

Out of the Closet and Into the Mainstream: Queer Representation in Indian Cinema Before and After Legal Milestones

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abstract

Indian films have evolved from barely acknowledging queer individuals to placing them at the centre of mainstream stories. This transformation has paralleled major shifts in India's legal landscape and societal attitudes. This paper examines how LGBT+ representation in Indian cinema changed before and after two landmark legal milestones: the 2018 decriminalisation of homosexuality and the 2023 denial of same-sex marriage rights. It argues that while queer characters are now more visible and portrayed with more empathy, they are often shown only in homonormative ways, that is, fitting into traditional norms of family, marriage, and respectability. In other words, Indian cinema's new "queer-friendly" stance tends to accept LGBT+ characters only when they behave "like everyone else." Drawing on queer theory and cultural studies, the paper offers a fresh perspective on this trend and highlights whose stories are being told and who remains in the shadows. The conclusion discusses the way forward for truly inclusive and bold queer storytelling on screen, urging Indian cinema to embrace diversity beyond assimilation.

keywords

Indian cinema, LGBT+ representation, queer visibility, homonormativity, intersectionality, legal change

Introduction

Queer depictions in Indian cinema have long been closely tied to the country's laws and social attitudes. For decades, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial-era law that criminalised consensual homosexual acts, cast a long shadow over how films portrayed non-heterosexual identities. Under this repressive legal and social climate, it was almost unheard of for a popular Indian film to show a gay or transgender character in a positive light. If queer figures appeared at all, it was usually in coded hints, as the butt of jokes, or as villains. Early Bollywood offered what film scholars Anupama Arora and Nikki Sylvia describe as queer-coded sidekicks and caricatures, characters mocked as effeminate or portrayed as predatory and unstable (Arora and Sylvia, 2023: 548). In effect, queerness on screen had to remain an "open secret," implied but never explicitly named. This reflects theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) idea of "the closet," a structure that forces queer expression to hide in plain sight. Throughout the 20th century, the heterosexual romance and traditional family occupied centre stage in Indian

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movies, leaving queer desire to exist only in subtext or as a stereotyped subplot. This paper selects Hindi and regional films based on their cultural impact, critical reception, and how they align with key legal milestones between 1998 and 2023. The selection prioritises films that shaped public discourse or received scholarly attention, rather than aiming for an exhaustive list.

A turning point came in 1998 with the release of *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta. Filmed in 1996, *Fire* was one of the first Indian movies to place a same-sex relationship (between two women) at the heart of its story. Its release sparked both nationwide discussion and fierce backlash. Conservative groups like the Shiv Sena staged violent protests, attacking cinemas and condemning the film as an insult to Indian culture. As sociologist Carol Upadhyia (1998: 3158) noted, the film angered some because it challenged patriarchal control of female sexuality and the sanctity of the heteronormative family. By showing two sisters-in-law falling in love, *Fire* opened up a public conversation about homosexuality in India, likely the first large-scale discussion of its kind in independent India (Ghosh, 2010: 114). Yet the ferocity of the response also showed how taboo queer themes still were in the 1990s. Detractors claimed the film promoted “Western” immorality and argued that same-sex love was alien to Indian values. (Queer activists have long countered that such love has always existed in India’s history, even if previous films rarely acknowledged it.) This paper does not aim to merely describe how queer films have changed over time. Rather, it offers a unique lens by placing shifts in queer cinematic representation alongside two specific legal moments: the 2018 decriminalisation of homosexuality and the 2023 denial of same-sex marriage rights. It argues that Indian films after 2018 have not just reflected legal changes but also shaped public imagination in ways that may comfort rather than challenge mainstream audiences. By focusing on this intersection of law, media, and respectability, the paper contributes a fresh, critical framework for thinking about queer visibility in Indian popular culture.

Theoretical framework

This paper reads cinematic change through key concepts in queer theory. First, Sedgwick’s account of “the closet” explains how queerness functioned as an enforced open secret in Indian cinema of the 20th century and early 2000s. It was legible in subtext yet compelled to disavow itself in narrative resolution (Sedgwick, 1990). Second, Duggan’s (2002) critique of homonormativity helps make sense of post-2018 mainstream films that extend recognition largely to coupledness modelled on marriage, property, and respectability. Third, Puar’s (2007) idea of homonationalism frames the selective embrace of “acceptable” LGBT subjects who are typically urban, upper caste, and cisgender, while others remain marginal. Fourth, Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality clarifies why caste, class, region,

religion, and disability frequently disappear from queer story worlds even when sexuality is centred. Finally, Muñoz (2009) urges a horizon of queer futurity, pushing beyond assimilationist closure such as weddings or family approval toward more capacious imaginaries of belonging and world-making. These lenses structure the analysis that follows: the pre-2018 regimes of closeting and stereotype, and the post-2018 visibility that often narrows into homonormative forms.

