

Changing Portrayal of LGBTQ+ Community in Hindi Films

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Introduction

Cinema acts as a cultural mirror that reflects societal norms and beliefs while actively reshaping public opinion, making it crucial to examine how mainstream commercial cinema perceives gender and sexual diversity. Although classical Indian texts like the *Nṛasamhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* and mythological epics such as the *Mahabharata* document a rich lineage of diverse identities, modern civil society and mainstream screen portrayals have long marginalized the third gender through strict binary enforcement, silence, and heavy stereotyping. While early global efforts like Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* (1953) attempted to address gender non-conformity, Indian cinema historically treated the topic as an absolute taboo. This paper examines the historical trajectory of transgender and queer representation in Hindi cinema, tracing its evolution from early comedic gimmicks to nuanced modern blockbusters while highlighting structural variations between mainstream Hindi films and regional Indian cinema.

The socio-legal landscape of transgender rights in India

In India, contemporary society was long closed to the third gender, as their identity lacked legal recognition. The community engaged in a legal battle spanning over two decades, which eventually altered how filmmakers' approach queer characters.

In 2014, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark judgment in the case of *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India*. The NALSA judgment formally granted transgender

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individuals' legal status as the "third gender," securing constitutional equality, autonomy, and human dignity. The court ruled that gender-based discrimination directly violates constitutionally guaranteed rights, thereby extending affirmative action to the transgender community.

Later in this legal fight, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was struck down by the Supreme Court of India, which declared the criminalization of consensual adult same-sex relationships unconstitutional, arbitrary, and a violation of individual dignity and privacy.

These legal shifts marked a remarkable transition. The legislature subsequently introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, culminating in the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2019 (which came into full effect in 2020). Later, the National Portal for Transgender Persons (NPTP) was established in collaboration with human rights NGOs, creating a digital framework for citizens to secure identity certificates and seek legal recourse against institutional injustices. These legal milestones encouraged filmmakers to bring queer narratives into mainstream commercial spaces.

Typologies of LGBTQ+ representation in Hindi cinema

The representation of the LGBTQ+ community in Hindi cinema can be categorized into four distinct typologies based on narrative depth, intent, and execution:

Typology	Narrative Function & Characterization	Key Illustrative Films
1. Cross-Dressing for Comic Relief	Queer identities are reduced to physical gags. Cisgender male actors dress as women to invoke cheap laughter, reinforcing the idea that gender non-conformity is inherently absurd.	<i>Rafoo Chakkar</i> , <i>Laawaris</i> , <i>Khiladi</i> , <i>Baazi</i> , <i>Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya</i> , <i>Masti</i> , <i>Partner</i> , <i>Humshakals</i>
2. The Horrific & Villainous Stereotype	Transgender characters are weaponized as terrifying, superstitious, or predatory antagonists, directly generating societal fear and mistrust.	<i>Sadak</i> , <i>Sangharsh</i> , <i>Murder 2</i> , <i>Padmaavat</i> , <i>Laxmii</i>
3. Glamourized / Surface-Level Mainstream	The narrative acknowledges the community but relies on highly polished, commercialized tropes, avoiding complex systemic issues to maintain mass appeal.	<i>Dostana</i> , <i>Student of the Year</i> , <i>Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga</i> , <i>Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui</i>
4. Empathetic & Complex Narratives	The community is portrayed with authentic human depth. Characters are written as multifaceted individuals navigating systemic oppression, emotional vulnerability, and real relationships.	<i>Badnam Basti</i> , <i>Daayra</i> , <i>Tamanna</i> , <i>Fire</i> , <i>Aligarh</i> , <i>Margarita with a Straw</i> , <i>Badhaai Do</i>

Content Analysis: The Evolutionary Milestones of Queer Representation

The era of gimmicks: Cross-dressing and reductive comedy

For decades, mainstream Hindi cinema primarily showcased cisgender male actors cross-dressing for situational comedy. From the 1970s through the 2000s, almost every major A-list actor—including Amitabh Bachchan, Rishi Kapoor, Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, Akshay Kumar, and Ajay Devgn—participated in cross-dressing sequences designed solely as comic relief. Films like *Rafoo Chakkar* (1975), *Laawaris* (1981), and *Humshakals* (2014) exemplify this trend. These portrayals lacked narrative depth and sociological understanding of transgender realities, communicating the message that gender non-conformity was something to be mocked at and discarded.

A notable exception was Kamal Haasan's *Chachi 420* (1997), which tells the story of a father who cross-dresses as a female nanny to stay close to his daughter; the screenplay treats his daily struggles with relative dignity. Earlier, *Razia Sultan* (1983) featured a subtle portrayal of intimacy between characters played by Hema Malini and Parveen Babi, though it was too brief to make a significant impact.

