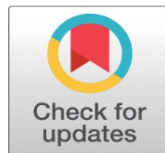


MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF TRANSGENDER PERSONS IN INDIA: A CRITICAL SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Mansoor Ahmad ¹, Aneesa Shafi ²

¹ Assistant Professor (Contractual) in the Department of Sociology, University of Kashmir J and K, India

² Dean School of Social Sciences, University of Kashmir J and K, India



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Corresponding Author

Mansoor Ahmad,
darmansoor2224@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Transgender persons constitute a diverse group whose gender identities transcend culturally imposed binary constructions of masculinity and femininity. Despite their long historical presence in Indian society, transgender communities have faced systemic marginalization, social exclusion, and cultural stigmatization. Media, as a powerful social institution, plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions; however, mainstream Indian media has historically rendered transgender identities either invisible or caricatured. This paper critically examines the representation of transgender persons in Indian media, with specific focus on Hindi cinema, television serials, documentaries, and advertisements. While certain media narratives have progressively attempted to humanize transgender experiences, negative portrayals continue to dominate, reinforcing stereotypes and societal prejudices. Drawing on sociological theories of identity, representation, and marginalization, this study argues that media portrayals significantly influence public attitudes and can either perpetuate exclusion or foster social acceptance. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for more authentic, inclusive, and rights-based representations of transgender lives in Indian media.

Keywords: Media Representation, Transgender, Hijras, Bollywood, Advertisements, Indian Society

1. INTRODUCTION

Any systematic inquiry into sexuality and gender politics must begin with an examination of identity formation and the socio-political contexts in which identities are produced, negotiated, and contested. Identity—sexual or otherwise—is neither static nor singular; rather, it is shaped by historical processes, cultural norms, ideological frameworks, and power relations [Bose and Bhattacharya \(2007\)](#). In the Indian context, identities are further complicated by the intersecting influences of tradition, colonial legacies, modernity, nationalism, and globalization.

Bose and Bhattacharya (2007) argue that locating individual identity within the framework of national identity—itsself fluid and ideologically driven—is essential for understanding sexual and gender diversity. These identities are often constructed through competing discourses that pit heterosexual normativity against non-binary and non-heteronormative expressions. Consequently, transgender identities in India exist at the margins of both traditional and modern social structures.

Hijras, often referred to as India's "third gender/ transgender," have been documented in ancient Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain texts under categories such as tritiyaprakriti, kliba, and napumsaka Reddy (2005). Despite this historical recognition, contemporary hijra communities experience acute social exclusion, economic deprivation, and cultural stigmatization. Identity among hijras is multidimensional, encompassing gender, sexuality, kinship, religion, and class Reddy (2005). These identities are both self-defined and socially imposed, making them vulnerable to misrepresentation, particularly within mass media Kalra and Bhugra (2015).

Media representations play a decisive role in shaping public understanding of marginalized communities. In India, cinema and television function as influential cultural texts that not only reflect societal values but also actively construct social realities. This paper critically examines how transgender persons—particularly hijras—are portrayed across different forms of Indian media and evaluates the sociological implications of these portrayals.

2. TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN INDIA

Nanda's seminal ethnographic work *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990), *The Hijras of India* (1999) conceptualizes hijras as an institutionalized third-gender category with distinct socio-religious functions. Traditionally, hijras perform rituals at childbirths, weddings, and religious festivals, deriving symbolic legitimacy from their perceived association with fertility and divine power. These ritual roles serve as mechanisms through which hijras negotiate social recognition and collective identity.

Reddy (2005) ethnographic study challenges monolithic interpretations of hijra identity by highlighting its internal diversity. She emphasizes that hijra identity is constructed through everyday practices, embodied performances, kinship networks, and public markers such as the distinctive hijra hand-clap. These performative acts simultaneously assert identity and invite social scrutiny, rendering hijras hyper-visible yet socially marginalized.

Despite such rich cultural histories, mainstream narratives—particularly media portrayals—often reduce transgender identities to simplistic stereotypes, erasing their complexity and humanity.

3. TRANSGENDER PORTRAYALS IN INDIAN MEDIA

3.1. BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Hindi mainstream cinema has historically portrayed transgender characters as comic relief, villains, or grotesque spectacles rather than as fully realized human beings. During the so-called "Golden Era" of Bollywood (1950s–1960s), cross-dressing characters were frequently used to evoke humor, reinforcing the notion of gender non-conformity as abnormal or laughable. Prominent actors, including Amitabh Bachchan in *Lawaaris* (1981), contributed to such portrayals, where exaggerated mannerisms, crude gestures, and caricatured appearances reinforced public ridicule.