After *Fire*, mainstream Indian cinema largely retreated from queer themes for a while. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when homosexuality was still illegal under Section 377, LGBT+ characters in popular films were few and mostly far from empowering. If a movie included a queer character, it was often either for comic relief or portrayed as something frightening. For example, in *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998), a flamboyant interior decorator is included purely for laughs, reinforcing the stereotype of effeminate gay men as comic figures. Similarly, in *Mast Kalandar* (1991), actor Anupam Kher played an exaggerated gay caricature often cited as the first openly gay character in an Indian film. Such portrayals told audiences that gay men were “abnormal” and ridiculous. When queer characters were not used as comedy, they could be depicted as sinister. In the thriller *Sadak* (1991), for instance, the villain is a transgender sex worker shown as creepy and evil. Similarly, the 1999 film *Sangharsh* features a serial killer who cross-dresses, implying that non-heteronormative gender expression is pathological. These depictions mirrored and reinforced societal prejudices, suggesting that queer people were either a joke or a threat. The underlying message was that LGBT+ people did not belong in the respectable world of family and romance that Bollywood celebrated.

Yet even in this era of silence and stereotype, some viewers found queer subtext between the lines. Indian popular cinema has always loved lavish song-and-dance sequences, and sometimes these provided a sneak space to bend gender norms playfully. For instance, in a famous song from the blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994), a female character disguises herself as a man and jokingly flirts with the heroine during a group dance number. In the film, this is just comedy, a girl pretending to be a guy to tease someone. But as critic Sahir Avik D’souza (2023: 80) points out, the scene creates a brief same-sex romantic tease that a queer reading can latch onto. Moments like this, though not intended as LGBT+ representation, offered subversive little hints within the safe space of a musical fantasy, the rigid rules of gender and sexuality could momentarily loosen. Queer audiences often used such moments to “read in” representation where officially there was none, finding resonance in subtext when overt representation was impossible.

From the 2000s to 2018: Slow Steps Forward

The first decade of the 21st century brought small but significant shifts even as many old tropes persisted. Importantly, changes in the legal arena were unfolding alongside changes on screen. In 2001, activists filed a lawsuit (the Naz Foundation case) to challenge Section 377. As this legal battle gathered steam through the 2000s, a few films, especially in regional and independent cinema, started addressing queer themes more directly than before.

Regional and art-house filmmakers were sometimes ahead of Bollywood in portraying queer lives with empathy. For instance, a Malayalam film, *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1986), had earlier hinted at a romantic bond between two schoolgirls, and a low-budget Hindi movie *Badnam Basti* (1971) is now recognised as one of the first Indian films with a queer theme (though it was little-known for decades). In the mid-2000s, some notable independent films humanised queer characters rather than mocking them. *My Brother... Nikhil* (2005), set in Goa, told the moving story of a gay man and former swimming champion who is shunned after being diagnosed with HIV. Similarly, *Margarita With A Straw* (2014) portrayed a young bisexual woman with cerebral palsy exploring her sexuality. These films were not mainstream hits, but they treated queer protagonists with complexity and compassion. They also sparked conversations about authenticity in storytelling, for instance, the lead actress in *Margarita With A Straw* (playing a disabled queer character) was neither disabled nor queer, raising debates about representation. Still, such films showed the potential of cinema to generate empathy and awareness about LGBT+ lives, going beyond mere tokenism.

Mainstream Hindi cinema, however, largely continued with stereotypes during this era. Karan Johar's *Dostana* (2008) is often cited as Bollywood's first big film centred on a sort-of gay theme, though notably, it was about two straight men pretending to be gay. In this comedy, two bachelors fake a gay relationship to rent an apartment (while both secretly woo the female roommate). *Dostana* put the idea of a same-sex couple in front of a wide audience, but only as a source of humour. The men's faux-homosexual antics were played for cheap laughs, reinforcing the notion that being gay is so absurd or taboo that it can only be a prank. Indeed, by the end of the film both heroes remain straight and paired with women; the gay ruse was just a plot gimmick. A retrospective in *VICE* magazine noted that after making some money from *Dostana*'s success, Bollywood "forgot queer people even existed" for the next several years (Sanjay, 2020). It wasn't until 2016 that a mainstream Hindi film featured a gay character with depth and dignity: *Kapoor & Sons*. In this family drama, one of the sons (played by Fawad Khan) happens to be gay. His sexuality is a part of the story, including a touching coming-out scene, but he is not reduced to a stereotype. *Kapoor & Sons* was praised as a nuanced, respectful portrayal,

suggesting slowly shifting attitudes in the industry. Still, the character remains closeted to his family for most of the film, and the treatment is quite cautious, which showed that even in 2016 filmmakers were treading carefully.

