

**EXPLORING THE SPATIAL EXPERIENCES OF
TRANSGENDER DEVOTEES IN SAUNDATTI THROUGH
AN ARCHITECTURAL AND COMMUNITY LENS**

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the lived spatial experiences of transgender devotees from the Jogappa community at the Renuka Devi Temple in Saundatti, Karnataka. Guided by an intersectional framework that links gender, religion, caste, and class, the research used snowball sampling, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with devotees aged 25 to 55 from Bengaluru, Belagavi, Kolhapur, Gadag, and Mumbai. Thematic analysis produced four principal themes: identity, belonging, accessibility, and infrastructure. Findings show that peripheral and semi-open temple areas, such as courtyards, verandas, and steps, function as sites of social comfort and collective ritual, while inner sanctums often evoke social awareness and restraint. Devotees reported infrastructural gaps, including gendered restrooms, limited accommodation, and transport discrimination, and expressed willingness to participate in planning. The study argues for participatory planning and representation of transgender devotees in temple and urban decision-making to translate ritual inclusion into spatial equity.

Key Words and Phrases: Sacred architecture; transgender devotees; Jogappa community; spatial experience; intersectionality; belonging; accessibility; participatory planning; Renuka Devi Temple; Saundatti

1 Introduction

Sacred architecture embodies not only the ritual and symbolic expressions of faith but also the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through spatial configuration, ornamentation, materiality, and thresholds that signify hierarchy and belonging [1]. Recent scholarship highlights that spatial qualities such as form, light, proportion, and

circulation patterns significantly influence worshippers' emotional engagement, sense of identity, and spatial comfort within sacred environments [2], [3], [4]. Architecture, therefore, becomes an active agent in shaping both collective devotion and social recognition within religious spaces.

In India, transgender devotees, particularly the Jogappa community, inhabit a complex intersection between spirituality and social marginalization. While their devotion is deeply rooted in cultural tradition, their lived spatial experiences within temple complexes remain underexplored from an architectural perspective. Intersectional theory offers a valuable framework to understand how gender identity, religion, caste, and class interact to shape these experiences [5], [6], [7].

This study investigates the spatial experiences of transgender devotees at the Renuka Devi Temple in Saundatti, a significant pilgrimage site for the Jogappa community. The objectives are to understand how transgender devotees experience and use temple spaces, to examine how architectural design influences comfort, safety, and belonging, and to propose how participatory planning can foster inclusivity in religious and urban spatial contexts.

2 Review of Related Studies

2.1 Spatial Experience and Architecture

Spatial experience in architecture denotes the dynamic relationship between built space and users, mediated through multisensory perception and embodied responses. It encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological reactions prompted by environmental qualities such as materiality, light, sound, and scale, which together shape meaning, memory, and behaviour [8], [9], [10]. Architectural form and ritual movement affect how individuals transition from public to sacred domains, reinforcing inclusion or exclusion based on accessibility and spatial hierarchy [11]. Reviews of heritage architecture emphasize that identity, sensory engagement, emotional connection, and accessibility are central to experiencing sacred spaces [12]. Collectively, these findings suggest that space functions not only as a physical structure but also as a cultural and emotional medium for negotiating belonging and spirituality.

2.2 Gender, Identity, and Intersectionality

Intersectional theory helps explain how overlapping identities—gender, religion, caste, class—shape experiences in social and spiritual spaces. Research shows that transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals often face exclusion, restricted access, and limited recognition in ritual contexts [13]. Legal and social transitions influence spatial behavior and identity performance, highlighting how space becomes a site for negotiating acceptance and visibility [14]. These insights indicate that the spatial experiences of transgender devotees must be understood through the intersections of identity, faith, and community participation, not solely architectural form.

