






UNVEILING THE UNSEEN: QUEER REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN CINEMA AND THE ROAD YET TO BE EXPLORED

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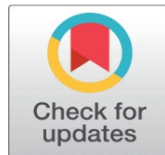
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ABSTRACT

There exists a disproportion in the Indian film industry in the delegation and the representation of queer community. The inclusion of queer subjects often fluctuates between invisibility, stereotypes, authentic portrayal and its acceptance. Investigations and explorations of the LGBTQ+ narratives in a refined and nuanced way became more visible in the Indian cinemas after the amendment of Section 377 in 2018. This study aims to observe and understand the horizons and boundaries of queer representation in the Indian film industry by examining the historical and contemporary global trends, significant movies, and related scholarly productions and literary narratives. A huge gap is prevailing between the global queer film sector and the Indian queer film sector in the detailing of queer subjects on the backdrop of social, political, economic and familial resistance. This review article evidences that the developments in both mainstream and regional industries still do not gain freedom from the restrictions of class, caste, gender binaries, and censorship. This apparently calls for the need for an intersectional and authentic detailing of queer narratives. The difference in the reception of queer subjects on various geographical and generational bases is yet another topic for discussion. The article stands for politically correct, culturally rooted, socially balanced queer portrayals in the Indian film industry.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, an integral part of entertainment, plays a crucial role in moulding and enriching humans' perceptions and critical thinking. Through the feature of storytelling, films influence the collective norms and sometimes point out the unwritten social values [Pandey and Gaur \(2025\)](#). Indian cinema has touched various sectors of human existence, including class, caste, creed, contemporary concerns, family knots, and social responsibilities. However, a voyage

towards the genuine representation of LGBTQIA+ in the movies takes a prolonged period of time. For generations, Indian cinema exhibits an indifference in the matter of these individuals. More than this ignorance, the most pathetic thing is that the film industry uses these earthlings only for comic relief. They are often portrayed under the shadow of red flags [Dey and Doley \(2024\)](#). These inaccurate portrayals are not accidental but a deliberate act of exploitation. This manipulation echoes in various sectors of existence, including societal, cultural, legal and religious. Because for generations, our tradition, values and beliefs show a kind of unease towards the non-heteronormative individuals. Filmmakers are impeded by the legal differences in portraying queer concepts. The Indian Penal Code under Section 377 describes same sex relationships as a criminal offence [Sarkar \(2021\)](#), [Shastri, \(2021\)](#). Even if a space has been given to the people from this community, it will be for depicting a deviant or disposable effect [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#).

Over time, and more so after the 2018 Supreme Court ruling, queer existences have evolved with regard to representations. Some movies now present queer characters as nuanced rather than caricatures. Popular narratives, however, keep emphasising upper-class, urban queer selves designed as more presentable within larger segments of society [Verghese \(2024\)](#). Cinema is a powerful sociocultural instrument. It mirrors, reinforces, and at times challenges prevailing societal norms. In India, film is not merely entertainment but a parallel culture influencing public discourse and identity construction [Manukriti et al. \(2020\)](#). Yet, despite its cultural magnitude, Indian cinema has historically marginalised or misrepresented queer identities [Sumati \(2020\)](#).

The Indian Penal Code's (IPC) Section 377 was greatly shaped by colonial morality, social stigma, and the fear of offending the establishment in the mainstream industry. Such representations tended to be conservative values, such that LGBTQIA+ characters were villainous, comic, or tragic. Although the international cinematic scene developed under the repression of the Hays Code and ultimately thrived through New Queer Cinema and global queer film festivals [Bao \(2019\)](#), [Pramaggiore \(2013\)](#), India remained behind, bound by institutional censorship and the erasure of queer discourse in the public sphere [Kole \(2007\)](#).

