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Transcending Dualities of Gender: Mapping factors influencing the life of a trans person in India

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Mapping factors influencing the life of a trans person in India

The transgender community is one of the oldest communities in India, and includes hijras, eunuchs, kothis, and aravanis. All members face severe discrimination and harassment in all respects in contemporary India, having been subjected to unfair treatments such as verbal abuse, physical and sexual violence, and victimisation in multiple settings (family, educational institutions, workplace, health care settings, and public spaces). The project aimed to understand and represent the challenges faced by the trans community in India and explore possibilities of design intervention in the system. According to UN Sustainable Development Goals 5–Gender Equality, many developing and developed countries have raised concerns about gender-related inequalities at various levels, validating the relevance of the project.

As an outcome of the project, the gigamap serves as a concise and comprehensive visual document on trans-individuals in India and is also aimed as an education tool for parents, teachers, educational institutions, policymakers, designers, changemakers, and the general public. The gigamap addresses the fundamental question of who a trans individual is, covering the basics of sex, gender and gender identities. It further delves into the history of trans-individuals in India, highlighting two important bills passed by the government and examining the ground reality.

The core of the gigamap revolves around the life journeys of trans-individuals, mapping their emotional states. It encapsulates our findings around gender

dysphoria, coming out, and transitioning, ensuring readers gain in-depth knowledge on the pivotal points of their lives. It directly connects to the synthesised causal map, emphasising the key factors influencing the life of a trans person in India. This section also incorporates illustration bubbles as empathy builders, narrating everyday emotions shared by the community.

The last section gives a system overview in the form of loops and a stakeholder map, highlighting groups of individuals with high impact and influence. It concludes with nine areas for intervention and encourages the viewer to make a difference in their own spheres of influence. Throughout the ten-week project, systemic design mapping helped us navigate the complexities faced while dealing with such sensitive topics. Gigamapping as a tool and a deliverable also helped us as designers to consider products and services.

KEYWORDS: systemic thinking, trans lives, gigamap, trans well-being, gender, system mapping, trans representation, SDG

RSD: Health & Well-being, Society & Culture

Project brief

The goal of the research project was to understand and represent the challenges faced by the trans community in India, especially with respect to education, employment, healthcare and social support during their different stages of life. The study was conducted for 10 weeks as a part of an academic project on systems design and thinking at the National Institute of Design, Bengaluru (NID Bengaluru). For our study purposes, we have contextualised the research and gigamap to India.

Process

Initially, the process of mind mapping was carried out keeping the broader topic of 'gender' at the forefront. How gender affects people's daily lives brought us to explore gender inequality and inequity as topics of interest for this exercise. At this stage, all genders were considered, and this process brought a lot of the group's understanding and perceptions to the surface. It further led to conversations on how gender inequality can lead to lower levels of educational attainment, reduced job opportunities, and limited access to healthcare.

At this stage, a collective discussion was also taken to focus on the lives of trans-individuals in India as they are the most marginalised and affected due to the inequalities in the system. In order to further validate the marginalisation of the trans community, we used a tool that we as a team referred to as *evidence mapping*. The research spanned stories from mythology, religion, history and the current-day situation. A template was designed to make physical cards of the information that we extracted from the literature we read in news articles, research papers, scholarly publications, independent journals, blogs and documented interviews. Through this evidence map, interconnections and themes such as representation in society, acceptance in social circles, the relevance of education, degree of body autonomy, crime and violence, gender dysphoria, and many more emerged. The overarching topics and relations between these areas provided us with points of enquiry for the primary research.

The primary research was conducted to better understand the lives, struggles and challenges faced by transgender individuals in India. The team planned interviews to holistically understand different segments and stakeholders involved in the system. The data collection methods, such as physical surveys and in-person and online interviews, were conducted with relevant and empathetic interview guides for each segment. Observations were ethically recorded after informed consent, maintaining absolute confidentiality whenever required.

A physical survey was conducted at the NID Bengaluru campus to gauge the understanding of gender, sexuality, and opinions about the trans community. A total of 19 interviews were conducted in the form of in-person visits, online and surveys.

Interviews included trans women, trans men, intersex, non-binary and other subject matter experts like healthcare professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists and endocrinologists. The legal side was also explored to understand the challenges. NGOs, namely QAMRA's Queer archives.[1] The Aravani art project, which provides empowerment to the trans community,[2] also participated in the study. This concluded our research phase, and we moved to synthesise our research findings.

The service design tool of a synthesis wall was used to make sense of all the stories, quotes, and data collected from our secondary and primary research. After a basic affinity mapping, the user segment colour-coded printouts were pinned on the wall. We started encoding and tagging under four major buckets: needs, goals, pain points, and quick fixes. New cause-and-effect connections emerged, feeding into our causal map and enriching our understanding of the system. We found numerous reinforcing and balancing loops and how these could impact the system. Leverage points emerged from the map and governed our further insights. The causal map was then layered with an extensive stakeholder map, followed by an Excel sheet analysis of the same. Using a high-interest, high-impact quadrant, we gained an understanding of how the stakeholders could be the changemakers of the system.