2.3 Participatory and Inclusive Planning

Participatory and community-based planning is increasingly recognized as enhancing inclusivity in urban and sacred spaces. Involving marginalized groups in design ensures that spatial interventions reflect diverse needs and promote equity [15]. Evidence from Indian urban contexts shows that perceptions of safety and security, opportunities for social and community bonding, the presence of people (mass movement or crowding), accessibility, and feasibility in moving and staying in spaces significantly contribute to fostering belonging among gender minorities. Gender-responsive city-planning studies confirm that inclusive participation contributes to safer and more equitable conditions, improving users' confidence to move freely, reducing anxiety, and strengthening social inclusion [16], [17]. These perspectives underscore the importance of engaging transgender and other gender minority communities as stakeholders in architectural, infrastructural, and programmatic decision-making.

2.4 Methodological Approaches in Related Studies

Qualitative methods dominate research on sacred architecture and gendered spatial experience. Observation, interviews, and narrative documentation capture how users perceive and navigate space [18]. Semi-structured interviews with marginalized groups reveal nuanced insights into identity and belonging within religious environments [13]. Snowball sampling is effective for engaging transgender participants, as visibility and safety concerns limit their accessibility in conventional surveys. Combining field observation with participatory discussions and architectural mapping provides a comprehensive understanding of how sacred spaces are experienced, adapted, and reimagined across social and cultural contexts.

3 Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design aimed at understanding the lived spatial experiences of transgender devotees (Jogappas) within the Renuka Devi Temple complex at Saundatti. The conceptual framework was structured around three key objectives: Religious Factors, Visitation Patterns, and Spatial Experiences and Requirements. This structure reflects a sequential approach in which the first two objectives informed the development of the third.

The initial phase focused on religious factors such as beliefs, ritual identity, affiliation to Saundatti, the Guru Diksha tradition, and patterns of religious commitment. Understanding these elements was essential to contextualize the spiritual and cultural foundation of the Jogappa community's engagement with sacred space. The second component, visitation patterns and frequency, examined aspects such as motivation for visiting, nature of rituals, group participation, and community bonding. These insights helped the researchers understand how devotees navigate, use, and interact with the spatial elements of the temple.

Through the analysis of responses linked to these two objectives, the study then identified the third dimension—spatial experiences and spatial requirements—which encompassed the devotees’ sense of belonging, social identity, perceptions of safety, accessibility, and infrastructural needs. The integrated design thus established a conceptual link between faith-based behavior, community movement, and spatial engagement, providing an architectural perspective on inclusivity in sacred environments.



Figure 1. Research Design Framework

3.2 Sampling Method

A snowball sampling technique was adopted to reach Jogappa devotees through *guru–chela* kinship networks and local NGOs. Beginning with three initial contacts, participants recommended others within the community, building a trust-based recruitment chain crucial for ethically engaging a socially marginalized group. This method proved effective because transgender devotees often experience exclusion from formal surveys and require safe, identity-affirming participation spaces. Ultimately, participants aged above 15/16 years were included, representing devotees from Bengaluru, Belagavi, Kolhapur, Gadag, and Mumbai (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Profile Summary

Age Range	Above 15/16 years
Gender Identity	Transgender / Jogappa devotees
Places of Origin	Bengaluru, Belagavi, Kolhapur, Gadag, Mumbai
Years of Pilgrimage	> 5 years (average 10 years)
Primary Ritual Role	Guru–chela guidance, temple service, festival performance

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection was primarily qualitative and included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Observations were conducted during

temple visits and ritual events to document devotees' interactions with architectural features such as courtyards, verandas, resting spaces, and sanctum areas. The interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured question schedule derived from the pilot study, addressing themes like motivation for visiting, ritual participation, spatial comfort, community bonding, accessibility, and infrastructural challenges.

Table 2. Data Collection Parameters and Tools

Objective	Focus Areas	Primary Tools Used
Religious Factors	Beliefs, ritual identity, Guru Diksha, affiliation to Saundatti	Semi-structured interviews, observation
Visitation Patterns	Motivation, frequency, community bonding, movement through temple spaces	Observation, focus group discussions
Spatial Experiences and Requirements	Sense of belonging, accessibility, safety, and infrastructure	Thematic analysis of qualitative data

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis. Four principal themes—identity, belonging, accessibility, and infrastructure—were derived from the narratives. Observations were correlated with spatial mappings and architectural drawings to interpret how form, circulation, and materiality shape devotees' experiences. These themes were then examined in relation to the architectural and social parameters identified in the conceptual framework.

