

# Migration Of Transgenders towards Chennai For Economic Opportunities: A Hunt For Livelihood

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## Abstract

Transgender people across India have recently begun migrating towards Chennai, drawn by their expectations of securing sustainable livelihoods. This study examines the migration of transgenders from various parts of India to Chennai, seeking a better livelihood, employment and economic opportunities. The phenomenon of transgender migration towards Chennai remains underexplored in the existing literature, especially concerning the factors driving migration, and the challenges they encounter. The present research employs a qualitative approach, adopting both the approaches of case studies and group discussions, utilizing in-depth interviews to capture the lived experiences of transgender migrants. The purposive sampling technique and the snowball sampling technique is employed to make sure that the samples represent various Indian states and regions, allowing for a thorough understanding of the subtle distinctions and details pertaining to the transgender migration. Key issues including the push factors that induces migration, such as discrimination, lack of job opportunities, and social stigma, as well as the pull factors gravitating the transgenders towards Chennai, including better economic security, community support, and social tolerance and inclusiveness has been explored. Findings from this research contribute to the existing body of knowledge on transgender experiences in urban migration contexts and their pursuit of a more inclusive livelihood.

**Keywords:** Transgender Migration; Livelihood; Push and Pull Factors; Inclusive Livelihood; Social Integration

## 1. Introduction:

“A livelihood comprises of the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living” (Chambers & Conway, 1992, p. 6). The intricate web of social stigmatization, discrimination, and economic marginalization faced by the transgender communities in India largely affects the livelihood and living conditions of the transgenders. Due to the stigmatization and discrimination against transgenders, and due to the limited livelihood opportunities in rural parts of India, transgenders, in search of better livelihood, begin to migrate to cities of India where they perceive the social acceptance and livelihood opportunities to be comparatively higher.

The migration of transgenders from their native places to cities reflect both push and pull dynamic factors due to many complex and interconnected factors, as large number of transgenders face severe limitations in gaining access to formal employment opportunities in their rural based native places due to the deeply rooted prejudices and discriminatory practices in that societies. Their decision to migrate is most often a response to the challenging socio-economic situations and discriminating practices prevailing in their native places. Whereas cities being economic hubs, mostly has a more diverse job market and increased opportunities for economic and livelihood development. Migrating to cities from their rural based native places provides transgenders a platform to engage in self-employment and entrepreneurial endeavours. Cities mostly have more positive environment for small businesses and self-employment than rural areas, which allows for economic independence. Further, the LGBTQ+ support is often available in cities by community organizations and advocacy networks that provide necessary social support. Transgenders who are migrating to cities mostly seek the support and assistance from such networks, providing a sense of belonging and in developing a ‘we-feel’ among the community. The migrating patterns of marginalized communities serve as a lens through which, the complexities of societal structures, and economic aspirations are focussed within the intricate web of urban dynamics. The transgender communities in India grapple with a systemic discrimination, societal prejudice, and limited access to livelihood opportunities, especially in the non-metropolitan areas. Against that backdrop, the decision of transgenders to migrate to urban cities hold a significance, as they seek an economic empowerment in the bustling nature of the cities. This migration is not merely a geographical shift, but also represent a quest for their independency, economic stability, for an autonomic and authentic living. The migration of transgenders from their rural based hometowns and villages to cities is a complicated process that has been shaped by the economic, social, and cultural factors. Pursuing a better economic opportunity, and a social environment that is more inclusive, especially the access to essential services, and educational prospects, and the desire for personal freedom, altogether, motivates the transgender migration to cities, where they expect to find acceptance, opportunities, and a supportive community.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem:

As per the 2011 census, over 70,000 transgenders reside in rural parts all over India, among which, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and rural Bengal rank the top positions. (India Today, 2015). However, due to the lack of livelihood opportunities and

employment after the covid pandemic in 2019, there seems to be a significant proportion of transgender migration from rural parts of India to cities in search of livelihood opportunities. Further light may be thrown on this with the census of 2021, which is delayed due to covid pandemic reasons, freezing administrative boundaries and general elections of 2024, which is expected to be conducted by October 2024 (The Hindu, 2023). However, one other backdrop in this is that, most transgenders have their ID proofs of their home states and they neither have legal migration certificate nor address proof of current residence, as they constantly migrate to various cities. Therefore, the actual count of the transgenders is not exactly known.

