

The Political Participation of the Transgender Community in Kerala: Rights, Accessibility, and Activism

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This brief report examines the political exclusion of the transgender community in Kerala and factors impeding trans people's inclusion in electoral politics. The report's main argument is that the political exclusion of the trans community in Kerala is an extension of their socio-economic exclusion. Cultural and social exclusion, institutional or structural barriers, lack of identification documents, lack of awareness about the right to vote, lack of money and resources, violence, and discrimination are some of the factors that hamper the political participation of trans people. This report also showcases some possible recommendations for change that would increase the political inclusion of transgender people in Kerala.

KEYWORDS electoral participation; political exclusion; trans community; Kerala

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A democratic political system allows all citizens to participate in decision-making and neither denies nor capitulates to a particular group. Nevertheless, various minority groups are excluded from the Indian political system (Kumar and Rai 2007; Roluahpuia 2018). This exclusion is mainly based on identity markers, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, or property ownership. It is only due to struggle by diverse groups and constituencies that democracy, in practice, has expanded to include the demands and rights of non-elites. Transgender people are a marginalized and vulnerable community in India. It is difficult to understand discrimination and inequality in the transgender community by focusing on a single axis of gender identity. It must be examined and explored through an intersectional lens, wherein people's multiple identities collide. In his work, Rahul Rao (2020) draws connections between trans and lower-caste Dalits critiquing backwardness in India. Transphobia structurally depends on caste oppression in a historical sense (Rao 2020). Indian society is incredibly multi-layered, with class and caste divides, meaning that the inequality and abuse faced by gender

minorities differ due to the intersection of these categories. In India, gender violence is a gender-related crime and a combined effect of other factors, including caste, class, and religion. A hierarchy based on caste, class, and geographical location separates trans communities across India, and they experience varying degrees of abuse and marginalization.

One of India's most prominent Dalit trans activists, Grace Banu, points out that writers neglect cis-Brahmanical patriarchy's adverse and discriminatory effect on transgender persons. Transgender individuals fight for their rights and survival in a society organized by patriarchal and caste binaries. Banu links the discrimination that victimizes transgender persons to the cis-Brahmanical patriarchal order, which views sex work and begging as taboo rather than a form of labour. Finally, Banu argues that cis-Brahmanical patriarchy is responsible for notions of "purity" and "pollution" that surround the idea of morality in our society and distort socioeconomic power structures to disadvantage Dalit transgender persons (Banu 2018). Banu points out that the OBC classification and reservation of transgender people mentioned in the NALSA judgment do not do justice to the intersectional caste group within the community. Banu demands horizontal reservations for trans people based on their intersectional identity. The transgender community has caste divisions; for example, a transgender person could also be Dalit. This raises the need for reservations to recognize these intersectional and multiple marginalizations and cut across caste categories. Horizontal reservation ensures this need is recognized. This argument highlights the need for the transgender community to be treated as a separate class within existing reservation slabs (Banu 2022).

It has taken 70 years for India, the world's largest democracy, to realize and recognize that trans people have the right to vote on their gender identity. India had 908,717,791 registered voters in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. Out of this, a total of 470,925,902 (51.8%) were male voters, 437,752,919 (48.1%) female voters, and only 38,970 (.0042%) transgender voters. Political communication between citizens and government is possible only through electoral participation, adequate representation, strategic negotiations, protests, discussions, debates, etc. The lack of political involvement of transgender people is evident in every Indian state. This report argues that the poor political participation of the trans community in India is an extension of their socio-economic exclusion. Compared to other Indian states, Kerala is one of the states that introduced progressive measures for trans people. The study analyzes the political participation of trans people and the factors impeding their political participation in Kerala.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is descriptive and analytical, using available books, interviews with trans voters and candidates, media reports, and academic writings. Since the study happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher conducted interviews over the phone. When names for interviewees are provided, names have been changed to protect participants.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN KERALA

