

# Libraries as Inclusive Spaces for Transgender Individuals in West Bengal: A Review

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## Abstract

**Background / Purpose:** Libraries play a transformative role in promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning. This study examines how libraries in West Bengal can serve as inclusive educational spaces for transgender individuals, who continue to face systemic discrimination and limited access to information.

**Methodology:** using a qualitative review approach, the study consolidates the findings from national and international literature, case studies, and policy reports on LGBTQ+ absorbing in library services. It highlights key challenges such as want of awareness among library staff, the absence of adequate resources in local or regional languages, and minimal institutional collaboration with community organizations.

**Findings / Results:** The review aims to expose the collaborative models linking libraries with safe shelter houses and NGOs which can expand access, provide legal and health information, and create supportive community environments. Successful global and Indian examples show that inclusion becomes effective when embedded in library culture through staff training, policy reform, and visibility initiatives.

**Implications:** The study concludes that the libraries West Bengal can act as catalysts for empowerment by implementing gender-inclusive policies, curating multilingual resources, and fostering sustainable partnerships with local transgender support groups.

**Keywords:** Transgender Inclusion, LGBTQ+ Rights, West Bengal Libraries, Gender-Inclusive Policies, Community Empowerment.

## 1. Introduction

Transgender persons in India are still facing systemic discrimination and challenges in accessing education, employment, healthcare, public services and respect from society.

According to Census 2011, India reported approximately 4.9 lakh transgender persons; however, state-level data, including West Bengal, remain limited and underrepresented. In West Bengal, despite progressive legal frameworks such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, various social stigma and

institutional gaps continue to restrict access to inclusive public spaces, educational institutions, and libraries.

Libraries, as open educational entities, have the potential to function as inclusive and safe spaces for minority groups. In this context, an “inclusive space” does not imply segregation, but rather the transformation of existing library environment into accessible, free, respectful, and affirming spaces through inclusive policies, infrastructure, resources, and services and behaviors.

This study focuses specifically on transgender individuals, which fall under LGBTQ+ community. However, it is necessary to separate that transgender identity relates to gender identity, whereas lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities are related to sexual orientation.

This study examines how libraries in West Bengal can evolve into inclusive spaces for transgender individuals by analyzing existing literature, identifying gaps, and proposing action-oriented strategies for policies and practices.

Although national-level data provides a broad overview, region-specific insights remain limited. In West Bengal, community-based organizations such as Sappho for Equality (**Sappho for Equality, n.d.**) and Pratyay Gender Trust (**Pratyay Gender Trust, n.d.**) have documented challenges related to social exclusion, lack of access to education, and limited institutional support for transgender individuals. However, systematic data on their access to public libraries remains scarce, indicating a significant research and policy gaps. This further justifies the need for region-focused studies in public libraries.

## 2. Conceptualizing Libraries as Inclusive Spaces

In this study, the concept of “inclusive space” is identified as a multi-dimensional framework, rather than just a physical location. Library inclusivity for transgender individuals can be interpreted across four key dimensions:

- **Physical Space:** Availability of adequate space and infrastructure for unbiased gender opportunities, such as restrooms, washrooms, and safe seating environments.
- **Informational Space:** Access to necessary resources, including transgender and LGBTQ+ literature and legal, social and health-care related informative documents in regional languages like Bengali.
- **Social Space:** A welcoming and respectful environment fostered through staff sensitization, inclusive policies, and community engagement.
- **Digital Space:** Access to online information, e-resources, and digital platforms that ensure privacy, anonymity, and inclusivity.

This framework clarifies that inclusivity does not imply segregation, but rather the transformation of existing library environments into equitable and accessible spaces for all users to use.

## 3. Objectives of the study

1. To understand the role of the libraries in generating flexible environments for transgender individuals in West Bengal.
2. To explore integrity and strategies of libraries services and safe shelter houses for transgender support.

3. To identify and evaluate best practices in inclusive library services for LGBTQ+ communities.
4. To provide actionable recommendations for enhancing inclusivity in library infrastructure, resources and programming.

#### 4. Literature Review

The existing literature on LGBTQ+ inclusion in libraries highlights the role of libraries as safe and participatory spaces (Mehra & Braquet, 2011; Fisher et al., 2007). International studies emphasize inclusive programming, collection development, and staff training as key strategies for improving library services.

In the Indian context, research indicates a lack of representation of LGBTQ+ materials and limited institutional support for inclusive services (Rajan, 2020; Datta & Chatterjee, 2020). However, local initiatives, such as the Kerala Transgender Library Movement, demonstrate the potential for inclusive transformation.

Literature focusing specially on West Bengal remains limited, particularly in the context of transgender inclusion in library services. This gap highlights the need for region-specific, conceptual, and policy-oriented research.

