dimapur within three days. This, largely provides picture of differentiation in social acceptance of third genders among different tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam and Nagaland.

5. Beyond the Brinks/At the Core

Levels of Social Attitude toward the Third Gender Community

Social attitude, refers to “a person’s general disposition or manner toward other people” which can be “friendly or hostile” (Official website of American Psychological Association). In order to understand the social acceptance level of Third Gender people in Assam and Nagaland, the respondents were asked questions regarding discriminatory attitude in several public spheres like retail stores, vehicles, hospitals, hotels etc; their participation in social occasions in the neighborhood, visit to religious places, and data were collected on the issue of social inclusion/exclusion along with social attitude. Data reveals that, majority of respondents have faced discriminatory attitude in retail stores. With a percentage of 37.35%, they have felt a sense of social exclusion in retail stores (Figure 2); they have heard people make negative comments, and at certain times, the store owner watches them with suspicion, as if they might steal things. This is followed by hostile attitude from police personnels or Railway Police Force (RPF). The security officers who are employed to protect and safeguard citizens are, according to around 28% (27.71%) of third gender people, engaged in negative attitude of some sort, which ranges from passing comments to asking for sexual favours. When carefully watched, it has been found that the respondents from Nagaon district (9.639%, Table 1) reported of negative attitude from police and RPF to the maximum. A district-wise distribution of respondent’s answers reveals that the second highest percentage of reported hostile attitude from police and RPF are from Lumding town located at Hojai district of Assam. Contrasting to this, respondents from Tinsukia district haven’t reported of any such kind of attitude. In Nagaland, a very small proportion of respondents from Dimapur (1.205%, Table 1) did answer in affirmative when asked about discriminatory attitude from security people. This category of occupational personels apart, public vehicles hit the next level from the top of hierarchy. Thus, standing close to 27.71%, a percentage of 26.5% (Figure 2) of respondents remarked that they faced uncooperative attitude from people in public vehicles like buses, auto-rickshaw and totos.

This was followed by a gloom ridden picture in other sectors also, which includes hotels and restaurants; hospitals and doctors chamber; and officials working at government offices as well as judicial officers. It is to be mentioned here that government offices, here, means the public offices like municipality, panchayat office and the like. Thus, 16.87% of respondents have experienced social exclusion at hotels. Majority of transgender individuals avoid going to hotels or restaurants in the first place, due to the fear of discrimination and mainly because of financial constraints, as they cannot afford such places. While 14.45% reported having experienced forms of social exclusion during a hospital visit, 84.33% have not experienced any issue of social exclusion there. 12.04% of respondents reported experiencing social exclusion or issue when interacting with government officers, while 86.74% did not. The 12.04% respondents who experienced exclusion highlight a concerning issue as government officers are expected to provide equal service to everyone regardless of gender, age, caste or creed. 13.25% reported having experienced social exclusion while interacting with judicial officer, while 83.13% respondents have not and 3.61% remained unsure. Thus, experiences of social exclusion varied across context, with government officials having the lowest rate of reported exclusion while retail store with the highest rate of reported exclusion.

Figure 2: Discrimination faced by third gender people in Assam and Nagaland at different spheres