4 Findings

4.1 Ritual and Spatial Movement

Observation and interview findings revealed that ritual practices among devotees are strongly rooted in emotional connection, community participation, and shared identity. The collective performance of rituals, singing, and devotional gatherings fostered feelings of equality, comfort, and belonging. Participants engaged freely in these communal acts, perceiving them as spaces of social acceptance and emotional reassurance.

Rather than emphasizing spatial or physical arrangements, devotees described their connection in terms of inclusivity and recognition. The rituals became platforms for expression and togetherness, where social boundaries faded, and individuals experienced collective strength and unity. These gatherings were experienced as opportunities for emotional release, mutual support, and social visibility, enabling devotees to reclaim self-worth and community belonging.

4.2 Sense of Belonging and Recognition

Belonging within the community was deeply intertwined with acceptance, identity validation, and emotional safety. For many participants, inclusion within collective devotion and festivals symbolized recognition not just as worshippers but as valued members of a spiritual family. Being able to perform rituals and participate openly strengthened their dignity and reinforced the sense of social legitimacy.

Saundatti emerged as a place that embodies emotional and spiritual belonging. The Guru–Chela system—particularly among the Jogappa community—provides the foundation of this belonging. Each devotee’s relationship with their Guru offers mentorship, guidance, and protection, helping to overcome the trauma of family rejection and social stigma. Through Diksha, members acquire a spiritual identity that links them to their Guru family and to the larger network of devotees who travel and live together during festivals.

These collective bonds create psychological stability and a sense of continuity. The mass gatherings of devotees during rituals in Saundatti reinforce community visibility and acceptance. Such participation allows transgender individuals to express their identity confidently and to experience equality within sacred and social contexts.



Figure 3. Representation of communal rituals by the Jogappa Community

Table 3. Factors Contributing to Sense of Belonging

Factor	Description	Illustrative Evidence
Ritual Participation	Equal involvement in key temple rituals	Inclusive singing and performance roles
Guru–Chela System	Mentorship fosters emotional security	Shared accommodation and mutual care
Collective Visibility	Group rituals enhance recognition	Public performances during festivals
Social Safety	Acceptance by temple authorities and pilgrims	Positive interactions reported by most participants

4.3 Accessibility and Infrastructure

Although material facilities remain limited, emotional and social networks ensure a strong sense of accessibility and security. Participants emphasized that comfort arises from trust, familiarity, and collective presence rather than from physical infrastructure. Most devotees relied on Guru families for shelter, emotional support, and companionship. Group mobility and shared living were identified as vital coping strategies for safety and inclusion.

Local NGOs occasionally offered food or temporary accommodation during festivals, but such assistance was sporadic. The consistent sources of protection and care were community networks built through mutual trust and social cohesion. Traveling and staying together helped reduce discrimination and provided a collective defense against exclusion.

Accessibility was thus defined not by physical reach or infrastructure but by emotional feasibility—the ability to move, worship, and reside in environments where one feels secure and accepted. The supportive ecosystem within Saundatti enables devotees to participate freely while maintaining dignity and belonging.

Table 4. Accessibility and Infrastructure Gaps

Facility Type	Current Status	Reported Issue	Coping Mechanism
Restrooms	Gendered (male/female only)	Lack of privacy, exclusion	Use of NGO or private toilets
Accommodation	Limited, often denied	Safety concerns	Shared rental or NGO dorms
Sanitation &	Poor in festival	Unhygienic	Community self-

Waste Disposal	periods	conditions	cleaning drives
Transport Access	Inconsistent	Discrimination by drivers and co-drivers/conductors	Group travel for safety

4.4 Inclusion in Planning

Inclusion in planning was widely viewed as essential for dignity, empowerment, and self-recognition. Participants expressed that participation in decision-making should move beyond infrastructure to reflect emotional and social realities. True inclusion was described as being heard, represented, and respected.

Devotees associated inclusive involvement with greater safety, acceptance, and belonging. Environments that encourage collaboration and social visibility were perceived as secure and reassuring. When transgender individuals participate in shaping community decisions, it enhances their confidence and reduces alienation.