Additionally, reports and community-based documentation by organizations such as Sappho for Equality and Pratyay Gender Trust provide important insights into the lived experiences and institutional challenges faced by transgender individuals in India, although such perspectives remain underrepresented in formal LIS research.

Thus, the existing literature, although diverse, converges on the idea of libraries as inclusive “spaces” that integrate physical, informational, and social dimensions of access and participation

in the library.

#### 5. Methodology

This study has adopted a qualitative narrative review approach to examine the role of libraries, also as inclusive spaces for transgender individuals, focusing specially on West Bengal. A narrative review is appropriate for this study because it enables the integration and interpretation of diverse sources like scholarly articles, policy documents, and case studies to develop a conceptual and practice-oriented understanding of the topic.

The literature was collected from major academic and open-access databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the National Digital Library of India (NDLI). Keywords such as “*transgender inclusion in libraries*,” “*LGBTQ+ library services*,” and “*inclusive public spaces*” were used to identify the relevant materials.

The selection of literature was guided by the following criteria:

- **Inclusion criteria:** Studies and reports focusing on transgender or LGBTQ+ inclusion, library services, social inclusion, and community engagement, particularly within the context of public institutions.
- **Exclusion criteria:** Sources that do not make relevance to library and information science, opinion pieces without analytical grounding, and materials have been avoided.

The selected literature was organized and analyzed using a thematic framework and grouped into three major categories:

1. Policy and institutional frameworks
2. Library services and programming

### 3. Infrastructure and community engagement

This thematic categorization has identified the key challenges; make best practices and potential strategies for developing inclusive library services in West Bengal, India.

It is important to note that this study has not been established primary data but rather relied entirely on secondary data sources. Therefore, the findings are interpretative in nature and intended to provide conceptual clarity and actionable insights, not empirical generalizations. Future research should incorporate field-based studies and user perspectives to validate and expand these findings.

## 6. Evaluation and Discussion

### 6.1 Objective 1: To assess the role of libraries in creating inclusive spaces for transgender individuals in West Bengal

**Mehra and Braquet (2011)** established that public libraries, by their nature as community institutions, can serve as neutral and, welcoming environments for peripheral community, especially LGBTQ+ individuals. They suggest that libraries should offer LGBTQ+ resources, host inclusive events and act as safe place for expression. They foster a culture of visibility, acceptance and belongingness. This will make comfortable for transgender individuals who often feel excluded from mainstream educational, recreational, and informational settings.

However, this inclusivity does not always transfer into real life. In many public libraries, especially in West Bengal, neutrality is often interpreted as silence, where controversial or minority topics such as gender diversity—are deliberately avoided rather than openly engaged. The absence of transgender-friendly materials or symbols of

inclusion (such as Pride flags, posters, or openly inclusive signage) may signal unwelcoming spaces, even if no explicit discrimination occurs there.

**Tripathi (2015)**, in her autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, provides a powerful personal narrative, illustrating the deep-rooted societal exclusion faced by transgender persons in India. Her experiences of being denied access to public services underscore the urgency for institutional inclusion for people with disabilities. If public libraries in West Bengal adopt inclusive practices, they can act as symbolic and functional counterpoints to the marginalization that transgender individual's face elsewhere in society.

**Fisher et al. (2007)** explored the concept of libraries as “safe spaces” that build community identity and reduce social isolation. In the context of West Bengal, this idea could be expanded to design programs that explicitly invite and engage the transgender community—such as storytelling sessions, peer education circles, or transgender-led workshops. The presence of such activities can help normalize transgender voices in public discourse.

Conversely, **Rajan (2020)** highlights that many Indian libraries do not build representation of LGBTQ+ narratives and are often constrained by conservative, institutional cultures. This is acutely visible in West Bengal, where, despite the state's progressive political environment, library policies often fail to reflect inclusive values at the grassroots level.

A great local example of the Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk Library, which, according to **Banerjee and Basu (2021)**, collects LGBTQ+ literature and organizes occasional public readings. Although this is a promising initiative, it remains largely urban and isolated, with little

trickle-down effect to district or rural libraries. This underscores the uneven development and the need for state-level and, inclusive library frameworks.

In summary, while the literature affirms the transformative potential of libraries for transgender inclusion, the ground realities in West Bengal reveal a gap between the promise and practice. Bridging this requires intentional policy actions, resource allocation, and community engagement.

### **Assessment:**

While libraries are globally recognized as inherently inclusive institutions, the situation in West Bengal suggests a gap between their theoretical potential and on-ground implementation. Most public libraries, especially in rural and semi-urban regions, function within a rigid traditional framework that lack awareness and training on gender inclusivity issues. Only a few urban libraries—like those affiliated with progressive NGOs, have ventured into inclusive programming. The absence of gender-sensitive signage, a lack of relevant resources in Bengali and an untrained workforce have collectively hindered the development of transgender-inclusive environments. Therefore, while the **role** of libraries as safe spaces is conceptually sound, its realization in West Bengal requires systemic policy interventions, sustained sensitization, and community partnerships to make it a lived reality.

