

Cinematic Narratives and Legal Realities: Analyzing Transgender Representation in Indian Films

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Abstract:

The representation of transgender individuals in Indian cinema has played a pivotal role in shaping public perception and cultural discourse around gender identity. This paper examines the evolution of transgender portrayals in Indian films, analyzing how these narratives reflect societal attitudes and influence legal and policy frameworks concerning transgender rights. By employing a multidisciplinary approach, the research combines perspectives from mass media and law to assess the accuracy and impact of cinematic portrayals.

The study critically evaluates the depiction of transgender characters, ranging from stereotypical and marginalized roles to more nuanced and empowering portrayals in recent times. It explores how these representations intersect with legal realities, including the implementation of the Act, 2019, and landmark judicial decisions such as the NALSA judgment of 2014. Additionally, the paper highlights the role of films in fostering societal acceptance and initiating conversations about transgender inclusion and equality.

By analyzing selected Indian films and their reception, the research aims to identify gaps between cinematic narratives and the lived experiences of transgender individuals. It also explores the potential of cinema as a medium to advocate for policy changes and challenge entrenched biases. This paper contributes to the discourse on media ethics, gender inclusivity, and the interplay between cultural representation and legal reform in contemporary India.

Keywords: Transgender Portrayal, Indian Cinema, Transgender Legal Framework, Tokenism.

1. Introduction

Indian cinema has a profound influence on shaping societal perceptions, including those of transgender individuals. Until 2011, India did not have a separate count for the transgender population, grouping them with the general population. In a historic move, the 2011 Census marked the first time transgender individuals were explicitly recognized. Under the guidance of the Registrar General of India, and after recommendations from the Technical Advisory Committee, the census introduced a new category called "Others," coded as '3,' alongside the traditional '1' for males and '2' for females. (Census 2011).

The 2011 Census also included additional data on transgender individuals, breaking it down by factors like caste, literacy, and the number of transgender children aged 0-6. Demographic maps were used to

visualize these characteristics, providing more insight into the transgender population. According to the Census, the recorded population of the "Third Gender" was 487,803. The states with the highest numbers of transgender individuals were "Uttar Pradesh (28%), Andhra Pradesh (9%), Bihar (8%), West Bengal (6%), and Tamil Nadu (4%)". (Census 2011) However, it's important to note that these numbers may not fully represent the prevalence of transgender people, as visibility and reporting practices can vary greatly across regions.

However, the portrayal of transgender characters in films often diverges starkly from their legal realities. (Wankhede, 2012) Cinematic narratives tend to depict transgender people through exaggerated stereotypes, relegating them to roles that evoke pity, ridicule, or fear. Such representations perpetuate harmful misconceptions, reinforcing social biases rather than promoting understanding. Such problems involve social prejudices.

Many employers still hesitate to hire qualified transgender individuals, despite their skills and experience. (Naik, 2023) However, many transgender people continue to fight for employment opportunities, both for themselves and their community. A few progressive businesses have begun offering jobs to transgender women in mainstream sectors, such as agents for the Life Insurance Corporation of India, but these instances remain rare. (Divan, 2016) The limited job opportunities often push transgender individuals into sex work, which exposes them to increased health risks, including HIV. The combination of unemployment, low-paying jobs, and unsafe working conditions leads many in the community into a cycle of poverty and homelessness. (Mal. 2018)

The transgender community in India continues to face severe economic hardships, often unable to access employment in both the public and private sectors. (Ahmad, 2018) Due to widespread discrimination and social exclusion, many turn to begging, performing at events, or sex work for survival. (Seil, 2024) This lack of opportunities leaves transgender individuals underrepresented in mainstream jobs. With limited access to education and skill development, securing stable employment remains a significant challenge for them. As a result, their workforce participation is far lower than that of the general population.

India's growing pink economy holds significant potential, but this is hindered by widespread stigma and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community. (Sarah, 2024) Queer economics suggests that societal biases negatively impact economic outcomes, and research shows that marginalizing groups leads to inequality and measurable economic losses, including a lower GDP. In India, systemic discrimination affects nearly every aspect of LGBTQ+ individuals' lives, from abuse at home to exclusion in society. These challenges contribute to higher dropout rates and limited access to education, reducing their chances for stable employment. This cycle of marginalization weakens the nation's human capital and obstructs long-term economic growth. (Giri, 2020)

In contrast, India's legal framework has made significant strides in protecting transgender rights. Landmark developments, such as the "*National Legal Service Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India*" (2014) judgment and the "Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019", recognize gender self-identification and prohibit discrimination. Yet, these legal advances are often at odds with how transgender individuals are portrayed on screen. While laws aim to empower and integrate, films frequently reinforce marginalization, portraying transgender people as beggars or sex workers rather

than as equal members of society. This research explores the disconnect between cinematic depictions and legal realities, aiming to highlight the impact of such portrayals and advocate for authentic, inclusive storytelling that aligns with legal progress.