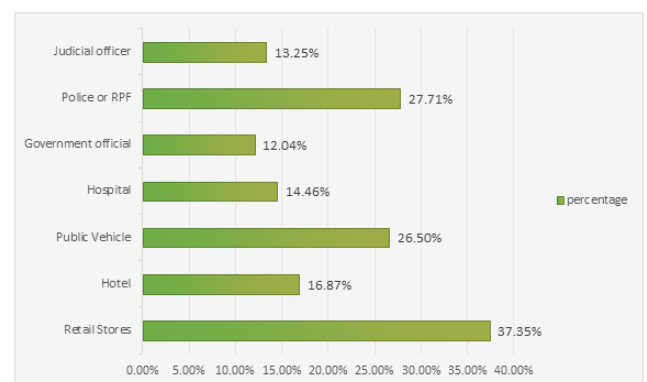


Table 1: Negative Attitude from police and RPF

Police	Place	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	Dimapur	1	1.205%	1.205%
	Guwahati (Kamrup M.)	5	6.024%	7.229%
	Nagaon	8	9.639%	16.867%
	Tinsukia	0	0.000%	16.867%
	Cachar	2	2.410%	19.277%
	Hojai	7	8.434%	27.711%
No	Dimapur	11	13.253%	40.964%
	Guwahati (Kamrup M.)	23	27.711%	68.675%
	Nagaon	1	1.205%	69.880%
	Tinsukia	15	18.072%	87.952%
	Cachar	5	6.024%	93.976%
	Hojai	4	4.819%	98.795%
Cant say	Dimapur	0	0.000%	98.795%
	Guwahati (Kamrup M.)	1	1.205%	100.000%
	Nagaon	0	0.000%	100.000%
	Tinsukia	0	0.000%	100.000%
	Cachar	0	0.000%	100.000%
	Hojai	0	0.000%	100.000%

6. Types of Abuses

Third Gender people of Assam and Nagaland face unpleasant attitude from different segment of people in society. It is evident from the data so found from respondents of several districts of the two states of Northeast India. But then, the question arises about what are the various types of unpleasant behaviour they face? What kind of negative social attitude is considered as exclusionary or unpleasant? In search of answers thus, they were asked questions regarding the nature of the negativity in social attitude. The data so found revealed that ranging from comments and verbal abuses to severe physical assaults were the very nature of discriminatory and hostile attitude faced by the third gender community of Northeast India. However, the only difference lies in the percentage and frequency of such acts of unpleasant behaviour and attitude.

Comments: The frequency table for comments (83 counts) shows that majority of respondents (transgender individuals) 47 counts (56.6%) selected "No" indicating they have not experienced comments related to their gender identity or because them being a transgender/gender non-confirming and 34 respondents (41.0%) selected

"Yes", confirming that they have faced comments, together comprising 97.6% of the sample. The "Don't know" response for comments is low with only 2 counts (2.4%). This split in responses suggests varying social interaction and experiences of transgender individuals.

Table 2: Frequency Table of Comment

Frequencies of comment			
Comment	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	34	41.0%	41.0%
No	47	56.6%	97.6%
Don't know	2	2.4%	100.0%

Verbal Harassment: The frequency table for verbal harassment (83 counts) shows that the majority of respondents (transgender individuals) 60 counts (72.3%) fall into the second category, indicating that they have not face verbal harassment, while 21 respondents (25.3%) fall into the first category, confirming that they have faced verbal harassment, together comprising 97.6% of the sample. Only two respondents (2.4%) fell into the third category, unwilling to share their experiences.

Table 3: Frequency Table of Verbal Abuse

Frequencies of verbal harassment			
Verbal Harassment	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	21	25.3%	25.3%
No	60	72.3%	97.6%
Unwilling to reveal	2	2.4%	100.0%

Threats: The frequency table for threats (83 counts) shows that the majority of respondents (transgender individuals), 80 counts (96.4%), selected "No", indicating that they have not received or experienced threats. Only one respondent (1.2%) selected "yes", confirming that they have faced threats based on their gender identity. And two respondents (2.4%) chose not to reveal.

Table 4: Frequency Table of Threats

Frequencies of Threats			
Threats	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	1	1.2%	1.2%
No	80	96.4%	97.6%
Unwilling to reveal	2	2.4%	100.0%

Sexual Violence: The frequency table for sexual violence (83 counts) shows that highest number of respondents (transgender individual) 79 counts (95.2%), fall into the second category, selected "No" indicating that they have not experienced sexual violence.

The first and third category represent 2.4% with 2 counts each, those who have experienced sexual violence and those unwilling to reveal, respectively.