In the public sphere of Kerala, an Indian state known for its admirable Human Development Index score, transgender people have historically been invisible. Kerala is the most literate state in India, with a literacy level of over 93.91% compared to the national literacy rate of 74% as per the 2011 census (Know India, n.d.). However, despite some of its exceptional characteristics, persistent male dominance, social stigma, and heteronormativity are evident. Public perceptions of the hijra¹ community outside Kerala, as well as patriarchal and heteronormative gender norms, phobia, and social stigma prevailing in Kerala society, led to their social exclusion (Krishna 2018). After the Supreme Court verdict (NALSA v. Union of India, 2014) on transgender people, discussions and social interactions in the community have become active in Kerala's public sphere. The struggles of transgender community members, the intervention of community-based organizations, print, and visual media reports, and the positive support of the government have catalyzed these changes. Kerala is the first Indian state to announce a transgender policy (Government of Kerala Social Justice Department 2015). Despite pro-trans attitudes and welfare measures that enhance them into the mainstream, trans community electoral participation remains low. Kerala politics has always been male-oriented and -dominated (Hapke 2013), which has created an unfriendly environment for women and gender minorities to access political positions. This is especially evident in the political recruitment and representation of women and gender minorities. The social construction of gender and sexuality, stigma, and patriarchal notions have often limited transgender peoples' capacities to articulate and act upon their claims and concerns. The discourses, procedures, structures, and functions of governance are still, by and large, heavily skewed in favor of men. Women and gender minorities cannot articulate the priorities of their constituency and influence decision-making. Consequently, their voices are muted. The patriarchal culture neither sees them as political entities nor allows them to develop in that direction.

Feminist politics in contemporary Kerala is now evidenced by the much greater visibility of women in public and development and by the arrival of anti-patriarchal discourses that reject binary gender models (Devika and Thampi 2012; Tharayil 2014). When discussing the political participation of trans people in Kerala, it is essential to look past the obstacles for transgender political aspirants, the lack of political intent to help them contest oppression, and the social ostracism they face in a heteronormative society. In 2017, six voters in Kerala registered their identity as transgender on the voter's list. In 2021 the number increased, indicating social change. As per the government's 2014–2015 transgender survey, there were around 25,000 transgender

1 Hijras are mostly feminine individuals assigned male birth. Hijras have a long tradition and culture and have strong social ties formalized through a ritual called "reet" (becoming a member of the hijra community). There are regional divergences in terms referencing hijras, for example, kinnars (Delhi) and aravanis (Tamil Nadu). Hijras may earn an income through their traditional work, "badhai" (clapping their hands and asking for alms), blessing newborn babies, or dancing in ceremonies. Some of them engage in sex work for lack of other job opportunities. Reddy (2005) refers to hijra "supra" religious/national subjectivities that emerge out of the plurality of their daily life practices and the incessant material and symbolic comings and goings through which "hijrahood" is constructed in South Asia.

people in Kerala, but only 290 registered in the voter's list by March 2021 (Sangama 2015). However, this is not enough for transgender political participation. The fear of social ostracization prevents many transgender people from enrolling as transgender voters. Most are forced to hide their identities for fear of being tainted and expelled. The researcher spoke to some trans people at a private event hosted by a community-based organization. They revealed that they had never publicly disclosed their gender identity. As a result, those who retain their birth identity in public cannot vote or obtain an identity card by revealing their gender identity due to fear of social rejection. Some trans persons want to identify as binary male/female, and others are forced to remain in the binary gender category contrary to their wishes due to social stigma and discrimination. They are reluctant to fight for their rights because of the risk of socio-political exclusion.

Duffy (1995) defined social exclusion as the inability to participate effectively in social, political, economic, and cultural life and alienation and distance from mainstream society. Duffy argues that the political disengagement manifested in non-participation is a form of social exclusion. There is ample evidence that political disconnection can be a form of social exclusion. Those excluded for economic and social reasons are also politically excluded; they are less likely to participate in the election process and vote. As a result, democratic participation is reduced, and political influence is polarized by class and wealth. Duffy's study points out that political segregation and social exclusion harmonize and guide each other. The relationship and causal direction between the factors of social exclusion of the transgender community in Kerala and the levels and forms of political disintegration are evident. Trans individuals have not yet been able to ensure their political, social, and economic participation in Kerala society. Those who experience social poverty are the most politically excluded, and political segregation can be a form of social exclusion (Beeghley 1986). Political aspects of exclusion refer to deprivations of citizens' rights, including restricted access to organizations, voter rights, legislations, constitutions, and decision-making in policy. This multidimensional model of social exclusion also frames the analysis of the experiences of the trans community. Their citizenship and community decision-making rights are limited. Among these multifaceted exclusions, few trans people have participated in Kerala politics without adequate support from political parties and society.