The Jessica Lal murder case of 1999, involving the fatal shooting of a Delhi model, initially faced judicial stagnation due to systemic lapses and the acquittal of the accused, Manu Sharma, in 2006. However, the case was reignited by relentless media scrutiny, spearheaded by campaigns like *Tehelka's* sting operations and public outrage amplified by televised debates. This media activism exerted societal pressure, leading to the Delhi High Court invoking its *suo motu* jurisdiction. The subsequent retrial resulted in Manu Sharma's conviction in December 2006, underscoring the transformative role of media in bridging public sentiment with judicial accountability, ultimately restoring faith in the rule of law.

2. Literature Review

Billard's (2016) study contributes to the growing body of research on media representations of marginalized communities, focusing specifically on transgender individuals. Previous studies have shown that media often perpetuates stereotypes and delegitimizes minority groups through biased language and limited representation (Miller & Vaccaro, 2016; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Billard extends this work by analyzing "legitimacy indicators" in mainstream U.S. newspapers, revealing a pattern of delegitimization through minimal and stereotypical coverage. Such findings align with broader media studies, highlighting the role of language in shaping public perceptions and policy discourse (Goffman, 1974). This study underscores the need for inclusive and accurate media portrayals.

Madhusudhan B (2021) sheds light on the persistent marginalization and neglect experienced by the transgender community in India, which forms the core focus of the book. Although transgender individuals have been an integral part of Indian society for centuries, their socio-economic and political status remains a subject of considerable debate and discussion. While some state governments in India have introduced policies and initiatives to enhance the welfare of transgender people, the author emphasizes that these efforts have had limited impact. The realities faced by the community remain grim, reflecting the gap between policy intentions and tangible improvements.

Billard's (2016) study analyzes how U.S. newspapers portray transgender identities. Examining 200 articles from leading publications, the research highlights limited coverage and prevalent delegitimizing language. These portrayals, the study argues, negatively influence public perceptions and hinder political legitimacy for transgender rights.

McInroy and Craig (2015) explore the growing visibility of transgender individuals in traditional and online media, highlighting the influence of these portrayals on public perceptions and the identity formation of transgender youth. Their study addresses a research gap by analyzing media depictions and LGBTQ youth perspectives, offering insights into social work practices using an ecological framework.

Johnson (2016) critiques the restrictive influence of medicalized norms on transgender autonomy through the concept of "transnormativity," which prioritizes conformity to medical standards. Using

documentary films and studies on transgender communities, the article highlights how media perpetuates this framework, marginalizing gender-non-conforming individuals who opt out of or lack access to medical transitions.

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, analyzing select Indian films to critically examine transgender representation and its societal implications. A thorough review of literature and secondary sources, including academic studies and media analyses, provides the theoretical framework. The study incorporates content analysis of films across different eras, examining narratives, character development, and their alignment with societal attitudes. Additionally, laws and judgements are reviewed to contextualize cinematic portrayals within the evolving legal landscape, ensuring a multidisciplinary approach to the research.

4. Historical Marginalisation of Transgender Community

Initially, the transgender community in India was not greatly affected by the East India Company's arrival. However, following British conquest and the imposition of English laws, their rights were significantly altered. Privileges such as land ownership, access to food, and financial benefits from agriculture were gradually taken away. English inheritance laws, in particular, had a detrimental impact on the Hijra and Eunuch communities, as they were prevented from inheriting property. Historical accounts from travelers and missionaries show British observers' surprise and admiration for the transgender community's dignity and social standing from the 18th century onwards. (Narain, 2018)