Section 377 being lifted followed a series of queer narratives and offered promises of more inclusive news coverage [Prasitha and Bhuvanewari \(2024\)](#). But more realities, such as the intersections of class, caste, regional identity, and the role of censorship, indicate that much of queer India remains invisible [Kole \(2007\)](#). The homogenised and prosperous representations of the queer community become problematic since there exists a huge gap between the rustic and civic life, elite and common survival and privileged and marginalised dynamism. This study focuses on analysing the portrayals of people from queer community in Indian cinemas from the perspectives of the present, past and future, i.e., contemporary, historical and upcoming.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several critics point out the multifaceted layers and complexities of queer representation in cinema. An interesting fact is that this representation includes intricacies from various sections of socio-political, cultural, industrial and legal regulations. Early Indian film artistry and global cinematic aesthetics and traditions are constantly discussed subjects in literature. Along with that, contemporary cinematic movements, the current evolution of cinematic liberation, the nullification of Section 377, and regional interventions are recurring areas of scholarly studies. Queer representation in Indian films underscores a shift from an invisible and stereotypical aspect to a more progressive and selective visibility. Revisions in legal criteria, variations in industrial constraints and disparities in cultural norms shaped these developing representations. Early depictions highly depend on the moral perspective. This silenced the authentic portrayals for a very long time. Scholars noticed the shift from this silent era to the resilient era of Queer representation and brought this transition to the public space. Regional cinemas are indeed more context-specific, while the mainstream tends to align with the assimilationist narratives. Queer representations and their compelling visibility hinge on digital platforms to a larger extent. However, studies reveal that the urban and elite approaches are gaining more privilege in these digital platforms.

2.1. GLOBAL FOUNDATIONS OF QUEER REPRESENTATION IN CINEMA

A constructive shift in the perspective of representing queer subjects is visible at the level of international cinemas. The negligence and negative portrayals of non-heteronormative sexual identities have been favourably transformed into the celebration of the same [Salam-Salmaoui and Salam \(2025\)](#). In early Hollywood, the Hays Code - the Motion Picture

Production Code - (1930-1968) explicitly forbade representations of homosexuality, compelling filmmakers to rely on subtext or to depict queer characters as immoral or doomed [Pramaggiore \(2013\)](#).

A turning point came with the emergence of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s. The movement, fronted by filmmakers such as Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki, put front and centre defiantly queer narratives. Movies like *Paris is Burning* (1990) and *The Living End* (1992) refused traditional and accepted versions and found a place for marginalised voices. They addressed sexuality and the crossroads between racism, gender, poverty and activism [Bao \(2019\)](#), [Dasgupta and Mahn \(2023\)](#).

It was the European film that contributed most to the legitimization of queer stories. Film directors like Pedro Almodovar (Spain) and Xavier Dolan (Canada) treated queer issues empathetically and experimentally. This inspired postcolonial filmmakers in countries like India, where filmmakers started drawing on universal models of world cinema in representing queer realities specific to cultures [Dawson and Loist \(2018\)](#), [Schoonover and Galt \(2016\)](#), [Williams \(2020\)](#).

2.2. INDIAN CINEMA: EARLY PORTRAYALS AND STEREOTYPES

In India, cinematic presentation of queer identities remained problematic and limited for most of the twentieth century. Rooted in colonial morality and post-independence conservatism, Indian cinema rarely depicted non-heteronormative relationships with authenticity or dignity [Bhattacharjee \(2004\)](#), [Jalarajan and Suresh \(2021\)](#). Homosexuality, criminalised until 2018, was either invisibilised or encoded through comedic, villainous, or tragic figures, reinforcing societal taboos and misconceptions [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Dey \(2024\)](#).

Effeminate men, cross-dressers, and sexually ambiguous characters were frequently reduced to caricature and comic relief [Palekar \(2012\)](#). Mainstream films such as *Masti* (2004) and *Dostana* (2008) exploited male intimacy for humour or deception, trivialising same-sex attraction and equating gender non-conformity with absurdity [Dey and Doley \(2024\)](#).

During the 1990s, the independent filmmakers took initiatives to challenge the authoritative heteronormative accounts, and this sparked a fire for the need for non heteronormative discourses. As a result of this, in 1996, the Indian-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta came forth with her Bollywood attempt 'Fire'. This movie claims to be very first initiative of the Indian film industry that stands for the authentic portrayal of homosexual relationships. The film is set in a traditional family background where two women fell in love with each other [Bhattacharjee \(2004\)](#), [Parmaar \(2024\)](#). In the face of censorship, the film was able to break the silence on lesbian desire. In a similar context, *Bomgay* (1996), directed by Riyad Vinci Wadia, represented queer male desire through experimental imagery and poetry, a pioneering work on openly gay Indian films [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Dey \(2024\)](#).

Regional films contributed significantly to the diversification of queer representation. Movies such as *Sancharam* (Malayalam, 2004), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Bengali, 2010), and *Mitrachi Goshta* (Marathi, 2014) negotiated same-sex relations in culture-specific terms, considering religion, caste, and familial obligations. These stories challenged the Western origin of queer identity and placed it within the plural traditions of India [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Raju \(2020\)](#). Even though the films remained on the fringes of the commercial mainstream, they impacted academic and cultural discourses in serious ways. The films proved the capability of cinema to foreground the marginalised and reimagine the identity of India through the queer lens and convert the screen from the instrument of erasure to the agent of empowerment [Murasing \(2025\)](#).