Despite their ideological and political differences, political parties in Kerala support trans persons after the Supreme Court's verdict on transgender people. Such changes stemmed from the general perception that accepting transgender people is progressive. Thus, since 2014, the political parties in Kerala have developed pro-transgender attitudes. During their reign, the Transgender Policy initiated by the United Democratic Front (UDF) has also been implemented by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government. There were signs of acceptance and acknowledgement of trans people as evidenced by their inclusion in the manifestoes of the LDF and UDF during the 2016 assembly election and the discourse on the transgender community in the policy outline of the Fourth Kerala Padana Congress held by the AKG Study and Research Centre. Although the problems of the trans community need to be highlighted by political party members, a binary gender-identifying candidate talking about transgender community issues is not adequate. It reflects the main problem of representation; transgender people talk about their problems through a cisgender person,

who either understands it empathetically or may not understand it. Therefore, the policies they formulate will not be effective. Political presence from the trans community is essential for any policy change because many policies and plans have been formulated for trans people in India in general and Kerala in particular. Still, the voice of trans communities is not heard in parliament or at any political level. In Kerala, three transgender candidates have stood in elections. In 2019, Aswathy Rajappan contested as an independent candidate from the Ernakulam Parliamentary constituency in the Lok Sabha elections to represent the transgender community. Rajappan is a Dalit² activist who identifies as both intersex and transgender and actively working among Kerala's LGBTQIA human rights community. Rajappan has also been an active part of the 'Sahayathrika,' an LBT welfare organization based in Thrissur. Rajappan was the first transgender candidate to contest from Kerala. Out of 967,203 votes polled, Rajappan received 494 (Joseph 2019). Many candidates and fronts have talked about rights and equality in Kerala politics, but Kerala society has rejected identity-oriented politics and still favors broad-based party politics. The Lok Sabha elections always highlight issues of national importance, so those raised by the trans person Rajappan in the election and the politics put forward were not reflected correctly in the constituency. A lack of money and other resources, social stigma, and discrimination were obstacles for Rajappan to get the political campaign to the grassroots.

In the 2020 local body election, a transgender person named Sneha K. contested as an independent candidate from the Kannur Corporation Keezhunna ward. Sneha K. was the first transgender candidate to contest in the local body election in Kerala (Sanjit 2020). Out of 1,397 votes polled, Sneha received 37. It is clear from the votes for Sneha that there had been no significant change in the mindset of voters and political parties in the three-tier panchayat elections a year after the Lok Sabha elections. Although national perspectives determine parliamentary elections, panchayat-level elections often focus on local issues, personal relationships, and the candidate's excellence. Sneha has been unable to get any votes beyond her sphere of influence because trans people are still not entirely accepted by society.

Similarly, in the 2021 Kerala Legislative Assembly election, a transgender person named Annanyah Kumari Alex contested as a Democratic Social Justice Party candidate from the Vengara constituency. The candidature and performance of transgender candidates in Kerala were not noticed due to a lack of support or cooperation from political parties and the community. Ananya did not receive any group support from her party. She stated that DSJP used her to gain publicity, and she faced stigma, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment from their party members (TNN 2021).

2 "Dalit" is derived from the Sanskrit word "dal," which means "ground," "suppressed," "crushed," or broken pieces. It was first used by Jyotiba Phule, the founder of the Sathya Shodak Samaj, a non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. Phule used the term to refer to the outcasts and untouchables as the victims of the caste-based social division of Indian society in the nineteenth century. According to Premasagar (2002, 108), the word expresses "weakness, poverty, and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian Society." Ambedkar (1948) chose "broken man" as an English translation of dalits in his famous treatise, *The Untouchables*.