The Guru–Chela system provides a self-sustaining model of inclusion where social, spiritual, and emotional needs are addressed simultaneously. Gurus guide their followers through shared responsibilities, spiritual rituals, and community engagements, ensuring psychological stability and identity affirmation. Within the Jogappa community of Saundatti, this system transforms exclusion into empowerment, enabling members to sustain livelihood, social recognition, and emotional well-being.

Participants reported that staying under the protection of their Guru families rather than using external accommodation provides emotional comfort and social assurance. Group associations during festivals create a sense of extended family, reinforcing both security and belonging. Saundatti thus operates as a nurturing ecosystem that unites acceptance, identity, safety, accessibility, and spiritual growth.

These findings highlight that inclusion in planning must integrate emotional and psychological dimensions alongside social empowerment. Co-created systems that reflect lived experiences, encourage community engagement, and affirm identity are most effective in promoting equality and belonging.

Table 5. Perspectives on Inclusive Planning

Theme	Participant Views	Implication for Design
Representation	Inclusion in planning committees validates identity and lived experience	Promotes culturally responsive and gender-sensitive design
Safety & Security	Spaces with frequent movement and collective presence create reassurance	Design environments that enable visibility, crowd safety, and emotional comfort
Privacy &	Preference for gender-neutral	Ensure private, safe, and

Comfort	and private facilities under Guru supervision	flexible spatial typologies
Community Bonding	Guru–Chela relationships and group travel reinforce belonging	Provide communal spaces encouraging interaction and shared identity
Cultural Continuity	Ritual and sacred character sustain identity and livelihood	Integrate heritage preservation with inclusive design principles

5 Discussion

The findings indicate that the Renuka Devi Temple functions as both a sacred and social sanctuary, where spirituality and identity intersect for the Jogappa community. The temple environment transcends its ritual purpose by becoming a safe space that affirms transgender devotees' sense of belonging and legitimacy within the broader social order. Through ritual participation, song, and collective movement, Jogappas assert visibility and reclaim spiritual authority in a society that often marginalizes them. However, these inclusive experiences coexist with structural barriers—limited infrastructure, gendered facilities, and restricted accommodations—that reveal the persistent tension between spiritual equality and spatial exclusion. Intersectional factors such as gender, caste, religion, and economic status deeply shape how transgender devotees navigate and perceive sacred space. Their engagement with temple architecture reflects not only faith but also a struggle for recognition and spatial justice. Within this context, participatory planning emerges as a transformative approach to integrate lived experiences into design and policy. Involving transgender devotees in decision-making can bridge the gap between physical architecture and socio-cultural inclusivity, ensuring that temple environments evolve as equitable, identity-affirming spaces. The study thus situates sacred architecture within a larger discourse of social inclusion, arguing that spaces of worship must consciously respond to diverse embodied experiences of faith.

6 Conclusion

The study concludes that the Renuka Devi Temple at Saundatti embodies both spiritual belonging and spatial marginalization for the Jogappa community. While the temple provides an environment where transgender devotees find recognition through ritual participation and collective devotion, their spatial experiences remain constrained by inadequate facilities, restricted mobility, and limited engagement in planning processes. Observations and interviews demonstrate that inclusive architecture cannot be achieved through structural design alone; it must emerge from an empathetic understanding of community voices and participation. The research highlights that snowball sampling and qualitative engagement were essential for reaching participants ethically and authentically, allowing their narratives to inform the architectural interpretation. The

findings reaffirm that built environments mirror social hierarchies, and transforming them requires inclusive dialogue between communities, temple authorities, planners, and policy institutions. The study therefore advocates for the formal inclusion of transgender representatives in temple and urban planning committees, ensuring that sacred and civic spaces alike address the needs of gender-diverse groups. By linking spiritual participation to spatial justice, the research contributes to a growing body of literature that reimagines sacred architecture not only as a vessel of devotion but also as a potential framework for equity, belonging, and human dignity.

Ethical Considerations

As participants could not read or write, verbal consent was taken in their presence and witnessed by community elders and NGO facilitators.

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