Before the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act, transgender individuals were sometimes targeted under the Indian Penal Code of 1860, specifically Section 377, which criminalized non-vaginal sexual acts. In 1884, the Allahabad High Court convicted a person based on a medical examination, where a civil surgeon noted signs of "unnatural sexual intercourse," including physical markers like anal distortion and recent syphilis. (*Queen Empress v. Khairati*, 1884) During British rule in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, laws were introduced that systematically marginalized the Hijra community. The "Criminal Tribes Act of 1871" was one such law, which targeted transgender individuals for activities like kidnapping, begging, and public performances. This legislation was implemented in the wake of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, which challenged British authority, leading to stricter measures for control. The Hijra community, along with other marginalized groups, was seen as a threat to "law and order." (Sammalar, 2014) Historians like David Arnold and sociologist Meena Radhakrishnan have pointed out how these colonial policies negatively impacted groups unfamiliar with British rule, such as gypsies, tribals, and Hijras. (Reddy, 2005)

5. Legal Recognition to Transgender Population in India

The legal battle began in 1994 when the anti-AIDS group "Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan" called for the repeal of Section 377 of the IPC. However, the case was dropped due to a lack of legal representation and follow-through. (Bhan, 2020) The issue resurfaced in 2001 when the Naz Foundation petitioned the Delhi High Court. After years of legal challenges and public outcry, the Delhi High Court decriminalized Section 377 in the landmark "*Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of New Delhi*". But in 2013, the Supreme Court reversed this ruling in "*Suresh Koushal v. Union of India*", stating that it

was up to Parliament to decide on such matters, reinstating Section 377's criminalization of the LGBT community. (Narain, 2018) Despite this setback, efforts continued, with MP Sashi Tharoor proposing the decriminalization of these laws, though the motion was rejected. Finally, in 2018, the Supreme Court decriminalized Section 377 in the "*Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*" case, marking a victory for LGBTQ+ rights.

In 2014, Tiruchi Siva introduced the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill as a private member's initiative. The Bill gained approval in the Rajya Sabha in 2015. (Anuvinda, 2022) However, its progress stalled in the Lok Sabha, where discussions were unexpectedly delayed and remained incomplete. Around the same time, the Supreme Court of India was presented with a pivotal writ petition, leading to the landmark "*NALSA v. Union of India*" judgment.

This judgment was groundbreaking, as it formally recognized non-binary genders in India. It further affirmed that the fundamental right to live with dignity, enshrined under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, includes the right to gender self-identification. This interpretation underscored the importance of diversity and self-expression in leading a dignified life.

Additionally, the judgment highlighted that constitutional rights, such as the right to freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a) and the right to equality under Article 14, are inherently inclusive and apply to all individuals, irrespective of gender identity. The language of these provisions, being gender-neutral, reinforced the principle of equal treatment and respect for all. (Comments on Bill, 2020).

Transgender individuals face significant discrimination across various aspects of society, undermining their right to equality. The right to freedom of expression includes the ability to express one's gender identity through clothing, speech, behavior, and personal conduct. Therefore, transgender people are entitled to both equality and freedom of expression under the law.

The Court observed that Articles 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution explicitly prohibit discrimination based on "sex." It clarified that the term "sex" extends beyond biological differences to include gender identity, which is shaped by an individual's self-perception and biological characteristics such as chromosomes, genitalia, and secondary sexual traits. Discrimination against someone due to their gender identity is thus a violation of these constitutional protections.

To address the widespread stigma faced by the transgender community, the Court emphasized the importance of conducting public awareness campaigns. These initiatives are seen as a crucial step toward fostering societal acceptance and understanding.

The Court also directed both the Central and State Governments to implement a series of measures aimed at advancing the rights of the transgender community. These measures include ensuring that all official documents recognize the "third gender" legally. Furthermore, the Court emphasized that individuals from this group should be acknowledged as a "socially and educationally disadvantaged" category, thus entitled to special provisions in education and public employment. The Court also called for the creation of community welfare programs designed to support the social upliftment of transgender people. To gain a deeper understanding of the specific needs of transgender individuals,

the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment was instructed to form an "Expert Committee on Issues Relating to Transgender." (Jadhav, 2014)

In response to a Supreme Court order, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment set up an Expert Committee in August 2013, with the committee's report being released in January 2014. On August 2, 2016, the government introduced the "Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016." However, many aspects of the 2016 bill were criticized as regressive and less progressive compared to the 2014 private bill. It was also pointed out that the bill ignored several recommendations from the Expert Committee.

The Expert Committee had suggested numerous welfare reforms to better support transgender individuals. Among the recommendations was the creation of a comprehensive program aimed at strengthening the transgender community. The committee also proposed establishing a crisis counseling service similar to those used for rape and other forms of trauma to help individuals cope with violence and hardship. Additionally, the committee recommended that the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation collaborate on providing housing and rehabilitation support through specific housing assistance programs.