2.3. EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON INDIAN QUEER CINEMA

Academic attention toward Indian queer films has grown appreciably over the last two decades, especially after seminal socio-legal events like the release of *Fire* (1996), the reading down of Section 377, and the advent of online streaming channels. Besides altering the content of public debate, they also unveiled academic discussion on the politics of on-screen queer representation [Chaudhary \(2012\)](#), [Menon \(2016\)](#).

Some scholars have also indicated the manner in which OTT services such as Netflix, Prime Video, and domestic OTT channels have facilitated nuanced storytelling through the offering of safer spaces for exploration and through the infiltration of fractioned audiences who may be willing to consume progressive content [Joseph and Arul \(2020\)](#), [Nanditha \(2020\)](#). The further inclusion of queer elements in advertisements and original web series also contributed further to

the public coverage and research focus on the manner in which queerness is being normalised, negotiated, or resisted in narrative content [Bhushan \(2021\)](#).

Recent research also examines the broader ideological formations underlying queer film production and reception in India, including the influence of nationalism, neoliberal identity politics, and transnational solidarity. In this way, queer film in India comes to be more readily understood as a site of contestation, pedagogy, and cultural imagination [Anjaria \(2019\)](#), [Deb \(2014\)](#).

2.4. EARLY ACADEMIC CRITIQUE: VISIBILITY AND SILENCING

Initial scholarly work on Indian queer cinema primarily focused on invisibility and misrepresentation. Scholars like [Vanita and Kidwai \(2001\)](#) explored how Indian culture, though historically accommodating of gender and sexual diversity, has been sanitised through colonial morality and postcolonial nation-building. Early Bollywood and regional films were studied as complicit in enforcing heteronormativity by either mocking or completely ignoring queer identities.

[Gayatri \(2015\)](#) argued that queer desires in Indian cinema were historically confined to coded subtexts, given the legal and social taboos around same-sex relationships. She emphasised the importance of affective readings, how queer viewers interpreted latent queerness in songs, friendships, or symbolic imagery that bypassed censorship.

[Mokkil \(2019\)](#) further examined how 'visibility' in cinema can paradoxically lead to new forms of surveillance and regulation, especially when queer characters are included in narratives to serve patriarchal or nationalist ends. Such literature highlighted that mere inclusion was insufficient if not paired with narrative agency and complexity.

2.5. THE TURNING POINT: FIRE AND QUEER ACTIVISM

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) is arguably the most emblematic piece in Indian queer film and is famously referred to as the movie that catalysed public discussion on same-sex longing and screen depiction. Public outcry and protests arose over the depiction of a passionate and romantic relationship between two women in a patriarchal Indian household, and placed the gender, sex, and censorship politics in the foreground. Critics argue that *Fire* marked a turning point for the public psyche of India and introduced queer matters to mainstream debate in the face of brutal opposition from the conservative film-makers and traditional society [Parmaar \(2024\)](#).

Academic works also refer to the ambivalent double identity of the film as being local and diasporic simultaneously. Although *Fire* elevated the profile of lesbian desire, the film was criticised further for prioritising stories of the urban, upper-caste, middle-class and excluding non-elite queer communities [Banerjee \(2010\)](#). Research also refers to the differential reception of the film between Western and Indian spectators and the resulting strain between nationalist backlash and cosmopolitan queer identification [Mahn and Watt \(2014\)](#).

2.6. POST-2010 LITERATURE: RESPECTABILITY POLITICS AND NARRATIVE CLICHES

Since the production and distribution of more mainstream queer films such as *Aligarh* (2015), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), academic debate has increasingly focused on the manner in which the pressures of the Hindi film industry shape the production of queerness. Scholars argue that these films reflect a politics of respectability. Queer characters are often sanitised, upper-caste, and embedded within family narratives that emphasise acceptance rather than resistance [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Verghese \(2024\)](#). These movies generally do not represent queer intimacy and rather engage with family reunions, coming-out narratives, and typical romances with no political commentary [Bhardwaj \(2023\)](#), [Murasing \(2025\)](#). Critics also evaluate that they would cultivate a narrow, urban, and class-preferential account of homosexuality in India.

2.7. THE POST-SECTION 377 SHIFT

Legislative decriminalisation in 2018 offered additional encouragement to Indian queer films. Films like '*Aligarh*' on a true story of a gay professor and '*Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*' on a lesbian heroine allowed the depiction of homosexual protagonists as central, sympathetic characters [Singh \(2020\)](#). Nevertheless, diverse researchers assert that the depiction is still conditional on mainstream definitions of gender, class and nuclear family.