By the mid-2010s, Indian cinema was living a dual reality. On one hand, films like *Aligarh* (2016) took a hard-hitting sympathetic look at the real struggles of queer individuals. *Aligarh*, based on the true story of Professor S. R. Siras, depicted the loneliness and persecution of a gay man in a conservative society and was a damning commentary on homophobia (especially poignant since at that time, gay sex was again a criminal offence). On the other hand, many commercial films still either ignored LGBT+ people or resorted to outdated tropes. For instance, the glossy college romance *Student of the Year* (2012) included a camp gay dean mainly for comic effect, and the thriller *Girlfriend* (2004) infamously depicted a lesbian character as a psychotic, violent woman, basically saying she is “crazy” because she is a lesbian. Such exploitative stories perpetuated the idea that queer desire leads to deviance or instability. This contrast showed that progress was happening, but unevenly.

Meanwhile, in the legal sphere, there were dramatic ups and downs. In 2009, the Delhi High Court in the Naz Foundation case ruled to decriminalise homosexuality, declaring that Section 377 violated fundamental rights to equality and liberty. This was a moment of euphoria, it seemed as though the law was finally catching up with ideals of justice and dignity for queer citizens. But in 2013, the Supreme Court of India delivered a setback by overturning that ruling (the *Suresh Kumar Koushal* case), thus re-criminalising same-sex relations. The top court argued that such a major change should be left to Parliament and downplayed the rights of what it oddly called a “minuscule minority.” This rollercoaster, legal recognition followed by legal regression, was devastating for activists and cast a chill over budding efforts to bring queer themes into the mainstream. It’s notable that *Aligarh* (2016), released while homosexuality was once again illegal, ends on a tragic note, reflecting the grim reality that the protagonist’s very existence was deemed a crime by the law of the land at that time.

Post-2018: Celebration and Assimilation

A profound shift occurred in 2018, altering both the legal and cultural landscape. In September 2018, the Supreme Court of India in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* finally struck down Section 377 for good, decriminalising consensual same-sex relations. The judges did not just remove an old law; their verdict came with emphatic affirmations of LGBT+ people's equality and dignity. One judge famously wrote that "history owes an apology" to LGBT+ Indians and their families for past injustices. The end of Section 377 was a watershed moment, overnight, it lifted the legal stigma, even if social stigma would take longer to erase. This victory, hard-won by activists, also seemed to embolden filmmakers. With homosexuality no longer officially "against the order of nature" in law books, the fear of backlash or censorship was somewhat reduced. The result was a noticeable increase in films and web series that openly featured queer characters and plots.

By the late 2010s and early 2020s, one could say Indian popular media entered a new phase of LGBT+ visibility. Mainstream Bollywood began to put queer protagonists into the kinds of stories that typically draw big audiences. No longer confined to art-house cinema, queer characters started appearing in glossy family dramas and romantic comedies. A prime example is *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019). This film was promoted as a classic Bollywood love story but with a twist: the romance was between two women. It starred well-known actors like Sonam Kapoor (as the lesbian heroine, Sweetie) and Anil Kapoor, and it treated the subject gently, aiming not to shock but to normalise. In the film, Sweetie struggles to come out to her conservative Punjabi family, and ultimately her father comes to accept her, delivering a tearful speech that he wants his daughter to live happily with the person she loves. The film avoided anything that might be deemed too "bold," for instance, it showed no physical intimacy between the two women, preferring to keep their love story very wholesome. The idea was to make the audience see a lesbian relationship as just another love story, complete with family melodrama and reconciliations, thereby making it palatable to those who might otherwise resist the idea.