One key suggestion was to expand the financial support remit of one of the existing Corporations to include the transgender population. Furthermore, the Expert Committee emphasized the importance of creating strong partnerships with vocational training centers, both public and private, to provide relevant skill-building opportunities for transgender individuals. Lastly, the committee recommended establishing a "National Council for Transgender People", inspired by similar councils that exist for senior citizens, to focus on the unique needs and challenges of the transgender community. ("Report of Expert Committee on the Issues relating to Transgender Persons", 2014).

The NALSA ruling emphasized the need for transgender people to be accommodated in both workplace and educational environments, and affirmed their right to express their gender identity publicly without the requirement of undergoing sex reassignment surgery. In the same year, a private member's bill was introduced in the Indian Parliament, and surprisingly, it passed the upper house. This achievement was notable, as private member's bills typically struggle to gain significant traction. However, while the private bill was still under discussion, the Indian Government presented its own version of the bill in 2016. This version was then forwarded to a Standing Committee for further recommendations. In 2018, the bill was revised based on the committee's input and reintroduced in Parliament in 2019. After the dissolution of Parliament in 2018 and the formation of a new Central Government, the bill was finally passed into law in 2019.

The "Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act" came into effect on January 10, 2020. Initially, the government released the proposed regulations for the Act on April 18, 2020, with a deadline for public feedback set for April 30, 2020. This deadline was extended to May 18, 2020, to allow for more thorough input. The Supreme Court is now reviewing arguments related to the constitutionality of the Act, particularly focusing on issues such as privacy, equality, and self-determination. The Court has requested the Central Government to respond to these concerns. If the Court delves deeper into the complexities surrounding transgender rights in India, it will undoubtedly be confronted with the significant challenge of aligning the Act with the earlier NALSA judgment. Despite these challenges,

the Transgender Persons Act stands as a crucial piece of legislation in advancing the rights and recognition of transgender individuals in India.

The “Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019,” plays a pivotal role in affirming and safeguarding transgender rights in India. One of its key provisions, found in Chapter 3, addresses the right of transgender individuals to self-perceive their gender identity. This allows them to apply for a certificate formally recognizing their gender identity. However, this section has faced criticism from activists, who argue that the requirement for a certificate issued by the District Magistrate, along with proof of sex reassignment surgery, undermines fundamental rights to dignity and bodily autonomy. This provision, though well-intentioned, raises serious concerns about the potential impact it may have on the lives of transgender individuals.

While the Act represents a significant step forward in acknowledging transgender rights, the certification process embedded in Chapter 3 has drawn valid criticism. The need for certification can infringe upon the dignity and bodily autonomy of transgender individuals. It imposes unnecessary financial costs and may inadvertently reinforce societal biases and discrimination. To foster a more inclusive and just society, there is a strong argument for amending the Act to allow for self-identification without the prerequisite of certification. This adjustment would bring Indian laws more in line with global human rights standards, ensuring the protection and respect of transgender individuals' autonomy and rights.

Merely enacting laws will not guarantee trans-equality; there is a pressing need for concrete action from the Government to ensure the full inclusion of transgender people in society. A transformative approach is required to address the lasting consequences of decades of institutionalized discrimination. The Indian Government should implement comprehensive visibility programs that support transgender and non-binary individuals in overcoming the challenges they face.

To achieve this, significant legal reforms are essential. These reforms should encompass recognizing the right to self-identify one's gender, revising anti-discrimination laws, and introducing targeted affirmative action policies. Such measures must be put in place across key areas such as education, employment, and healthcare to ensure transgender individuals are provided with equal opportunities and protections. Only by taking these steps can we build a society that truly celebrates diversity and upholds equality for all its citizens.

6. Tokenism vs. Authentic Representation by Indian Cinema

Tokenism refers to “the superficial inclusion of marginalized individuals in institutions or groups to create an appearance of diversity without genuine commitment to equality” (Kanter, 1977). Indian cinema, with its immense cultural influence, has the power to shape perceptions and challenge societal biases. While historically marred by negative stereotypes and tokenism, there has been a significant shift in recent years toward more positive and nuanced portrayals of transgender individuals. Such films have played a crucial role in creating awareness and fostering empathy, offering a platform for the transgender community to be viewed with dignity and respect.