Regional cinemas have sometimes exceeded this trope. Movies such as *Sancharam* (Malayalam), *Mitrachi Goshta* (Marathi), and *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Bengali) engage with queerness via issues of caste, religion, and native culture and thus provide more intersectional representations [Chakrabarti \(2024\)](#), [Deb \(2014\)](#), [Raju \(2020\)](#).

2.8. GAP IN EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

Since existing studies face limitations in integrated analysis across languages, regions, and modes of distribution, significant gaps exist in this branch of study. Fragmented academic enquiries, including a separate focus on Bollywood, regional movies, and digital platforms, highlight the absence of sufficient studies. Even though the post-Section 377 caters to the increased visibility of queer representation, it often undermines the class and creed privileges, and regional and linguistic elite benefits, while dealing with the queer portrayals. Therefore, narrative inclusions are prioritised in many instances over structural critique. As intersectionality is left only in words, not in a symmetrically applicable form, an authentic and whole Queer reading turns out to be impossible. When the descriptive elements, such as themes and portrayals, are examined critically, other aspects of the political economy of queer representation in the film industry become silenced. The casting practices, commercialisation, authorship, censorship, and systemic exclusions should be examined critically for a legitimate portrayal. In a nutshell, the supremacy of descriptive textual analysis subdued the heterogeneous perspectives of audience reception, generational differences, and geographic variations. Whether the eminence of OTT platforms helps in presenting queer subjects with equity irrespective of caste, class, regional and other biases becomes a question to be answered. An integrative and intersectional systematic study becomes the need of the hour for deconstructing the queer representation in the Indian film industry.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative review design to examine queer representation in Indian movies. The research relies on peer-reviewed scholarly publications from the disciplines of film studies, queer theory, gender studies, and Indian cultural studies. The academic databases on which the literature was searched included JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The literature was searched using the specific terms 'queer Indian cinema,' 'LGBTQIA+ representation,' 'Bollywood,' 'regional queer films in India,' and 'intersectionality and queer cinema.'

In addition to academic sources, the discussion also includes close readings of some of the most frequently cited Indian films within the body of work on queer cinemas. These include *Fire* (1996), *Aligarh* (2015), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Super Deluxe* (2019), *Sancharam* (2004), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010), and *Taali* (2023). All the films were selected on the grounds of cultural context, critical reception, and the role of the film in the extension of the body of work on queer identifications within Indian screen culture.

Analysis was conducted using thematic categorisation to integrate comprehension from the academic sources and the films. Four main themes were used to summarise this research:

- Historical and Cultural Paths
- Politics of Representation in Mainstream and Regional
- Platforms, Production, and Authorship
- Audience, Reception, and Socio-political Response

This multi-dimensional structure allows for a nuanced evaluation of both the advancements and the persisting gaps in queer representation across Indian cinematic traditions.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. HISTORICAL ABSENCE AND SUBTEXTUAL QUEERNESS

For much of Indian cinematic history, queerness existed in the realm of subtext rather than overt representation. Early films avoided explicit acknowledgement of LGBTQIA+ characters due to both legal restrictions and social taboos. Nonetheless, subtextual queer narratives emerged through coded behaviour, gender performance, and ambiguous relationships.

Films such as *Razia Sultan* (1983) and *Sujata* (1959) have been retrospectively interpreted as containing queer subtexts, although these interpretations are often speculative. Scholars point out that queer audiences have long engaged in the act of “reading against the grain”, experiencing queer resonances in narratives that do not indulge in overt heteronormativity [Mokkil \(2019\)](#). Readings on the affective registers provided subtle levels of recognition and resonance within otherwise exclusionary screen spaces.

4.2. EVOLVING REPRESENTATION: FROM COMIC RELIEF TO COMPLEX CHARACTERS

In the 1980s and 1990s, openly queer leads in mainstream Hindi films primarily played the villain or the comedian [Ashi and Jain \(2021\)](#). Featuring effeminate males or gender non-conforming individuals as humour sources was popular in mainstream commercial successes, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and *Masti* (2004). The depiction reinforced hurtful stereotypes through the linking of gay males to predatory or fabulously camp [Dey and Doley \(2024\)](#), [Verghese \(2024\)](#).