FACTORS IMPEDING TRANS PEOPLE'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KERALA

The study identifies broader issues that lead to transgender people being excluded from the political sphere. Various issues and problems have existed in Kerala regarding the path of the political participation of transgender people. Although specific policies are introduced and implemented by the Government of Kerala, promising equal rights for transgender people, the public's conceptions remain unchanged. Since there is a gap between the state and society in Kerala, mere policy formulation is not the solution.

Cultural and social barriers

One of the obstacles to transgender people's political participation is cultural and social barriers, including social stigma and heteronormative beliefs. They are often treated as an oppressed community and disrespected in almost all aspects of life. Social exclusion, such as exclusion from participation in social and cultural spaces, exclusion from family and society, poor facilities for education and health, and lack of protection from violence, lead to political exclusion. Due to negative behaviour from society, norms, and culture, their voices have not been heard. The lack of acceptance from society and family has left trans people filled with anxiety and discomfort.

A transgender voter in Kerala told me in an interview:

When I first went to the polls, everyone looked at me with great astonishment. I felt like everyone is making fun of me or looking at me as different. I felt like I had to get out of there quickly.

A transgender political party member pointed out:

As a member of a mainstream political party in Kerala, I had demanded in the party that one of the transgender persons be brought into the fray during the local government elections. They did not accept this demand saying that society has not started accepting transgender people fully and there is no chance of winning. Many of the parties that hold us together in public have not yet fully accepted us.

From these opinions, trans individuals face stigma and discrimination from society and political parties in Kerala. These obstacles discourage transgender persons from entering politics in various ways. The main reasons for this are the cultural and socio-political attitudes that consider politics an exclusively male domain. In this regard, it is essential to remember that public opinion matters greatly in elections. Thus, how the public perceives transgender people's place in society can be decisive. Considering that Kerala's social organization remained highly patriarchal and heteronormative, as noted in scholarly inquiries (Devika 2019; Kumaramkandath 2013; Tharayil 2014), one could assume that many faced gender dysphoria but preferred to remain in the closet due to social ostracism. Similarly, general social exclusion also prevents transgender presence in the public sphere. This social exclusion among the trans community extends their political exclusion within society.

Despite all their efforts, social stigma and existing patriarchy remain the biggest obstacle to overcome for the trans community in Kerala. The stigma of discrimination, harassment, and even violence causes psychological distress for transgender individuals. Rajappan, in a telephone interview, recounts experiences of such social stigma during the election campaign:

The families I approached for the election campaign have asked me why you are contesting. Will people vote for you [a trans person]? Aren't the other parties talking about you?

Thus, the social stigma in which gender is questioned reduces the political participation of trans people. The stereotypes imposed by civil society onto trans people are a crucial barrier to access to political opportunities.

A lack of education among trans people is also an obstacle to understanding political rights. Kerala's high literacy rate is not reflected in transgender education. According to the transgender survey of the Social Justice Department, 59% of transgender students drop out before completing the 10th standard, and 72% by the time of the 12th standard due to discrimination (Sangama 2015). Transgender people in the education sector strongly experience exclusion. The feeling that voting and electoral politics will not make a substantial difference in their lives also becomes a reason for the reluctance of transgender people to participate in politics.

Institutional or structural barriers

Institutional or structural barriers are a substantial obstacle to transgender political participation. These constraints include political systems, electoral rules, political party structures, and institutional cultures, such as campaign financing trends that discriminate against transgender people. Political parties are one of the institutions influencing the electoral participation of trans citizens. At the national and state levels, parties determine which candidates are nominated and elected and which issues are of national importance. The role of transgender people in political parties is a key determinant of their potential for political empowerment, especially at the national level. Unfortunately, there are no candidate lists or leadership elections involving trans persons on the part of political parties. In addition, mainstream political parties do not mobilize transgender voters in their constituencies and election campaigns. There is no proper initiative on the part of political parties to add the names of trans persons to the voter's list and get them to vote. As a result, political parties are reluctant to give transgender people important responsibilities and include them in their campaigns.