One of the earliest films to break away from negative stereotypes was *Tamanna* (1997), directed by Mahesh Bhatt. The film tells the story of Tikku, a transgender woman who adopts an abandoned baby

girl and raises her with unconditional love. Tikku's character is portrayed with sensitivity, highlighting her humanity and resilience in the face of societal rejection. This film remains a seminal work in portraying transgender individuals as nurturing and capable of love, challenging the prevalent narrative of ridicule or fear.

Another groundbreaking film is *Daayraa* (1996) by Amol Palekar. The film explored themes of identity, love, and acceptance, showcasing a transgender character in a powerful, empathetic role. It was ahead of its time, addressing complex issues with sensitivity and depth.

The Tamil film *Super Deluxe* (2019), directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, marked a significant milestone in positive representation. Vijay Sethupathi's portrayal of Shilpa, a transgender woman returning to her family, is both nuanced and heartwarming. The film avoids caricatures and instead delves into the challenges of acceptance, both within families and society. Shilpa's character is a testament to resilience and self-acceptance, portrayed with dignity and respect.

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021), directed by Abhishek Kapoor, further advanced the conversation on transgender representation. Featuring Vaani Kapoor as Maanvi, a transgender woman, the film tackled themes of love, identity, and acceptance in the context of a romantic relationship. Although it faced criticism for casting a cisgender actor in a transgender role, the film succeeded in sparking discussions around inclusivity and acceptance, particularly in a mainstream commercial setting.

Paaru (2021), a Kannada short film, also deserves mention for its sensitive portrayal of a transgender woman striving to find her place in society. Through its compact narrative, it sheds light on the struggles and aspirations of transgender individuals, presenting their lives with compassion and authenticity.

Positive portrayals such as these have begun to dismantle entrenched stereotypes, portraying transgender individuals as multifaceted and deserving of respect and understanding. However, challenges remain, such as the need for authentic casting and deeper engagement with the lived experiences of transgender individuals.

These films demonstrate a growing willingness within the Indian film industry to address transgender issues with sensitivity and depth. They reflect the changing societal narrative, aligning with the broader legal and social movements advocating for transgender rights. However, in reality, the legal framework, despite its progressive nature, struggles with implementation. Transgender individuals often face barriers to accessing these rights due to societal prejudices, lack of awareness, and administrative inertia.

On the other hand, Indian cinema has long faced criticism for the negative and oversimplified portrayal of transgender individuals. Rather than presenting transgender characters as multi-dimensional, they are often reduced to exaggerated stereotypes. These representations perpetuate harmful views and contribute to the ongoing marginalization and stigmatization of the transgender community. Films typically cast transgender individuals as tragic figures, villains, or comedic relief, ignoring the full spectrum of their lived experiences. This reinforces a narrative that undermines the dignity and rights granted to transgender people by the law and society.

In *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), directed by Mira Nair, the transgender character is depicted as both exotic and tragic. The eunuch character is presented as a symbol of sexual deviance and victimhood, reinforcing the stereotype of transgender people as outcasts, deprived of autonomy and agency. This portrayal aligns with the common trope of transgender individuals as tragic figures who lack the dignity and independence guaranteed under Indian law.

A similar negative portrayal appears in *Baazigar* (1994), directed by Abbas-Mustan, where a transgender character is shown as the villain. This character is depicted with psychological and moral flaws, furthering the stereotype of transgender people as deviant or inherently dangerous. The character is positioned as a threat to social order, which contradicts the Indian Constitution's principles of equality and dignity under Article 21, which guarantees the right to live with respect and without discrimination.

In *Masti* (2003), directed by Indra Kumar, the transgender character is used for comic relief. This film trivializes the experiences of transgender individuals, reducing them to objects of ridicule and mockery. Rather than addressing the real issues faced by transgender people in society, the film uses them as a vehicle for humor. This shallow depiction contributes to the reinforcement of stigma, while the legal protections under the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019*, which mandates respect and dignity, remain ignored in the narrative.

Similarly, *The Dirty Picture* (2011), directed by Milan Luthria, includes a transgender character who is again portrayed in a stereotypical and ridiculed light. The character is shown as subservient and often treated as a source of humor or sensationalism. This portrayal undermines the ideals of inclusion and equal treatment advocated by legal reforms like the *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014) judgment, which protects transgender individuals' right to self-identify and be treated with equality.