Table 5: Frequency Table of Sexual Violence

Frequencies of sexual violence			
Sexual Violence	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	2	2.4%	2.4%
No	79	95.2%	97.6%
Unwilling to reveal	2	2.4%	100.0%

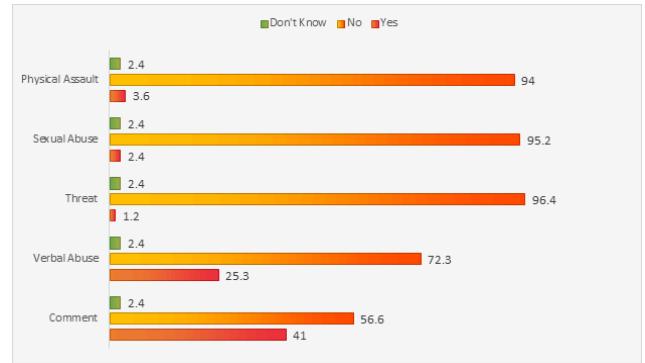
Physical Assault and Violence: The frequency table for physical assault (83 counts) shows that majority of respondents with 94.0% (78 counts), fall into the second category, indicating no experiences of physical assault. The first category with 3.6% (3 counts) represents those who have experienced physical assault, and the third category with 2.4% (2 counts) represents those unwilling to disclose. This highlights that physical assault is rare within the sample, the small percentage unwilling to share suggest sensitivity around the issue.

Table 6: Frequency Table of Physical Assault

Frequencies of physical_assault			
Physical_assault	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	3	3.6%	3.6%
No	78	94.0%	97.6%
Unwilling to reveal	2	2.4%	100.0%

Discussion: A detailed analyses of various types of abuses reveals that comments (Figure 3) are the most frequently occurring types of abuse. The third gender people of Assam and Nagaland face comments which unveils suspicion along with a sense of negativity. This comes with the fact, as perceived by society as a whole, that although many of the third gender people have physical attributes of one sex, their attitude and gender role reflects nature of another sex. For instance, a hijra, although look mostly as male, get dressed up as a female showing characters of femininity with a layer of masculine physical attributes,. This happens untill any hormonal changes or sex reassignment surgery is done to the external body. This deviation from the prescribed gender norms is not acceptable to majority of the people in society who have, by dint of patriarchal norms, have internalized the factuality of the presence of binary male and female sexes in society which must align to their gender identity. Any sort of deviation is thus rejected. Thus, instead of being placed at the core, the third gender community are pushed to the margins.

Figure 3: Various Types of Abuse faced by Third Gender people in Assam and Nagaland



7. Homelessness

Another very important aspect to understand whether a person or community is at the core or the brinks is whether they have the three basic needs of life which are preliminary to a person living in a place. Food, shelter and clothing-the three basic needs of a person. So, coming to the second basic need, that is, shelter, third gender community have always faced problems finding a shelter which can serve as an umbrella over their head at times of extreme hot and cold, good and bad weather, thieves and dacoits, police and people. Such is the necessity of a shelter in a person’s life which has always been denied to the gender deviant people. Thrown out of their homes, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, they begin their search for a shelter and family, where they can not only find a home to stay but also a family to share their feelings with. Data (Figure 4) suggests that a majority of 56.09% respondents have experienced homelessness, of which, 46.34% respondents are from Assam and 9.75% from Nagaland (Table 7). One person was unwilling to share so the data has been analysed with N=82, instead of N=83. The high rate of homelessness among transgender individuals in Assam and Nagaland is a critical issue.

Figure 4: Rate of Homelessness among Third gender Community

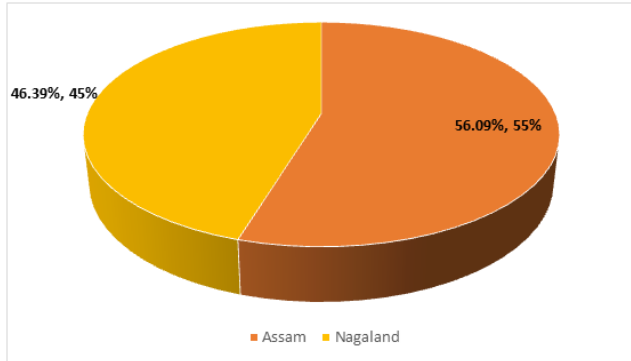


Table 7: Third-gender experience of homelessness

Frequencies of homelessness				
Homelessness	State	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	Assam	38	46.341%	46.341%
	Nagaland	8	9.756%	56.098%
No	Assam	32	39.024%	95.122%
	Nagaland	4	4.878%	100.000%

8. Participation in Socio-cultural Events and Institutions

“A human rights-based approach recognizes that exclusion, marginalization, inequality, and discrimination deprive people of their right to dignity and equality. Inclusion means recognizing that every individual is an integral member of society and can participate meaningfully. Inclusion is the first condition for participation”-Equitas; International Centre for Human Rights education.