In a telephone interview Manu, a trans man, told me:

Political parties are now increasingly involved in our problems. Solidarity is also expressed through social media and public opinion when there are any issues. But they do not intervene in a big way to choose us a candidate or ensure our political participation. No party is willing to take risks in politics.

Political parties and Kerala society love to look at the trans community with sympathy and keep them aside. However, while the social taboo and ostracism have kept most transgender people from actively participating in politics, there have been a few risk-takers.

Violence and discrimination

Transgender individuals face multi-dimensional violence and discrimination in public and private spheres. For example, Ramya, a trans woman, said:

I am a person who has faced various forms of violence in public places.
I have heard jokes and abuses even from the police, who are supposed

to protect the law. For all these reasons, public space interventions are complex for me.

In Kerala, trans people are targeted, harassed, and abused publicly because of gender identity. Syama S Prabha said:

When I met PC George, a member of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, he asked me, “Aren’t you a man... Why are you dressed up? I can see your moustache.” I am a transgender government employee in Social Justice Department, and he is a representative of the people, and he was questioning my identity.

This is a clear example that high-ranking officials and politicians still do not have a clear understanding of trans identity. Mental harassment, bullying, and insults are common in public places. In the workplace and medical institutions, transgender people have reported the experience of psychological harassment and discrimination more prominently than physical or sexual violence. Sruthi, a trans woman, said:

When I went to the hospital to treat a rash on my hand, I openly declared to the doctor that I was a trans woman. But the doctor called the nurse and murmuring her about my gender expression and made vulgar comments. Because of this humiliating situation, I returned without treating my illness.

Many trans men face derogatory comments from the public or co-workers. Monu, a trans man, spoke about the period before he had started taking hormones:

My boss knew that I was a female. But when customers came into the shop, they would point at me and ask, “Is that a he or a she?” This incident made me feel very bad, and so I left the job.

In the context of transgender identity, the vulnerability and discrimination that the trans community faces are distinct. Dalit transgender persons face compounded discrimination due to their caste and gender identity. Caste-based discrimination has been recorded in different forms. They range from termination, employers verbally reminding respondents of their background, unequal pay, etc. In the case of Dalit transgender respondents, the interviews reveal experiences of verbal harassment and ridicule. Karishma, a trans woman, recounted that they face discrimination and mental abuse in the workplace because of their gender and caste. They were severely insulted by colleagues because of their color and feminine character. Because of this multitype and intersectional violence and discrimination, trans people are afraid to face the public.

Lack of identity documents

Access to legal identification is a fundamental human right of every citizen. A unique identity is needed to prove who we are, exercise our fundamental rights, and facilitate access to all state services. However, in the case of many transgender community members, their gender identity in documents differs from their self-declared identity. Therefore, due to the lack of identity documents, transgender people lack social benefits such as education, healthcare, and voting rights. In addition, due to the lack of clear identity documentation, most trans people are still forced to vote within the gender binary. Soorya, a trans woman, said:

Although I am a self-identified trans woman, all my identity cards are my

biological (male) identity. I'm still voting on my male identity because it is not changed. I'm not happy about that. I'm trying to change it.

Interviews revealed that there are also trans people who abstain from the voting process because of their inability to vote using their desired gender identity. In addition, the lack of a clear/definite address for trans human persons displaced from their families, homeland, and social status is a barrier to obtaining identity documents.

Poor awareness of voting rights

Lack of awareness among trans citizens about their voting rights is one of the reasons for their active participation in the electoral process and their awareness and interest in the process. One trans interviewee opined in a telephone interview:

Why should I vote? Politicians or the people will not accept us. None of the politicians come to me asking for votes. No one asks us to vote or add a name to the voter list. Now I am 28 years old, but I didn't vote yet.

This comment points to a lack of awareness of political rights and duties and a sense of inferiority and indifference arising due to neglect from political institutions and systems. There is insufficient information, training, and voter education for transgender citizens regarding registering on the voter's list, casting a vote, finding relevant polling booths, etc. Moreover, they haven't received enough information and training on contesting elections, their rights, and their duties as candidates.