A notable turning point came about with the emergence of independent filmmakers who started representing queer people with sensitivity and nuance. *Fire* (1996) challenged dominant heteropatriarchal discourses by foregrounding female longing and friendship within a conventional home. This movie has lit the fire against the biased representations that were dominant in the Indian film industry and has left space for the subtle, refined and nuanced representations, though a lot of chaos has happened [Dasgupta \(2011\)](#). Another milestone in this genre is the 2005 movie *My Brother... Nikhil* by Onir. The movie depicts the complexities of the HIV/AIDS affected realities and how these individuals and queer humans are being treated by the family, society and even the law. The movie, while keeping away from stereotypical portraits, explicitly narrates the difficulties of such people in surviving their adversities [Dcosta \(2021\)](#).

One of the significant movies that came out in 2015 under this genre is *Aligarh*. Hansal Mehta illustrates an anecdote of Ramachandra Siras, a gay professor at the University of Aligarh. The professor was trapped and victimised due to his queer sexuality within the orthodox society and the prudent institution. The movie realistically portrays the helplessness, desolation and emotional isolation of these individuals through the lens of sensitivity and sorrow [Arora and Sylvia \(2024\)](#).

4.3. QUEERNESS AND RESPECTABILITY IN MAINSTREAM BOLLYWOOD

The 2010s also observed growth in Bollywood films featuring LGBTQIA+ leads in more central roles. The presentations nonetheless remained bound largely within the framework of the politics of respectability. In *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), the same-sex desire of the protagonist continues to be thinly contained within the boundaries of familial respect, cultural tradition, and emotional repression. Scholars argue that the protagonist’s identity gets validated through her upper-middle-class status, heteronormative appearance, and avoidance of overt sex expression [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#).

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020) employs humour and the topic of individual acceptance from the family to create its gay couple. The film introduces a queer relationship into a mainstream family narrative but skirts direct confrontation with the structural repression or political imperatives facing the LGBTQIA+ community in India. It treats queerness as a matter of individual acceptance rather than collective justice [Verghese \(2024\)](#). This has been strongly criticised for creating what scholars call ‘palatable queerness.’ The characters are queer in identity but obedient in other normative desirables; they fall into the economically privileged group, emotionally managed, and on the same value side. This type of representation makes queer identity observed but not transgressive [Rangnekar \(2024\)](#). It is rendered non-threatening by aligning it with family values and depoliticised storytelling [Petronio \(2023\)](#).

4.4. INTERSECTIONALITY IN REGIONAL CINEMA

While mainstream Bollywood often caters to urban, upper-middle-class sensibilities, regional Indian cinema has offered a more rooted and intersectional portrayal of queer experiences [Labade and Ajgaonkar \(2022\)](#). Intersectionality, a concept introduced by [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#), recognises that caste, class, gender, religion, and geography interact to shape how marginalised individuals experience discrimination [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#). Regional cinemas have used this lens to depict the manners in which queerness is lived in culturally specific realities and not as a universal identity [Nair and Francis \(2024\)](#), [Raju \(2020\)](#).

For instance, the film *Sancharam* (2004) is about a same-sex relationship between two women who come from different religious communities in Kerala. The film weaves the two women's love into communal strife and patriarchal politics in the family. Similarly, *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) sets the contemporary queer filmmaker and the old folk theatre performer in parallel, who negotiate gender non-conformity in the conservative Bengali terrain [Mokkil \(2009\)](#), [Nizam \(2022\)](#).

Mitrachi Goshta (2014), the Marathi film, is all about the issues of caste, gendered prescript and the queerness of rural Maharashtra women. Regional films do not seek validation of the homosexually identified subject; they place them into the worlds of powers, excluding and marginalising on all levels [Labade and Ajgaonkar \(2022\)](#).

While Bollywood's reliance on respectability and social rise, the films consistently depict economic deprivation, social exclusion and community surveillance as crucial elements of queer existence. This makes them provide a more political and contextually rooted account of queerness in India [Mammen \(2021\)](#), [Parmaar \(2024\)](#).

4.5. LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

Regional films offer the benefit of being written on specific cultural and language contexts so that directors would be able to tell queer films from the everyday reality of the communities rather than from generic scripts. Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil cinemas have especially offered nuanced presentations that reflect the regional sensibility.

Ligy J. Pullappally navigates a same-sex relationship between two women in Kerala in *Sancharam* (2004). One is Hindu and the other Christian, and the tale of love unfolds in the regional conservative socio-religious context. The film uses regional practices, attire, talk, and music to create an immersive cultural context that reflects the manner in which queerness is negotiated distinctly according to religious affiliation and familial obligation [Mokkil \(2009\)](#). *Kaathal-The Core*, a 2023 film, gained acceptance and popularity. Since the mainstream actor Mammooty acted in it, the queer subject was normalised in the Malayalam film industry.