A year later, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) took a more comedic route to a similar goal. It focused on two men in love (portrayed by Ayushmann Khurrana and Jitendra Kumar) and their efforts to get one set of parents to accept their relationship. The movie used humour and the familiar template of a Bollywood family entertainer, with over-the-top antics and even a big wedding-esque finale, to convey a message against homophobia. Remarkably, it even showed the two male leads kissing on screen, probably a first for a mainstream Hindi film, and it invited audiences to cheer for them as a couple. By packaging the advocacy ("love is love,

don't discriminate") in jokes and songs, the film reached a wider audience and tried to disarm prejudice through laughter. These films also reflect the influence of market forces and censorship. Bollywood remains cautious about upsetting family audiences or attracting censorship. Queer characters are made acceptable by keeping them "clean," no intimacy, no anger, no politics. Producers often avoid showing anything that could be labelled "too bold" because of fears around box office losses or online trolling. This commercial concern shapes which stories get told and which ones remain invisible. As a result, many films prefer safe, sanitised queerness over raw or radical narratives.

Another film, *Badhaai Do* (2022), carried forward the theme of seeking family acceptance but added its own twist. Here, a gay police officer and a lesbian teacher enter a marriage of convenience with each other to appease their respective families (a scenario sometimes called a "lavender marriage"). The story then shows how they each find partners outside this marriage and slowly reveal their real selves to their families. In the end, instead of a typical husband-wife, the two leads form a supportive friendship and help each other come out, and they even adopt a child together with their partners. The final scene, a family photo with two same-sex couples and a baby, with the older generation smiling along, is a heartwarming fantasy of acceptance, especially powerful considering that in reality same-sex couples in India still cannot marry or jointly adopt children.

These films were celebrated for bringing queer stories into the mainstream and for promoting messages of tolerance. They certainly marked a big change from the days when a gay or lesbian character could only be a joke or a villain. Many viewers and critics lauded them for normalising queer presence in everyday life and fostering empathy. There is a tangible social impact when a mainstream hero or heroine publicly plays a queer role and says on-screen that there is nothing wrong with being gay, in a country where homophobic attitudes are still common, that visibility can help change minds. And indeed, after 2018, pride-themed content in advertising, online series, and other media also flourished, reflecting a broader cultural moment of tentative pride and openness. While mainstream films often play it safe, online streaming platforms have become spaces for slightly bolder storytelling. Web series like *Made in Heaven*, *Class*, and *Romil and Jugal* have featured queer characters with more complexity. These shows explore romance, desire, heartbreak, and family rejection, sometimes going beyond the usual coming-out plots. However, even in the over-the-top media services, representation is uneven and rarely touches on caste, class, or rural-urban divides. The web has helped normalise queerness, but it has not fully embraced intersectionality or structural critique.

However, as this wave of representation gained momentum, some critical voices began to ask: what kind of representation are we getting? A pattern was noticeable. These mainstream films often framed queer life in terms that a straight, traditional audience would find reassuring. They tended to focus on the idea that queer people are “just like” straight people in their values and desires. The conflict in the plot was usually external (society or parents not accepting the couple), and the resolution was about winning that acceptance. Little attention was given to queer experiences on their own terms, for instance, queer friendships, community, or exploring sexuality openly. Instead, the queer characters were almost always portrayed as monogamous, family-oriented, and very much within the cultural norms except for their choice of partner. They seldom showed much physical affection on screen (to avoid offending sensibilities), and they rarely expressed anger or fought against broader injustices beyond wanting to be accepted by their family. Essentially, these characters were depicted as the model minority within the queer community, “good” gays and lesbians who just want a simple, respectable life.

This approach to storytelling aligns with what academics term homonormativity. Homonormativity, as explained by Lisa Duggan (2002: 179), is when LGBT+ politics or culture focuses on fitting into heteronormative institutions like marriage and family, rather than challenging the status quo. The idea is that certain queer people (usually those who are most similar to the societal norm in other ways) are accepted as long as they do not rock the boat too much. We can see homonormativity in these films: they argue that queer people deserve acceptance because they can be just as “normal,” marry, have kids, uphold family traditions, as straight people. There is certainly a progressive element in this, because it stretches the imagination of a traditionally conservative society to include queer couples at the dinner table and in wedding photos. But there is also a conservative underpinning: it largely leaves unquestioned the notion that marriage, nuclear family, and respectability are the ultimate goals.