Lack of money and resources

Money, as well as related resources, is essential to facilitate an election process. Unfortunately, economic backwardness and a lack of election-related materials hamper the smooth running of trans contestants' campaigns. In a telephone interview, Kavya revealed:

Competing in elections is a very costly process. No one comes forward to support competitors like us mentally and financially. I have personally seen contestants from our group struggling with the money to tie up in the election and the cost of campaigning. Only the majority parties are funded and supported by all. Nobody cares about minority people like us.

Transgender candidate Rajappan, who contested the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, raised funds for the election through crowdfunding. Rajappan says the financial crisis decelerated campaigning and poster advertising throughout the constituency (Varghese 2019). The trans candidates who contested various elections in Kerala had no permanent work or income. Therefore, society's economic situation and lack of acceptance have severely affected their election campaigns and political participation.

RECOMMENDATION FOR THE INCLUSION OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In light of the interviews and analyses conducted with trans individuals, their social inclusion must be addressed to enhance their participation and inclusion in political activities. Thus, the level of political participation of the transgender community can be improved through the following measures:

1. Create an enabling socio-economic and political environment for transgender inclusion. The study shows that transgender people continue to be subjected to social ostracization and prejudice, leading to horrific violence and discrimination.
2. Provide knowledge, training, and education for political participation. This study indicates that the level of political knowledge and consciousness affects political participation among the trans community in Kerala. Empowerment through processes of learning and action strengthens their self-esteem, analytical skills, competencies, and political consciousness. It helps marginalized and excluded transgender citizens understand their rights and unite to transform inequitable power relations and develop more democratic societies.
3. It is clear from the study that the trend of avoiding trans candidates in elections continues in Kerala, despite increased social acceptance. Surya, a trans activist in Kerala, opined in a newspaper, "The parties' support for our community remains on paper. We realize we are still prevented from coming to the forefront of politics. Trans people continue to face gender discrimination. I understand the respective political fronts must give the allies a few seats. But at least a few seats should be earmarked for us by all political parties" (Chandran 2020). Kerala political parties must ensure a gender-neutral political approach, education, and thinking beyond the gender binary. All political parties should include the trans community in their election manifestoes to make them non-discriminatory and inclusive. Political parties should explore the potential of transgender politicians and candidates. Political parties should include transgender rights organizations and activists in party meetings, consultations, and hearings; it creates political space for them.
4. The election commission should hire transgender community members as polling staff to deliver the inclusion message. It should organize special campaigns to educate transgender voters, focusing on first-time young transgender voters. The Election Code of Conduct should ban any transphobic candidate from contesting elections. It must ensure zero tolerance towards transphobia in election campaigns and elections. Local, district, and state-level offices should be sensitive and mobilized to engage with transgender individuals, organizations, networks, and alliances.
5. Amend the constitution and include provisions for reservations for transgender people. There is a need to consider the transgender community as a separate class within existing reservation criteria. In addition, it will help increase their political participation.

CONCLUSION

It is critical for trans people, a marginalized and excluded section of Kerala society, to be part of the democratic system to achieve their rights and to make sure their voice is heard. Unfortunately, the political participation of transgender people in Kerala is minimal, as reflected in their electoral registration, voting, and election contestation.

That fact is reflected in the opinion and views shared by the trans respondents interviewed for this study. The main reason is that transgender people do not receive equal treatment in the community and are discriminated against in all spheres. Although political activism has increased slightly, fundamental changes are possible only by ensuring trans representation in the legislature and executive. However, their election to representative bodies will not be possible without the support of the political parties that dominate the Kerala political system. Trans communities can become mainstream only if they receive social, political, and legal support, welfare measures, and empowerment programs. Political parties, government, and society have a significant role to play in ensuring the political participation of trans people. More broadly, NGOs, including trans, human rights, community groups, the academic community, and other civil society organizations, can contribute to the advancement of the political participation of transgender people.

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