Similarly, Bengali movie *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) presents a multi-layered narrative of gender fluidity and sexual identity through the conjunction of a queer documentary filmmaker and a performer of Jatra women's roles. The movie queers the very construct of time, not only by connecting the present and the past, but also by questioning the manner in which cultural practices like folk theatre have traditionally included gender non-conforming persons [Bakshi \(2014\)](#), [Sengupta and Ganjoo \(2021\)](#).

4.6. CASTE AND CLASS AS DETERMINANTS OF VISIBILITY

While the screen queer in Bollywood movies are typically depicted to be well-off, well-educated, and residents in cosmopolitan cities, the regional movies have attempted to represent the existence of the rural or economically marginalised and LGBTQIA+. This is important in capturing the diversity of queer life in India, the majority of whose lives subsist not only on the decisions of sex orientation or gender identity but also on caste and socioeconomic decisions. For example, *Mitrachi Goshta* (2014), a play scripted in the Marathi language and later adapted into a movie, portrays the trials of a woman whose affection for another woman upsets familial and caste expectations. The film examines the ways in which caste not only governs marriage practices but also prescribes permissible acts of intimacy and kinship [Thakur \(2016\)](#), [Tiwari \(2020\)](#).

Peranbu (2018) is another example of a film that, whilst not being about queerness per se, includes a trans woman who is central to the protagonist's narrative. Her subjectivity is layered with economic insecurity and social exclusion and can be seen to represent the trans life being shaped through gender and class exclusion [Nair and Francis \(2024\)](#), [Ram \(2018\)](#).

Through the placement of queer people in the caste-subjugated or economically weaker communities, regional cinema begins to break the myth that being queer is a lifestyle associated with Westernisation or wealth. Instead, it emphasises the reality that queer people exist in all classes of Indian society and the problems they encounter have more to do with systemic injustices.

4.7. GENDER IDENTITY AND LOCAL NARRATIVES

Regional cinemas also have addressed more freely trans and gender non-conforming identities, albeit with restrictions. The Malayalam film, *Njan Marykutty* (2018), presents a trans woman who transits medically and struggles to be accepted by her conservative community [Raju \(2020\)](#). The film was well received for its coverage, even as it also received backlash for the use of a cisgender male actor playing a trans role and questions surrounding authenticity and theatricality of support [Kuriakose \(2020\)](#).

Both the retrograde and progressive trans characters have a place in Tamil cinema. In *Kanchana* (2011), we have a trans character sympathised and also represented via tropes of supernatural narratives of vengeance. This ambivalence reflects the broader regional screen context in which trans characters are afforded narrative significance but nonetheless consistently mystified or romanticised and not depicted as ordinary humans [Dey and Doley \(2024\)](#). Even so, the movies mark an important step toward challenging the binary understanding of gender. By weaving indigenous idioms of rituals and social conflict together, regional narratives complicate the understanding of gender and sexuality and show the ways in which they intersect with broader struggles over dignity, livelihood, and identity.

4.8. RESISTING UNIVERSAL QUEERNESS

By embedding queer stories within caste, class, and cultural frameworks, regional films resist the tendency of Bollywood to universalise queerness as an elite, global identity. They challenge the notion that queer lives can be understood outside their socio-political context and instead show how queerness must be interpreted through intersecting local realities [Nair and Francis \(2024\)](#), [Tiwari \(2020\)](#).

The making of queer cinemas and the representation of queer people have a considerable impact on policy-making and activism. Through the portrayal of structural oppression across various marginalised groups, including Dalits, neglected women, and anti-caste feminism, a collective strategy can be built [Barman \(2022\)](#), [Dey and Doley \(2024\)](#), [Nanditha \(2022\)](#).

4.9. DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE EXPANSION OF QUEER NARRATIVES

Digital platforms, especially the expansion of streaming media, have strengthened the processing and output of queer content. In India, queer based movies are now being abundantly aired on online platforms, including Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar. Several adaptations of queer characters set against the backdrop of contemporary urban life are evident in recent series such as *Made in Heaven* (2019) and *Four More Shots Please* (2019-2022) [Mokkil \(2019\)](#). One of the main advantages of these series and other OTT content is that they are more resistant to censorship, compared to movies under the Central Board of Film Certification. This enables them to come up with more authentic and honest illustrations of these marginalised people.