Dehumanisation on screen

Beyond comic relief and superficial characterizations, films damaged the community's social standing by depicting transgender characters as monstrous, villainous, or supernatural entities. These portrayals reinforced deep-seated social phobias by presenting gender non-conforming individuals as inherently sinister, violent, or untrustworthy:

- **Sadak (1991):** Directed by Mahesh Bhatt, the film features an antagonist named Maharani, a trans woman pimp portrayed by Sadashiv Amrapurkar. Maharani was written as a violently sadistic, ruthless villain. While Amrapurkar's performance earned critical acclaim and commercial success, the character was portrayed as aggressive and inhuman.
- **Sangharsh (1999):** Directed by Tanuja Chandra, the film features Lajja Shankar Pandey, a religious fanatic involved in child sacrifice. Ashutosh Rana delivered a terrifying performance in a role where his character appears in a sari, explicitly linking trans identity with horror, superstition, and psychotic behavior.

- **Murder 2 (2011):** Directed by Mohit Suri, the film featured Prashant Narayanan as a sadistic, trans-identifying serial killer targeting sex workers, perpetuating the horrific stereotype.
- **Laxmii (2020):** Raghava Lawrence's Laxmii, starring Akshay Kumar, faced heavy criticism for reinforcing regressive tropes by attributing a trans woman's rage to a vengeful, supernatural spirit.

The parallel paradigm: Early empathetic breakthroughs

While mainstream commercial cinema remained insensitive toward the community, independent filmmakers quietly developed sensitive narratives:

- **Badnam Basti (1971):** Directed by Prem Kapoor and adapted from Kamleshwar's novel Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan, this film is widely recognized as the first Hindi feature film to depict a bisexual/same-sex relationship between its protagonists, Sarnam and Shivraj. Produced by the government-backed Film Finance Corporation, it avoided sensationalism and focused on the quiet complexities of emotional bonds.
- **Fire (1996):** Deepa Mehta's controversial film depicted an intimate emotional and physical relationship between two sisters-in-law, played by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das. Rather than framing their bond through a fetishistic lens, the film explored how institutional loneliness within a patriarchal household drove them to find solace in each other. The film faced severe backlash and calls for bans, highlighting societal discomfort with queer narratives.
- **Daayra (1996):** Directed by Amol Palekar, this film challenged rigid gender binaries by pairing a cross-dressing male theatre performer (Nirmal Pandey) with a young woman forced to dress as a man for self-preservation (Sonali Kulkarni). The film was praised internationally for its critique of traditional Indian gender roles.
- **Tamanna (1997):** Mahesh Bhatt offered a more empathetic portrayal with this biographical drama. Paresh Rawal delivered a performance as Tikku, a real-life trans woman who rescues and raises an abandoned girl. The narrative highlighted Tikku's capacity for maternal love while exposing the hypocrisy of a

Changing Portrayal of LGBTQ+ Community in Hindi Films

society that abandoned its children yet treated trans individuals as outcasts.

The 2010s transition: Nuance and humanisation

By the mid-2010s, filmmakers began moving away from caricatures to explore the raw emotional realities and institutional vulnerabilities of the LGBTQ+ community.

Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* (2015) marked a watershed moment. A biographical drama based on the tragic life of Professor Ramchandra Siras, the film starred Manoj Bajpayee as a quiet Marathi professor suspended from Aligarh Muslim University after being illegally filmed having consensual sex with another man. Mehta's direction focused on Siras's isolation, love for poetry, and the humiliation he suffered due to institutional homophobia without sensationalizing his sexuality.

Similarly, Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) pushed intersectional boundaries by exploring the life of Laila (Kalki Koechlin), a teenager with cerebral palsy who discovers her bisexuality. The film balanced discussions on physical disability, sexual self-discovery, and romantic heartbreak. Around the same time, mainstream family dramas like Shakun Batra's *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) integrated gay protagonists into traditional domestic spaces, framing homosexuality as a natural aspect of complex family dynamics rather than a defining gimmick.

The post-2020 era: Mainstream commercial inclusivity

The post-2020 landscape-accelerated by digital streaming, social media awareness, and the 2018 decriminalization of Section 377-witnessed a notable shift. A-list stars and major production houses began backing queer-centric commercial projects:

- **Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020):** Directed by Hitesh Kewalya, this film cast Ayushmann Khurrana as an openly gay man fighting to save his partner from a forced heterosexual marriage. By framing the narrative as an accessible family comedy, the film brought discussions on same-sex relationships to middle-class audiences.
- **Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021):** Directed by Abhishek Kapoor, this film featured a trans woman protagonist, Maanvi (Vaani Kapoor), as the central romantic interest. While praised for its mainstream visibility, critics noted that casting a cisgender

woman bypassed the physical realities of gender transition, shifting focus primarily onto the cisgender male hero's emotional adjustment.