A significant proportion of 27.27% of the respondents of this study (6 out of 22 respondents), which has been conducted in Chennai, are from the aforementioned states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and rural Bengal. It shows that most transgenders from rural India prefer to migrate to cities for better livelihoods. These transgender individuals often face economic vulnerabilities due to societal marginalization, discrimination, and limited access to mainstream employment in their rural based hometowns. The intersectionality of these challenges faced by transgenders, including social and economic challenges, forces them to migrate to places that they perceive to be safer and supportive for them to secure better economic opportunities. Most transgenders from all over India prefer certain cities to migrate based on their perception, among which Chennai holds a prominent position in their minds. Therefore, most transgenders from other states have recently begun migrating towards Chennai for economic opportunities, which represents a complex and underexplored phenomenon that demands comprehensive examination. Therefore, this study aim to address this gap by qualitatively studying the migration patterns, the challenges, and opportunities experienced by transgenders who have migrated to Chennai.

### 1.2. Significance of the Study:

The present research study is distinguished in its aim of comprehending the experiences of transgenders and the intricate process of migration to cities, especially Chennai. The present study examines the influencing factors of the migration decisions of transgenders to Chennai for economic, employment and livelihood opportunities. By focusing on the quality of these factors, the study provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of migration.

## 2. Methodology:

**Research Design:** The exploratory research design has been adopted to qualitatively explore the transgender migration to Chennai and its intricate aspects. The case study approach and the group discussion approach have been employed for the comprehensive exploration of transgender migration to Chennai for economic opportunities, and to capture the depth and richness of the individual experiences.

**Sampling Technique:** One hundred and seventy-three transgender individuals who have migrated to Chennai from other Indian states for livelihood and economic opportunities have been identified by adopting the Purposive sampling technique and the Snowball sampling technique, ensuring diversity in terms of geographic origin, socio-economic background, and migration experiences.

**Objectives:** The first objective of the research is to study the socio-economic profile of the transgenders who have migrated to Chennai. Secondly, the study analyses the push and pull factors of their migration to Chennai.

**Data Collection:** In-depth unstructured interviews and facilitated group discussions has been conducted to accomplish the objectives of the study. In collecting data from respondents who neither speak Tamil nor English languages, other transgender respondents who speaks both languages acted as a translating mediator between the researcher and the respondent in collecting the data.

**Inclusion Criteria of the Respondents:** The data have been collected from Transgender women who have migrated to Chennai within the last fifteen years i.e. 2008-2023, who are between the age group of 20 to 50 years, and those who have provided their consent to be the respondents of this study.

## 3. Findings:

The migration of transgender individuals to urban cities seeking better livelihood and economic opportunities is a significant phenomenon that remains a subject of inadequate empirical exploration. The findings of this study are based on the narratives of the One hundred and seventy-three respondents of the present qualitative study, whose details have been concealed, as per the requests of the respondents, adhering to ethical considerations and upholding the confidentiality of the respondents. The intentional elimination of the personal information of the respondents in the study aims to protect the privacy and identity of the individuals who have generously shared their experiences and perspectives for the study.

### 3.1. Findings based on the Socio-economic background of the Respondents:

#### 3.1.1. Findings based on the Educational Status of the respondents:

- Out of the One hundred and seventy-three respondents, Thirty-two respondents (18.49%) hold a bachelor's degree, and twenty-six respondents (15.02%) are currently pursuing higher secondary education with the help of community organizations. Forty-three respondents (24.88%), regardless of their age, aspire to pursue further education as soon as possible. The rest of the Seventy two (41.61%) respondents do not have any intention to pursue education anymore.
- It is noted that all these respondents have pursued or aspire to pursue graduation through the distance mode, and not through the regular mode, implying that there are limited opportunities for the transgenders to pursue a full-time mode of education.
- Among the forty-three respondents who aspire to pursue further education, eleven respondents (25.58) hold the school completion certificate and are eligible to apply for under graduation courses. Out of them, two respondents prefer Madras University, four respondents prefer Annamalai University, and five respondents has no preference in choosing the university to pursue under graduation through distance mode.
- ALL of the respondents (100%) opine that they could not have even thought about pursuing higher education if they had not migrated to Chennai.