Another major promising aspect of these OTT platforms is that they allow the innovative and unconventional filmmakers and artists to go with their low budgets, devoid of mainstream concerns, yet with precise targeting. [Castellini \(2017\)](#), [Fanea-Ivanovici and Baber \(2021\)](#). However, access to these platforms remains limited to urban, internet-literate viewers, creating a divide between the availability and the real-world impact of queer representation [Yeole et al. \(2022\)](#).

4.10. QUEER AESTHETICS AND SYMBOLISM

In recent years, queer Indian cinema has begun to adopt distinct aesthetic forms to express gender and sexual non-conformity. The films deviate from linear mainstream narrative and adopt symbolic and sensuous intensive forms to respond to the fluidity of queer experience. For example, *Super Deluxe* (2019), directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, articulates a fractured, disjointed narrative involving a trans woman and navigates her experience through tonal manipulation, colour palettes, and visual allegories [Biju \(2021\)](#). In place of expressing gender variance solely in speech terms, the film utilises spatiality, costume, and music to evoke emotional nuance and interior conflict [Bao \(2019\)](#), [Dey \(2024\)](#).

This style follows from the wider pattern of international and South Asian queer film, whereby the political becomes aesthetic in and of itself and resists neat resolution and clear paths of morality [Dasgupta and Mahn \(2023\)](#).

4.11. CASTING AND REPRESENTATION ETHICS

One of the perennial problems of queer representation is the casting of cisgender actors in trans roles. Whereas films such as *Super Deluxe* and *Haddi* (2023) offer representation, they themselves have been criticised for not having trans casts. Scholars have argued that such casting choices contribute to the erasure of trans voices and exclusion from the creative economy. This is not unique to Indian films; research in Western cinema also demonstrates how cisgender casting in trans roles often reinforces harmful stereotypes and sidelines authentic trans narratives (Conrad (2015), Macintosh (2018)).

Even though the contemporary media platforms put forth with genuine characterisation, there has been a major drawback with the off-screen participation. The queer people's involvement behind the screen is still less in number. As long as the queer portrayals are done through cisgender, there exists the chance to present the queer people from the perspectives of the cis-gaze. In order to reduce these biases and also ensure the legitimate construction, the behind-the-scenes group must include queer writers and directors. If the characters are framed after thorough consultation with queer community, then the whole content can ensure more credibility. Participation of queer actors again makes these contents reliable (Hermes and Kopitz (2021)).

4.12. AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND GENERATIONAL GAPS

While considering the audience reception, the acceptance of LGBTQ+ content is mainly done by the urban spectators, to be more precise, the youngsters. The teenagers and the young adults are more attracted to these queer contents when these themes are presented under the genres of thrillers or rom-coms. A sharp contrast to this tendency of urban people can be seen in the attitude of rural and older generations. The rustic audience finds this queer content as too unfamiliar and offensive (Nair and Francis (2024), Verghese (2024)).

Since there prevail contradictory perspectives among different generations and various regions, the type of queer content that is presented in front of these audiences also fluctuates. As the target audience of OTT media is liberal thinkers, a more radical type of content is catered to that audience. However, cautious content is provided through the theatrical releases since the intended audience here may consist of conservative spectators (Arora and Sylvia (2024), Verghese (2024)).

4.13. QUEER AUTHORSHIP AND BEHIND-THE-CAMERA INCLUSION

Authorship has a key impact on the framework of the story that is being narrated. It is the author who takes the first step to decide the flow of the events and perceptions of the subject matter. The presence of queer authors is evident throughout their content, as they generally won't sacrifice their lived experiences for the sake of marketability. The best examples for this can be cited in the movies *Chitrangada* (2012), *Sisak* (2017), and *Evening Shadows* (2018), (Dey (2024)).

The authors and creators from the marginalised section still find it hard to access the mainstream platforms. They face hurdles from their social, economic and network boundaries. To bring them to the front line, it is necessary to remove these barriers and provide them with sufficient support and equity. More than the mere act of tokenism, the real representation of queer makers should be ensured. (Dey (2024)).

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt in the fact that the Indian film industry is becoming more liberal in affirming queer representation. But the problem lies in the underlying politics of who narrates, from whose perspective, and whether authenticity is maintained (Arora and Sylvia (2024), Chatterjee (2021)).

The homogenous representations, especially done from the standpoints of elite queer characters, will neglect the realities of the underprivileged queer people. The depiction of urban class queer in Bollywood tends to generalise the actualities of the rural humans who have a working-class backdrop. Neglect of various social, economic conditions of queer individuals will result in neoliberal ideals, instead of political cohesion and solidarity (Tiwari (2020), Verghese (2024)).