## **6.2 Objective 2: To explore integration strategies between libraries and safe shelter houses for transgender support**

Collaborations between libraries and shelter houses or community-based organizations can be a powerful way to extend inclusive services to transgender individuals. Durbar Mahila

Samanwaya Committee (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, n.d.) and Pratyay Gender Trust (Pratyay Gender Trust, n.d.), two prominent West Bengal-based organizations, already provide housing, healthcare, education, and vocational training to transgender individual. If libraries collaborate with such NGOs, they can become knowledge-sharing hubs, offering print and digital resources tailored to the needs of transgender needs.

According to **Banerjee and Basu (2021)**, such partnerships are not only beneficial but also essential. Their study suggests that libraries should act as bridges between formal education and informal community information services. This could include initiatives such as joint reading sessions, mobile library services to shelter homes and digital kiosks providing access to health and legal rights information.

However, such partnerships remain theoretical in West Bengal, with minimal real-world implementation. There is no formal policy or guideline issued by the Department of Library Services that encourages libraries to work with NGOs serving marginalized groups. As a result, librarians often lack both institutional mandates and the confidence to engage in community-based collaboration.

This miscommunication could be addressed through Memorandums of Understanding (**MoUs**) between district libraries and shelter houses. These could regularize sharing programs, outline responsibilities and ensure continuity beyond individual initiatives. For instance, the Alipore Government Library could pilot a project in collaboration with Sappho for Equality (**Sappho for Equality, n.d.**) to provide mental health and legal literacy resources to transgender shelter homes in South Kolkata.

Such partnerships not only benefit transgender individuals but also redefine the library's role as an instrument of public service and social transformation. Furthermore, these collaborations can act as case studies to inspire replication across other districts of West Bengal.

### **Assessment:**

Although there are active transgender support groups in West Bengal, public libraries operate independently rather than under a coordinated system. There is no active evidence of partnering with shelter houses or NGOs to offer joint literacy programs, counseling sessions, or mobile-knowledge services. The lack of institutional frameworks, such as MoUs or official guidelines—prevents sustainable collaboration in this area. However, libraries are excellent candidates for this kind of integration due to their infrastructure and community involvement. With state support and proper training, libraries could become extended arms of care and education, particularly for transgender individuals in marginalized settings. Pilot initiatives in collaboration with NGOs could set important precedents for broader statewide adoption.

### **6.3 Objective 3: To identify and evaluate best practices in inclusive library services for LGBTQ+ communities**

Globally, several libraries have successfully institutionalized LGBTQ+ inclusivity. For example the **Toronto Public Library** hosts Pride Month programming including author talks, drag queen story hours, and curated LGBTQ+ reading lists. These are not token gestures but embedded in the library's annual operational strategy. **Similarly**, Berlin's Queer Archives focus on preserving LGBTQ+ histories and identities, integrating archiving, public outreach, and education.

These models demonstrate that inclusion is always successful when it is integrated into library culture, not merely added as a side program. The staff training, budget allocation, and community partnerships that support these programs are essential components that are often missing in Indian contexts.

In India, the **Kerala Transgender Library Movement**, as reported by **Rajan (2020)**, stands out for establishing gender-neutral infrastructure, providing **LGBTQ+ collections**, and conducting community outreach programs. This initiative reflects what is possible when state support and activist leadership converge. However, replicating this model in West Bengal requires attention to linguistic, cultural, and infrastructural differences from Punjab.

For example, West Bengal has a strong tradition of Bengali literature and oral storytelling. Inclusive services here must include **queer literature in Bengali, folk narratives reinterpreted through gender-inclusive lenses**, and events led by local transgender activists. The one-size-fits-all approach of importing Western best practices is likely to fail without such localization.

Moreover, these international and national practices demonstrate that inclusion is not just about collections, but about visibility, safety, and voices. Libraries must evolve from being passive spaces into proactive institutions of advocacy.

### **Assessment:**

The best practices observed in international and national contexts offer **inspirational models**; however, their direct replication in West Bengal requires thoughtful **cultural and logistical adaptations**. For instance, while the Toronto Public Library integrates LGBTQ+ services seamlessly into its public offerings, public libraries in West Bengal struggle with limited

funding, insufficient staff training, and language barriers. However, these challenges also present opportunities for **grassroots innovation**. By involving local LGBTQ+ groups, translating queer literature into Bengali, and embracing community-led programming, libraries can design **inclusive models rooted in regional realities**. The Kerala model proves that transformation is possible when state policies and community activism intersect. West Bengal can follow a decentralized but coordinated strategy.