The following insights emerged from the synthesis of the system:

> **Lack of social and familial support** for trans-individuals alienates the community, making everyday living a challenge. There is an urgent need for an increase in awareness about gender identities.

> **Education** plays a key role in deciding the life trajectory of a trans person. Many trans-individuals experience harassment and are at risk of leaving school before graduation. Some are forced into undignified occupations.

> **Many Indian languages lack the vocabulary** to express gender identities outside of the binary, leaving many trans children confused and stressed about their identity.

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[1] https://qamra.in/
[2] https://aravaniartproject.com/

Mental health issues are high in the trans community essentially due to stigma and social and familial rejection.

Gender-diverse amenities are important to re-install acceptance and create welcoming environments at educational institutions, workplaces, and social events.

The lack of data and documentation on trans lives in India has slowed down research in the fields of medicine, employment and policies for the community. Better data collection and laws would help to bridge knowledge gaps.

Visualisation

We decided to use the gigamap as a tool to deliver our final research outcome for the project. The technique allowed us to realise the systems map and research in a visual format for the viewer to understand the cause-and-effect relationships. By presenting a comprehensive overview of the lives and experiences of trans people in India, this gigamap aims to sensitise and educate the viewer, instilling empathy and awareness to uplift trans lives. The gigamap is structured in three parts: *context setter, synthesis,* and *system takeaways.*

The context setter section begins by addressing the fundamental question of who a trans-individual is to educate the varied audiences about the basics of sex, gender and gender identities. It further delves into the history of trans-individuals in India, from ancient mythology to the present, shedding light on the impact of colonisation on their societal status, highlighting two important bills passed by the government and examining the ground reality. This section also explores the hierarchy within the hijra community in India.
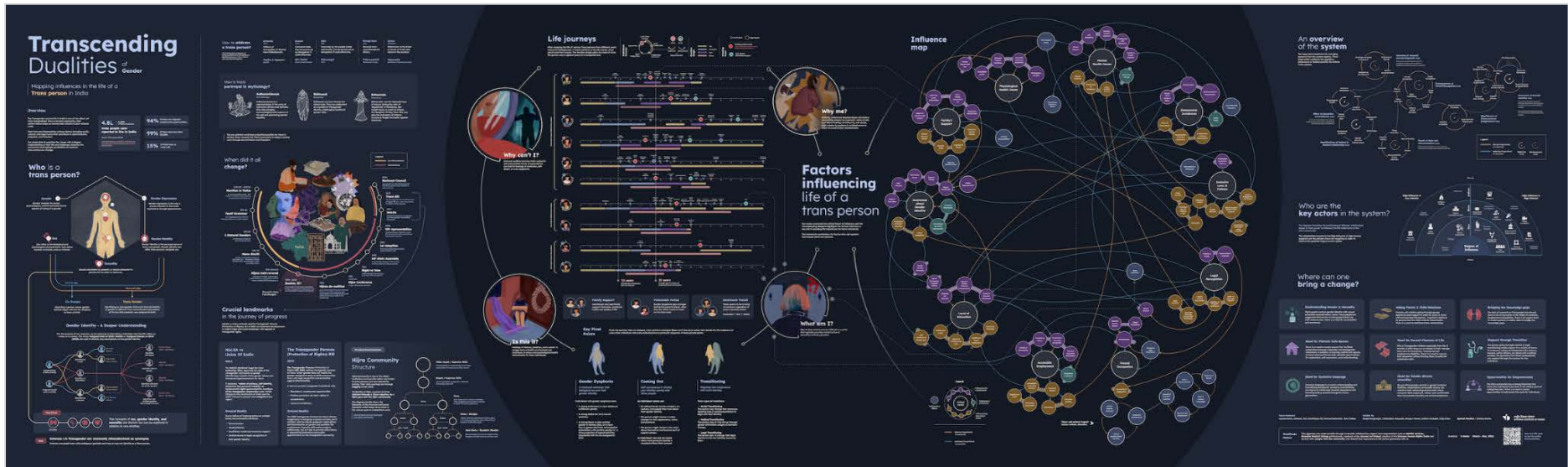
The synthesis section forms the core of the gigamap that revolves around the life journeys of the trans-individuals studied while mapping their emotional states. This section also encapsulates our findings around gender dysphoria, coming out, and transitioning, ensuring readers gain in-depth knowledge on the pivotal points of their lives. It directly connects to the synthesised causal map, emphasising the key factors influencing the lives of trans people in India. The central nodes are the system leverage points with a relation of cause-and-effect being represented. This section also

incorporates illustrations bubbles as empathy builders, narrating everyday scenarios shared by the community.

The takeaway section gives a system overview in the form of loops and a stakeholder map, highlighting groups of individuals with high impact and influence. It concludes with nine areas for intervention and encourages the viewer to make a difference in their own spheres of influence.

Conclusion

Throughout the ten-week project, the systems thinking approach helped us to navigate the complexities faced while dealing with sensitive topics. The numerous iterations for mind maps, idea boards, and sticky note exercises aided our group's understanding and helped us build upon each other's thoughts. Gigamap as a tool and as the final stage deliverable will aid in the further development of products, services and systems and help us as designers to intervene in a way that will have positive long-term impacts.

Transcending Dualities Gigamap

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