Casting becomes yet another issue to be considered critically. Most often, the transgender characters are portrayed by cisgender actors, and in several cases, these actors failed to portray queer people authentically. Misinterpretations and dramatic mannerisms are a few among them. For instance, Nawazuddin Siddiqui's trans woman character in the 2023 movie *Haddi* has received a response questioning the authenticity of casting. [Dey \(2024\)](#).

If the Indian film industry welcomes more queer casting for the depiction of trans subject matters and trans characters, it will become more genuine in essence and natural in mannerisms. This will also provide opportunities for trans people to come into the frontline of society and gain both economic and societal equity [Dey \(2024\)](#).

The affirmation of queer movies within the Indian film industry is noticeable through the queer film festivals such as KASHISH Mumbai International Queer Film Festival and the Bangalore Queer Film Festival. These opportunities ensure more vitality to the queer movies and provide space for the creators to bring forth such revolutionary ideas to the mainstream and directly to the audience [Dasgupta and Bakshi \(2023\)](#), [Mokkil \(2018\)](#).

Indeed, these cinematic celebrations pave the way for bringing cohesion and collective strength between the various regions and identifications. They also give a hand to build careers and facilitate in moulding the discourse. These art celebrations help to present the queer content actively in the mainstream, other wise audience may forget easily [Mokkil \(2018\)](#).

In order to erase the boundaries of tokenism, a restructuring is necessary in the Indian film industry. This entails:

- Initiating queer content with the viewpoints of and from the trans people and their community, and thus reducing the favourability that aims only to heteronormative communities.
- Diminishing the homogeneous depictions and generalisation of queer people by including factors like caste, creed, economic and social backdrop and gender identity.
- Ensuring the queer people are represented in every stage of content creation, from writing to casting to directing to editing.
- Introducing the queer subject matters and filmic perspectives in the curricula of the film studies, particularly in the film schools, and thus initiating critical thinking from the early stage onwards.

Above all, public and public policy should support queer filmmakers through grants and protections against discrimination in society and media spaces [Dey \(2024\)](#). The queer film's success is not achievable in solitude; it needs a good working environment.

Indian cinema has travelled a long distance in the depiction of queer identities from being invisible and mocked to careful inclusion and growing nuance. Although the legal and cultural context has evolved further, particularly after the decriminalisation of Section 377 of the IPC in 2018, the depiction of the lives of LGBTQIA+ on the screen still mirrors persistent structural hierarchies. These range from class and caste to region and gender identity and command over cultural capital [Arora and Sylvia \(2024\)](#), [Dey \(2024\)](#).

Mainstream Bollywood has alerted, but often sacrificed depth and diversity. The majority of the portrayals are subject to being accepted by the conservative audience and so turn out to be sanitised, upper-middle-class narratives that do not appeal to the diversity of queer experience throughout India [Arora and Sylvia \(2024\)](#), [Dey \(2024\)](#). The characters most often appear in domestic settings and need validation, not autonomy or political leanings.

More rooted and contextually nuanced representations have emerged from the regional cinemas. The inclusiveness of factors like caste, class, region, religion and language will encompass a multifaceted and intersectional narrative of queerness. LGBTQ+ matters cannot be determined by isolating from the complexities of discourse and the sense of community [Joseph \(2016\)](#).

6. CONCLUSION

One of the main advantages of the contemporary era is the advancement of online streaming platforms. These media opportunities boost every experimental filmmaker to come forward with their authentic portrayals without the harsh limitations of the institutional realm. Queer content makers grab this opportunity for the honest visualisation of their community and the related complications. Even though a progressive transformation has evolved, queer people from marginalised backgrounds face difficulties in accessing resources and networks. For ensuring the emancipation of queer content and trans humans, a thorough transformation should happen in Indian cinema from unrealistic inclusion to

realistic representations. Queer people should be given equal space on both onscreen and offscreen. This enables the Indian cinema to give voice to the lived experiences of queer directors, actors, consultants, editors and cinematographers. The whole institutional support, along with the changes to existing policies, is necessary for this progression. The audience should get enough information and education regarding the LGBTQ+ community and their difficulties.

The clutching hands of cinema have the potency to represent, reflect and rebuild a society. It is possible for all marginalised sections to raise a voice and find a space in society, even if cinema welcomes an authentic inclusiveness. A healthy deconstruction of stereotypes and a vigorous construction of empathy are possible through inclusiveness in the Indian film industry. Trans people are human beings just like all cis genders, who deserve honest, bold and liberating representations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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