Jasbir Puar (2007: 38) uses the term homonationalism to describe how nations selectively welcome some LGBT+ subjects (those who are seen as respectable or assimilable) into the fold while continuing to marginalise others. In the Indian context, one could observe that the queer characters who gain visibility are predominantly those who are also privileged in other ways, often upper-caste, middle or upper class, urban, and cisgender. They fit more easily into the social fabric apart from their queerness. Bollywood’s new queer narratives often sidestep issues like caste, religion, or economic struggle. For instance, in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha...*, the families, while traditional about gender roles, are depicted as fairly well-off and not grappling with other social vulnerabilities. This means the films isolate homophobia as the only problem to solve, which

simplifies the story. In reality, a queer person's challenges might be compounded by caste discrimination or poverty or communal tensions, dimensions mainstream films have largely not touched.

A breakthrough that did address an intersectional reality was the short film *Geeli Pucchi* in 2021's Netflix anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans*. It brought together issues of caste and sexuality by showing the dynamic between a Dalit lesbian factory worker and an upper-caste female colleague. *Geeli Pucchi* was lauded for bringing to light how a Dalit queer woman's experience is shaped by both her caste and her sexual orientation, in ways very different from the urban upper-class coming-out stories. The short's nuanced take, including the Dalit character hiding her last name to avoid discrimination, and the painful choices she faces, was a rarity in Indian cinema. Yet, it's important to note that even this film, bold as it was, came from the margins (a short on an over-the-top media services platform, not a wide-release feature) and it was not without its own critiques (such as casting a non-Dalit actor in the lead role).

Another representation gap has been the portrayal of transgender persons. While gay men and (to a lesser extent) lesbian women have started to appear in mainstream narratives, trans characters are still rare. When they do appear, they are often portrayed by cisgender actors and with less sensitivity. The film *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), for example, featured a romance between a man and a trans woman, which was a bold premise. But it was executed in a way that many found problematic: the trans woman was played by a cisgender actress, and the film included insensitive jokes and slurs about trans people. Critics argued that it showed a lack of true understanding, even as it tried to send a message of acceptance (Bhatt and Chudavala, 2022: 251). A review pointed out that the film got away with being offensive and ignorant in parts, under the guise of being supportive (Kumar and Sreenivas 2022). This shows that merely having a representation is not enough; the quality and context of that representation are crucial. Similarly, one can observe that mainstream cinema is yet to tell stories of, say, a queer person from a small town or a person who is queer and disabled, in a meaningful way. These narratives might exist in independent documentaries or regional films, but they are still at the fringes when it comes to big-budget productions.

In short, the post-2018 Indian media landscape is one of both unprecedented visibility and noticeable blind spots. On the surface, there is a celebration: Pride parades are shown in web series, gay and lesbian lead characters exist, and the conversation about LGBT+ issues is out in the open. Underneath that, much of this content gravitates towards a single narrative arc, the quest for acceptance by fitting in. As media theorist Stuart Hall would remind us, representations are powerful: by showing queer people mostly in one particular mould (as “normal” folks who just want love and a family), Bollywood is both mirroring and shaping societal attitudes. For some audience members, these films are eye-openers that reduce prejudice, which is undeniably good. For others, especially within the queer community, the films can feel limited, as if they validate only one way of being queer. There is a risk that the wider public, seeing these upbeat stories, might assume that the struggle is basically over and that queer people are now “accepted everywhere,” which is far from true on the ground.

When Reel Meets Real: The Marriage Equality Moment

The tension between rosy cinematic portrayal and reality became clear in 2023, when the issue of same-sex marriage reached India’s Supreme Court. In October 2023, in *Supriyo v. Union of India*, a group of same-sex couples who had petitioned for the right to marry heard the verdict. Despite high hopes fuelled by the post-377 optimism (and indeed, many on-screen weddings and proposals in films and series), the Supreme Court ultimately declined to legalise same-sex marriage. The Court acknowledged that queer citizens deserve protection and rights in a broad sense, but it ruled that changing the definition of marriage was beyond its purview and should be left to Parliament. In effect, it was a “no” to marriage equality for the time being. This legal outcome was a sobering reminder that even though popular culture had started embracing the slogan “love is love,” the law had not caught up to that sentiment fully.

This juncture invites reflection on how culture and law influence each other. On one side, one could argue that the proliferation of queer-positive films and shows in recent years is part of a changing social ethos that will eventually push legal change. The petitioners in the marriage case did point to changing attitudes, and every movie with a happy gay couple can contribute, in some small way, to normalising the idea of two men or two women building a life together. On the other side, one must consider whether these films, with their focus on marriage and family acceptance, paint too easy a picture and perhaps do not prepare the public to grapple with the harder political and legal battles.