#### 3.1.2. Findings based on the Employment and Income Status of the Respondents:

- Regarding the employment status, One hundred and twenty-four respondents (71.67%) work in unorganized sectors as labours, cleaners, or maids in restaurants, supermarkets, and houses. Twenty-nine respondents (16.77%) work as cleaners in organized private sectors such as BPO companies and hospitals. The rest of the twenty respondents (11.56%) are unemployed, however, in search of jobs.
- The monthly income of Ninety-seven respondents (56.06%) is between Rs.6,000/- to Rs.8,000/-. The monthly income of thirty-four respondents (19.67%) falls between the bracket of Rs.8,000/ to Rs. 10,000/-. Forty-two respondents (24.27%) earn between Rs. 10,000/- to Rs.12,000/- in a month. None of the respondents earn more than Rs. Twelve thousand a month. All the respondents report that their monthly earning is not sufficient to lead a normal life.
- Sixty-three respondents (36.43%) regularly indulge in both commercial sex work and beggary in Chennai, regardless of their age. A significant proportion of seventy-seven respondents (44.50%) occasionally indulge in commercial sex work and beggary during jobless times and for additional income. Thirty-three respondents (19.07%) have a strong determination not to indulge in sex work or beggary even during tough times.
- Out of the one hundred and forty respondents who are indulged in sex work and beggary, young transgenders below the age of 35 mostly involve in commercial sex work and beggary almost every day. Whereas, transgenders above the age of 35 mostly prefer beggary in trains and train stations and bus stations, and occasionally go for commercial sex work.
- Respondents who are engaged in unorganized sectors exhibit significant income disparities from their cisgender counterparts, and face challenges in securing stable income, and express their vulnerabilities to exploitation, such as working overtime, underpayment, workplace harassment, and exclusion.
- It is observed among the commercial sex workers that, transgenders from north Indian states have a high demand from customers than transgenders from other south Indian states. Transgenders from Tamil Nadu have the least demand among the commercial sex customers.

#### 3.1.3. Findings based on Migration Patterns of the Respondents:

- Out of the One hundred and seventy-three respondents, One hundred and thirteen respondents (65.31%) had earlier migrated to other Indian cities such as Calcutta, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Secunderabad, Bhopal, Mumbai, and thence, again migrated to Chennai in search of Livelihood. Sixty respondents (34.69%) chose Chennai as their primary choice to be migrated.
- The majority of one hundred and four respondents (60.11%) migrated to Chennai through the references and recommendations of their fellow transgender friends. Sixty-nine respondents (39.89%) migrated as per their preconceived notion of Chennai as a better place to live in.
- All One hundred and seventy-three respondents (100%) opine that they will refer their other transgender friends to migrate to Chennai due to the livelihood opportunities and security offered in Chennai.
- Fifty-one respondents (29.49%) plan to re-migrate to other cities seeking a cultural change. Fifty-seven of the respondents (32.94%) doesn't have any idea about migrating to any other cities in the near future. The rest of the sixty-five respondents (37.57%) wish to live the rest of their lives in Chennai, as they won't find any other safer place than Chennai.
- It is astonishing to know that, out of the twenty-t One hundred and seventy-three respondents, none of the respondents want to go back to their home states, due to the bitter experiences they had there.