#### 6.4 Practical Recommendations for Inclusive Library Development

Based on the review, the following actionable strategies are proposed:

1. **Staff Sensitization Training:** Libraries should implement structured training programs (e.g., 2–3 day modules) in collaboration with NGOs such as Sappho for Equality to improve awareness and interaction skills.
2. **Inclusive Collection Development:** Acquisition and translation of transgender and queer literature in Bengali should be prioritized to ensure accessibility.
3. **Community-Based Programs:** Monthly awareness sessions, storytelling events, and workshops led by transgender individuals can promote visibility and inclusion.
4. **Institutional Collaboration:** Libraries should establish formal partnerships (MoUs) with community-based organizations and shelter homes to extend outreach services, such as mobile libraries and legal information sessions.
5. **Infrastructure Development:** Gender-neutral restrooms, inclusive signage, and safe reading environments must be incorporated into library designs.

**6. Feedback and Monitoring Mechanism:** Anonymous feedback systems (digital or physical) should be implemented to assess user needs and continuously improve services.

These recommendations emphasize that inclusion should move beyond conceptual discussion to practical implementation.

The success of these recommendations depends on **institutional commitment, budget allocation, and training at the Institutional level**. Pilot projects should be initiated in metropolitan areas like **Kolkata, Siliguri, and Asansol**, with findings used to design a **state-wide inclusive library policy**.

#### Assessment:

Implementing inclusive infrastructure, resources, and programming in West Bengal's library services is not only possible but very much essential in the context of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 (**Government of India, 2019**). As identified in Table 1, key barriers such as lack of trained staff, absence of inclusive policies, inadequate infrastructure, and weak community engagement significantly limit access and participation of transgender users in library spaces.

The strategies outlined in Table 2 indicate that these challenges can be effectively addressed through a combination of short-term and long-term strategies. Immediate measures such as staff sensitization programs and community outreach can create a more welcoming environment, where long-term initiatives—such as infrastructure development and policy formulation—are essential for sustainable inclusion.

However to make it more effective, they must be institutionalized through clear policy-making and

supported by continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Inclusion should therefore be viewed not as a one-time initiative, but as an

ongoing commitment embedded within the core functioning and mission of public libraries.

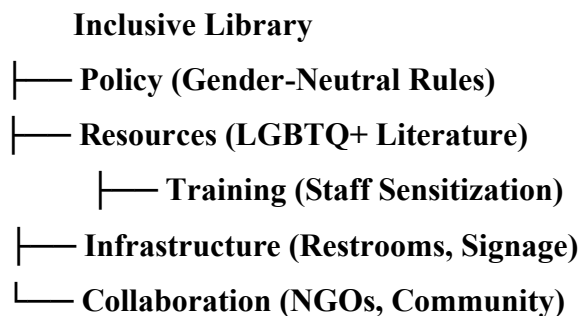
**Table 1** Key Challenges in Developing Transgender-Inclusive Library Spaces

Area	Key Challenges	Impact on Transgender Users	Source
<b>Collection Development</b>	Lack of Bengali LGBTQ+ resources	Limited access to relatable and culturally relevant information	Datta & Chatterjee (2020)
<b>Staff Sensitization</b>	Lack of awareness and training	Unwelcoming interactions, fear of discrimination	Hines (2019)
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Absence of gender-neutral facilities	Physical discomfort and exclusion	Transgender Persons Act (2019)
<b>Policy</b>	Lack of inclusive guidelines	No structured implementation of inclusivity	Review findings
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Weak collaboration with NGOs	Reduced outreach and support access	Banerjee & Basu (2021)

**Table 2** Actionable Strategies for Inclusive Library Development

Area	Recommended Action	Implementation Level	Key Stakeholders
<b>Staff</b>	Sensitization training programs	Short-term	Libraries + NGOs
<b>Collection</b>	Develop and translate LGBTQ+ resources	Medium-term	Libraries + Publishers
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Introduce gender-neutral facilities	Long-term	Govt + Institutions
<b>Services</b>	Community outreach and mobile libraries	Short-term	Libraries + NGOs
<b>Policy</b>	Develop inclusion guidelines and MoUs	Long-term	Govt + Library Authorities

**Limitations of the Study:** This review is limited to secondary sources and does not include fieldwork data or user testimonials, which could enrich future studies.



**Figure 1** Framework for Transgender-Inclusive Library Services in West Bengal

## 7. Conclusion and Suggestions

Libraries in West Bengal have the potential to integrate public spaces that support transgender individuals through policy reform, community engagement and innovative services. However, current practices reveal a gap between conceptual inclusivity and practical implementation in the field.

This study highlights the need for structured interventions, including staff training, inclusive resource development, infrastructure modification and institutional collaboration. By adopting these measures, libraries can transition from passive knowledge centers to active agents of social inclusion.

Future research should incorporate field-based studies and user perspectives to validate and expand upon the findings of this study.

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### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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The author/s declare/s no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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