As noted by the centre for human rights education, inclusion/exclusion means participation along with the fact that a person/community is part and parcel of a society. It is very essential to understand the inclusion/exclusionary pattern of the third gender people in social and cultural events of the fraternity because it will help to recognize their stance in society, the kind of attitude they face from humankind and their readiness to obtain power, property and material possession. Hence, it was sought to first understand their stance in the neighbourhood. Respondents were asked questions regarding their participation in social and cultural events of their locale which includes marriage, festivals and parties and programs. Majority of them revealed that they don't attend ceremonies such as marriage or pujas or any other cultural events in their neighbourhood;

many times, they are not invited, or when they are, they refuse to go as they cannot go as transgender people, thus only 34.94% reported having attended ceremonies in their locale. None from Nagaland have attended any ceremony in their neighbourhood. They are not invited to weddings or any other cultural events, because of the conservative nature of their society in Nagaland. In religious places, 74.69% respondents visit temples or mosques, while 25.30% don't visit any such place. The primary reason for not visiting the mosque is that only males are allowed inside. And in church, transgender people are not welcomed. Thus, they prefer not to visit, or when they do, they go dressed as a man. The high rate of social exclusion in religious places surpasses social exclusion in all other context.

Table 8: Third-gender participation in cultural event and ceremonies in neighbourhood

Frequencies of Cultural Event and Ceremonies			
Cultural Event	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	29	34.940%	34.940%
No	54	65.060%	100.000%

Field Survey 2024, 2025

Table 9: Third-gender visit to temple or mosques

Frequencies of Participation in Temples or Mosque			
Temples or Mosque	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	62	74.699%	74.699%
No	21	25.301%	100.000%

Field Survey 2024, 2025

Table 10: Discriminatory Attitude of priest, visitors or temple authorities towards third gender people

Frequencies of Discriminatory Attitude in Religious Place				
Attitude in Religious Place	State	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Yes	Assam	22	26.506%	26.506%
	Nagaland	9	10.843%	37.349%
No	Assam	49	59.036%	96.386%
	Nagaland	3	3.614%	100.000%

Field Survey 2024, 2025

Interpretation

Finally, the situation of third genders can be summed up in certain points.

- 1) Nagaland society is extremely conservative due to the acceptance of binary male female in Bible, the holy book of Christianity.
- 2) Social acceptance of third genders is more in the Marwari community.

3) Verbal abuse and comments are the frequently occurring problems faced by third genders in Assam and Nagaland.

4) Temples have more inclusiveness compared to other religious places.

5) The high rate of homelessness among transgender individuals is a critical issue in the region.

6) Third Genders of Nagaland are more harassed compared to those of Assam. In Nagaland, Dimapur society is bit more inclusive compared to other districts of the state.

9. Conclusion

History suggests, Third Gender people have faced negative attitude from society at different time periods. However, it is only after colonial period, that third genders of the Indian subcontinent have overwhelmingly faced rejection from society. Jessica Hinchy have very nicely portrayed their status during the British rule in India in her notable book. Since then, till the recognition of Third Gender people by the Supreme court of India in 2014, the status of these group of gender deviant people remain worse. Although, after that, nothing has changed much, but many of the third gender people have regained faith over the judicial system and government of India, as we understand from primary data (negative attitude minimum from government officials at 12.04%). Yet, there are miles to go because as we find from several books that status of transgender people is bad in India. And in Northeast India, as the data suggest, third gender people have faced rejection from society. They aren't at the core but, rather are, situated beyond the brinks.

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