### 3.2. Findings based on the Push and Pull Factors of migration to Chennai

#### 3.2.1. Push Factors:

- Discrimination and societal stigma in the born families and the hometowns of transgender individuals has been reported as the primary push factors for migration by ALL the respondents.
- Lack of social acceptance and exclusion in their homes and communities has been expressed as a compelling push factor by ALL the respondents.
- Threats to personal safety have been identified as a compelling reason to migrate to locations perceived as more secure and tolerant by ALL the respondents.
- ALL the respondents express their concerns about physical, sexual, and emotional violence in their hometowns. All the respondents reported that they had frequently undergone physical and sexual violence and harassment in their hometowns.
- Limited employment opportunities in their places of origin significantly contribute to their decision to migrate.
- Nearly half of Eighty-two respondents (47.39%) have migrated after the Covid pandemic, due to the lack of employment opportunities in their hometowns. This implies that the Covid pandemic has significantly affected the livelihood of transgenders across India.

#### 3.2.2. Pull Factors:

- ALL the respondents perceive the comparatively inclusive environment in Chennai, and its comparatively higher Economic and Employment Opportunities as the primary pull factor for transgenders to migrate towards Chennai.
- Social Support has been reported to be better in Chennai than in other cities and towns. ALL the respondents have benefitted through NGOs, community organizations, and philanthropists, either directly or indirectly, especially during tough times such as floods and the Covid pandemic. The respondents point out that they don't get this social support in their own hometowns.
- Majority of One hundred and twenty-six respondents (72.83%) opine that the financial assistance within the transgender community and community organizations helps mitigate economic challenges.
- The Findings reveal a major pulling factor related to educational opportunities and skill development. ALL the respondents sought access to better educational resources and to enhance their skills and qualifications for improved employment prospects.
- Comparatively higher sense of social acceptance is comprehended to be a pull factor for the transgenders to migrate to Chennai. ALL the respondents express their freeness to step out of their homes without having to hide their gender identity and without any fear or hesitation.
- All of the respondents rate their Overall Quality of Life to be Low. However, all of them declare that their Overall Quality of Life has significantly improved after migrating to Chennai.

### 4. Thematic Analysis & Discussions:

Thematic Analysis & Discussions.		
Codes	Categories	Themes
Diverse range of educational backgrounds	Aspiration to pursue higher education	Education
Educational migration		
Limited opportunities to attend colleges	Challenges in Pursuing Education	
Preference for Distance Education		
No formal employment	Challenges in Employment	Employment
Work Place Harassment		
Exploitation		
Unstable income; Income disparities	Income Insecurity	
Seeking Additional Income through Sex work and Beggary		
Exposure to Sexually Transmittable Diseases		
Discrimination; Harassment; Exclusion	Societal Stigma	Push Factors

Social Unacceptance; Threats to personal safety		
Lack of Social Support		
Physical, emotional, and sexual violence		
Limited employment opportunities	Employment and Income insecurity	
Impact of Covid Pandemic on Livelihoods		
Benefitted from Organizations & Philanthropists	Community Support	Pull Factors
organizations & NGOs & Philanthronists		
Financial assistance within the community		
Help and Support during tough times such as floods and Covid lockdown		
Community organizations and NGOs support (Financial & Educational)	Scope for Improvement	
Educational opportunities		
Self-employment Trainings		
Skill development opportunities		
Comparatively higher inclusiveness	Safety and Security	
Comparatively higher Economic and Employment Opportunities		
Freedom and fearlessness		
Improved Quality of Life		

*Source: Thematic Analysis based on the findings of the study*

#### 4.1. Discussions:

The discussions that follow are interpretations of the thematically analyzed interpretations derived from the study. The themes that have been explored in the study encapsulates the experiences of transgenders seeking not just a secured livelihood, but also the hope of inclusiveness, and improved quality of life.

**Education:** The present study reveal that migration to Chennai is not merely driven for economic opportunities, but, also by the aspiration of accessing education in an inclusive environment. The finding reveals that the societal barriers and discriminations creates a negative environment within the educational institutions, which forces many transgenders to abstain from attending colleges. The preference for distance education reflects a conscious decision by transgender individuals to overcome physical, emotional, financial, and societal hurdles in pursuit of education.

**Employment:** The findings reveal a stark reality of transgenders who are facing the barriers in accessing the formal employment opportunities. Transgender individuals oftentimes encounter harassment discrimination, and exploitation, which generates a negative work environment, severely affecting their overall well-being to a large extent. Transgenders face harsh financial vulnerabilities due to unstable income security, and adopts a defense mechanism to tackle the income insecurity by involving in commercial sex work and beggary. This also exposes the individuals to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and compromises their overall health.