The negative portrayals of transgender characters in these films are in stark contrast to the legal protections offered to transgender individuals in India. While films like *Baazigar* and *Masti* reduce transgender people to objects of fear or ridicule, Indian law explicitly guarantees equal treatment and dignity to all citizens, irrespective of gender identity. The *NALSA* ruling and the “*Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act*” recognize transgender individuals' right to live without discrimination and participate fully in society, including access to education, healthcare, and employment.

This contrast exposes the gap between cultural narratives in cinema and the positive legal developments for transgender people. While the Indian legal system recognizes the dignity and equality of transgender individuals, mainstream films continue to portray them as inferior or deserving of ridicule. This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for a shift in cinematic representation, one that aligns with the legal recognition of transgender rights and fosters a more inclusive and respectful society.

7. Social Acceptance of Transgender Persons

While films often focus on individual stories of acceptance and the emotional journeys of transgender characters, they tend to idealize the process of social inclusion. Legal protections, such as the constitutional guarantees of equality (Article 14) and dignity (Article 21), are important, but they cannot enforce societal acceptance. In reality, transgender individuals continue to face discrimination,

harassment, and violence. Films often focus on personal relationships or individual struggles, leaving out the broader, systemic issues that continue to marginalize the community.

Although contemporary films have made progress in portraying transgender characters with more sensitivity, they still often fall short of capturing the full diversity of transgender experiences. Legal realities involve tackling systemic barriers such as access to education, lack of inclusive infrastructure, and exclusionary policies, but these issues are seldom explored in depth in films. Most cinematic portrayals focus on personal conflicts rather than addressing the institutional obstacles that transgender individuals face daily. This narrow focus misses a vital aspect of the transgender experience, leaving out important discussions on how society, as a whole, can become more inclusive.

7.1. Employment and Economic Rights of Transgender

While films often depict transgender characters challenging societal norms and gaining acceptance, economic inclusion remains an ongoing struggle in the real world. Despite legal protections against discrimination in employment, transgender individuals frequently find themselves excluded from the workforce. As a result, many are left with limited options, often pushed into marginalized professions like begging or sex work.

7.2. Healthcare Accessibility

Though some films highlight the emotional and psychological toll that transgender individuals face, they rarely tackle the systemic issues related to healthcare access. Johnson (2016) While the right to gender-affirming medical treatment and surgeries is legally acknowledged, access to such healthcare remains a significant barrier. High costs, a shortage of specialized care, and the ongoing societal stigma surrounding transgender people create a gap between the law's recognition of these rights and the practical challenges of accessing them. These crucial issues are often overlooked in cinematic portrayals. (Sabatello, 2011)

8. Conclusion

This study underscores the stark contrast between the progress made in legally recognizing transgender rights in India and their depiction in Indian cinema. Despite legal milestones, these advancements find little reflection in mainstream cinematic narratives. The social realities highlight the inconsistency between constitutional guarantees like equality (Article 14), protection from discrimination (Articles 15 and 16), and the right to dignity (Article 21), and the stereotypical portrayals in films that fail to align with these principles. Although some contemporary films have made strides towards inclusive representation, the industry still struggles with issues such as authentic casting and a shallow understanding of transgender realities. These gaps reflect a broader cultural failure to embrace diversity and equality in storytelling.

Bridging this divide presents significant opportunities for societal transformation. Authentic portrayals of transgender individuals in cinema could help reduce stigma, encourage empathy, and promote their integration into the social fabric. Such efforts would enhance the impact of legal protections, as public opinion and attitudes are shaped positively. By aligning cinematic narratives with constitutional values, the film industry could contribute to social justice and equality.

This study also identifies certain limitations. It focuses primarily on mainstream Indian films, leaving out the contributions of regional or independent cinema, which may provide a different lens. Furthermore, it does not delve deeply into the economic and policy factors influencing filmmakers' decisions, an area that could offer valuable insights for future research.

Further exploration is necessary to examine how audiences perceive transgender representations in films and their broader impact on societal attitudes. Collaborative efforts involving legal experts, filmmakers, and activists could guide the creation of more responsible narratives. Engaging transgender actors, writers, and consultants is crucial for ensuring that stories accurately reflect their lived experiences. Awareness campaigns by both the legal community and the film industry could also contribute to reshaping societal perceptions.

This research calls for urgent action to address the gap between legal recognition and cinematic portrayal. By fostering authentic representation and aligning cultural narratives with legal advancements, Indian cinema can play a pivotal role in creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

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