Cultural representation can sometimes race ahead of legal reality, creating a feeling that “everything is fine now” while real people are still fighting for basic rights. After

the 2023 verdict, it is clear that Indian queer cinema is at a crossroads much like the queer movement itself. One path is to continue with the strategy of inclusion, telling stories that push for acceptance within existing frameworks (like marriage, inheritance, military service, etc.), hoping that showing such stories will gradually make those rights seem natural and necessary. Another path is to broaden the scope and address head-on the issues that have not been resolved, or to imagine entirely new ways of being that do not depend only on traditional validation.

Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 1) has written about the need to imagine queer futures beyond the here and now, to see queerness as an essentially revolutionary force that can dream up different ways of living. If we apply that lens, one might ask: Are Indian films imagining bold queer futures, or just assimilating queer characters into the same old futures? So far, the mainstream imagination stops at having a wedding and getting the parents to nod in approval. It is understandable why that narrative appeals, because for so many LGBT+ people the pain of rejection by family is very real, and the idea of being fully accepted is a powerful dream. But beyond that initial acceptance, there are many other stories to tell. For example, stories of queer people forming their own supportive communities or “chosen families,” stories of activists challenging systems (beyond just coming out to parents), or even genre stories (like a thriller or adventure) where a hero happens to be queer but the plot is not about their sexuality at all. There have been glimmers of such storytelling in independent circles with films like *Moothon* or anthology segments like *Paava Kadhaigal*, which did not cushion the audience from harsh realities. Those kinds of narratives might make some viewers uncomfortable or sad, but they also spark important conversations about prejudice, violence, and change.

Conclusion

While this paper focuses primarily on widely discussed films from Hindi and selected regional industries, it does not claim to be a comprehensive analysis of all queer cinema in India. Rather, it aims to critically examine dominant trends and gaps in mainstream representation. Indian cinema has travelled a long way in its portrayal of queer lives, from silence and caricature towards visibility and empathy. This journey mirrors, in many ways, India’s broader journey on LGBT+ rights: from legal criminalisation and social exclusion toward legal recognition and social acceptance. Films today are far more inclusive than before, and this has undoubtedly helped challenge the old idea that queer identities must remain hidden or be ridiculed. However, as we celebrate this progress, we must also critically examine its limitations. There is a valid concern that the current wave of representation is constructing a new kind of closet, one that is more colourful and friendly, but still confines queer people to a tight space of respectability.

The challenge going forward is to widen that space. Filmmakers and creators need to tell a greater variety of queer stories, especially those at the intersections of other identities. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) would argue, an intersectional approach is necessary, we need to see queer and trans characters of different classes, castes, religions, abilities, and regions, not just affluent city-dwellers. Including more LGBT+ creators in the filmmaking process can help ensure these stories are authentic and nuanced. Notably, the conversation in Indian media criticism has already shifted in recent years. It is no longer just “does this film have a gay character?” but also “how is this character portrayed?” and “who is telling this story?”. There is growing scrutiny about whether a purportedly progressive film is actually sensitive or just using a topical issue for attention. Such criticism is healthy and pushes the industry to do better.

In essence, Indian cinema stands at a point where it can choose to either pat itself on the back for “including” queer characters in familiar moulds, or it can push further and transform how queer lives are depicted. The true promise of queer cinema lies not only in asserting that queer people are just as human as anyone else, but also in showing that their ways of loving and living can expand our understanding of family and society, not by smoothing out differences to make queer people non-threatening, but by embracing those differences and educating audiences to respect and celebrate them.

If the films of the next decade can evolve in this direction, perhaps by showing stories that tackle, say, a lesbian couple facing caste prejudice, or a trans hero’s everyday life beyond clichés, or a gay protagonist leading a story in a genre that is not centred on coming out, then Indian cinema will truly be breaking new ground. Such diversity in narrative will not only reflect reality more honestly, but can also inspire social change by making audiences confront biases and imagine new possibilities.

Moving forward, filmmakers, producers, and streaming platforms must take conscious steps to widen the frame of queer representation. This means supporting queer creators behind the scenes, engaging with grassroots realities, and funding stories that show both struggle and joy beyond urban privilege. State and private funding bodies could also encourage more inclusive storytelling through grants or awards. Critically, queer cinema should not only seek validation from dominant structures but also ask: whose realities are we showing, and whose voices are still left out? As Muñoz (2009: 11) suggests, queerness is still “on the horizon.” Cinema can help bring that horizon closer by daring to show queer lives in their full humanity and variety.

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