**Societal Stigma:** Discrimination within societal structures, lack of acceptance, persistent threat and harassment, isolation and alienation, Threats to personal safety, including hate crimes and targeted violence experienced by transgender individuals have been identified as a pervasive issue faced by the transgenders that propels the individuals to seek refuge in more accepting and inclusive locations.

**Employment and Income insecurity:** The findings highlights the ongoing difficult challenges of transgender individuals in accessing stable income and inclusive employment that prompts individuals to seek migration as a way of escaping financial insecurities. It proves that the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the livelihoods of transgenders, and have intensified income insecurity, creating a dire scenario that acts as a compelling push factor for migration.



**Community Support:** The findings of the study underscore the vital role of the Community organizations, Non-Governmental organizations, and philanthropists in promoting an inclusive and a supportive environment, by aiding and facilitating the transgenders during their tough times. The financial support being offered within the community display a sense of solidarity, and inter-dependency among the Transgenders.

**Scope for Improvement:** The findings highlights the significance of the workshops, training programs, skill development training, and educational opportunities that empower transgender individuals by enabling them to pitch into self-employment.

**Safety and Security:** Transgender individuals are often drawn to locations that offers a comparatively better economic and employment opportunities, and an inclusive environment, thereby enabling them to overcome their financial instability and independence. Undoubtedly, the improved economic conditions bestows a sense of security and promotes the overall well-being.

## 5. Conclusion

The migration of transgenders towards Chennai in search of better economic opportunities is not only a physical mobility, but is an intense thirst for dignity, acceptance, and a normal life to be lived authentically. The so called normal life or an average life itself is a dream to be achieved for the transgenders. The apex of the present research on the migration of transgenders from various parts of India to Chennai for economic opportunities discovers a mixed collage of bitter experiences, difficulties, and hopes and aspirations within the dynamics of the urban environment. India is a country where most of the population resides in rural areas. It's observed that the rural areas are not so apt for the vulnerable communities, especially for the transgenders. The findings of the study on the push factors emphasizes the harsh realities the transgenders encounter in their rural based hometowns. Denial of employment opportunities, Discrimination, barriers in education, rejection by the born family, are the arduous push factors that propel migration of the transgenders towards cities. The study uncovers the deeply rooted preconceived notions and prejudices of the society that deprives the lives of transgenders, leaves them with no choice but to migrate to urban centers like Chennai for refuge and acceptance. The study throws lights on the gravitating pull factors that draws the transgenders to migrate to cities such as Chennai. Cultural diversity, economic prosperity, inclusive environment of the city, which are the essential requirements for the transgenders, distinctly stands out as a ray of hope. The blooming job market, easy access to quality healthcare, and the support by the transgender communities and networks largely contributes a space that provides inclusiveness, acceptance, community support, and above all, the economic opportunities that enables them to lead a life with better quality. The migration of transgender individuals towards cities such as Chennai is socially vigorous and dynamic, and is a constantly ongoing phenomena. In summary, the present study elucidates the visible improvement in the lives of transgender migrants, which occurs especially due to the transformative power of economic opportunities. Employment, education, and access to healthcare emerge not only as essential components for economic stability but also as catalysts for empowerment, resilience, and the reclamation of individual narratives. Future studies are suggested to delve deeper into the long-term socio-economic trajectories of transgender migrants, exploring the impact of economic empowerment on overall well-being and community dynamics. Additionally, continued research is essential to monitor the effectiveness of interventions and policies aimed at fostering inclusivity and dismantling barriers.

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The authors declare that there are no competing interests to declare.

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## 8. Dual Publication Statement:

The authors confirms that the work described has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The research conducted in connection with this submission is original and the results fully at the disposal of the authors, who have adhered to the ethical standards of their research funders and institutions.

## 7. Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process:

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Chatgpt version 3.5 in order to enhance the readability of the language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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