- **Badhaai Do (2022):** Directed by Harshvardhan Kulkarni, this film depicted a "lavender marriage" arrangement between a gay police officer (Rajkummar Rao) and a lesbian physical education teacher (Bhumi Pednekar). The screenplay was praised for portraying queer safe spaces, parental pressure, and legal limitations faced by queer couples in India.
- **Safed (2023):** Sandeep Singh's film explored the bond between a marginalized trans person and an abandoned widow (starring Abhay Verma and Meera Chopra), illustrating how shared trauma and societal rejection bring marginalized individuals together.

Comparative analysis: Hindi cinema vs. South Indian regional cinema

While Hindi cinema's shift toward queer representation is notable, a comparative analysis reveals that South Indian regional cinema has historically approached transgender narratives with greater depth, political clarity, and structural sensitivity. Mainstream Bollywood has often relied on polished commercial frameworks, star-studded casting, and comedic elements to make queer themes palatable. In contrast, regional industries-particularly Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada cinema-have frequently explored socio-economic realities, internal identity conflicts, and systemic challenges without commercial dilution.

Analytical Parameter	Mainstream Hindi Cinema	South Indian Regional Cinema
Casting Practices	Relies on cisgender A-list stars to play queer characters to ensure commercial viability (e.g., Vaani Kapoor, Akshay Kumar).	Pioneers the inclusion of actual transgender actors in lead roles, ensuring authentic representation (e.g., <i>Karuvarai Pookal</i>).
Narrative Tone	Often filters complex queer struggles through the lens of romantic comedies or family melodramas to soften the subject matter.	Adopts uncompromisingly realistic, gritty, or highly poetic tones that directly confront systemic violence and social ostracization.
Socio-Economic Grounding	Characters are often placed in affluent, urban, or stylized middle-class settings, masking everyday economic survival challenges.	Explores the intersections of caste, class, rural migration, and economic survival unique to the trans experience.

Changing Portrayal of LGBTQ+ Community in Hindi Films

Thematic Focus	Tends to focus on how the surrounding cis-heteronormative family or partner adapts to the queer individual.	Prioritizes the internal journey, personal autonomy, and systemic battles of the queer protagonist.
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Several regional films stand out as key milestones:

- **Karuvarai Pookal (2011):** This Tamil film explores gender identity and family acceptance, focusing on a transgender individual's struggle and a mother's acceptance.
- **Naanu Avanalla Avalu (2015):** Based on transgender activist Living Smile Vidya's autobiography, this Kannada film portrays gender identity, poverty, social exclusion, and the struggle for dignity.
- **Super Deluxe (2019):** Thiagarajan Kumararaja's Tamil film features Vijay Sethupathi as Shilpa, a transgender woman returning to her family, exploring social hypocrisy and institutional discrimination.
- **Paava Kadhaigal (2020):** In Sudha Kongara's segment Thangam, Kalidas Jayaram portrays Sathaar, a transgender individual facing unrequited love and honor-based violence in a conservative setting.
- **Naanu Ladies (2021):** This Kannada film focuses on lesbian love and challenges heteronormative social expectations with a predominantly women-led crew.
- **Gargi (2022):** Gautham Ramachandran's Tamil legal drama features a transgender woman as a judge, presenting her as an authoritative professional and challenging traditional stereotypes.

Conclusion and future directions

The evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema reflects a gradual cultural shift. Characters once reduced to cross-dressing gags or demonized as villains are increasingly portrayed as complex human beings. This transformation has been driven by grassroots activism, legal victories, global media exposure, and the growth of digital streaming platforms.

However, challenges remain. Mainstream commercial cinema often hesitates to cast queer and trans actors in leading roles,

frequently relying on cisgender star power to secure box-office success. Screenplays also occasionally rely on over-the-top characterizations or sanitized plotlines designed for broad appeal rather than challenging social norms.

Progressive milestones-such as the Kerala State Film Awards honoring Negha, a trans woman who won the debut actor award for the Malayalam feature *Antharam*-point toward a more inclusive future. Achieving authentic representation requires involving queer writers, directors, actors, and technicians directly in the creative process to tell their own stories. By committing to authentic and dignified representation, the film industry can actively work to dismantle social stigmas and promote a more equitable society.

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