Films such as *Aunty No. 1* (1998) and *Golmaal Returns* (2008) continued this tradition, employing transgender imagery primarily for comedic effect. Such representations trivialize transgender lives and normalize societal mockery, thereby reinforcing exclusionary attitudes.

A notable departure occurred with *Kunwara Baap* (1974), where comedian Mehmood portrayed transgender characters with relative dignity, even incorporating real hijras in a song sequence. Although limited in scope, this marked an early attempt at respectful representation Saxena (2011).

Post-liberalization cinema witnessed a gradual, though inconsistent, shift. *Sadak* (1991) introduced a transgender villain, Maharani, played by Sadashiv Amrapurkar. While critically acclaimed, the character reinforced negative associations of transgender identity with moral depravity. In contrast, films such as *Tamanna* (1998) and *Darmiyan* (1997) offered more empathetic portrayals, exploring themes of motherhood, sacrifice, and familial rejection. *Bombay* (1995) depicted a transgender character as compassionate and humane, offering shelter during communal violence.

Political representations in films like [Shabnam Mausi \(2005\)](#) and [Welcome to Sajjanpur \(2008\)](#) portrayed transgender individuals as ethical political actors, reflecting real-life electoral participation. However, these narratives also underscore persistent social violence and institutional exclusion faced by transgender persons.

The Hindi film [Laxmii \(2020\)](#), attempts to foreground the lives of transgender persons through the central character of Laxmii, a transgender woman whose spirit possesses a cisgender male body. While the film claims to promote social acceptance and awareness of transgender issues, its portrayal remains deeply problematic and contradictory. The central transgender character is presented primarily through the trope of horror and possession, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes that associate transgender identities with fear, abnormality, and the supernatural. Laxmii's anger and trauma are externalized as violent outbursts, which risks portraying transgender people as unstable or dangerous rather than as victims of structural oppression. Therefore, the exaggerated body language, makeup, and vocal modulation further contribute to theatricality and sensationalism, echoing the problematic "spectacle" treatment of transgender characters in Indian cinema.

A truly emancipatory portrayal would require centering transgender voices, normalizing their everyday experiences, and moving beyond fear-based or sensational representations.

4. DOCUMENTARIES AND TELEVISION SERIALS

Documentaries have played a comparatively progressive role in portraying transgender realities. [Aur Neha Nahin Bik Payee: Life of a Eunuch \(2011\)](#) sensitively documents the lived experiences, aspirations, and struggles of transgender persons was launched at the 799th Urs of Sufi saint Khawaja Moinuddin Chisty in Ajmer. Produced by an NGO working for transgender welfare, the documentary foregrounds structural inequalities while humanizing its subjects [Saxena \(2011\)](#).

Television serials such as [Shakti – Astitva Ke Ehsaas Ki \(2016\)](#) brought transgender issues into mainstream discourse. The narrative addresses marriage, family rejection, and societal stigma, highlighting the everyday discrimination faced by gender-variant individuals. While melodramatic, the serial marks an important step toward visibility and social dialogue.

5. TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Advertisements have emerged as a powerful medium for positive transgender representation. The [Vicks Touch of Care \(2017\)](#) campaign portrayed a transgender woman as a nurturing mother, challenging normative assumptions about gender and parenthood. By focusing on love, care, and resilience, the advertisement foregrounded transgender humanity and rights.

Similarly, Brooke Bond Red Label's [Swad Apnepan Ka \(2020\)](#) campaign addressed social prejudice and intergenerational acceptance. It's interesting to note the expressions of the grandmother and the grandchild – throughout the advertisement, we see that the grandchild is giving the grandmother very odd looks indicating that she is likely to be more accepting of the transgender woman. The symbolic act of blessing a transgender woman signified a break from entrenched stereotypes and promoted inclusive social values.

6. CONCLUSION

Indian media has historically portrayed transgender persons through lenses of ridicule, deviance, or marginality, often reinforcing societal prejudices rather than challenging them. Such representations risk legitimizing discrimination and sustaining myths surrounding transgender identities [Kalra and Bhugra \(2015\)](#). While recent films, television serials, documentaries, and advertisements indicate a gradual shift toward inclusivity, these efforts remain limited and uneven.

Authentic and nuanced portrayals are essential not only for social acceptance but also for advancing transgender rights and dignity. Media, as a powerful agent of socialization, must move beyond tokenism and stereotype to represent transgender persons as complex individuals embedded within social, cultural, and political realities. Greater collaboration with transgender communities and scholars can facilitate more ethical and transformative media narratives.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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