



## 5. Changing Trends in gender representations in Indian Cinema – An Analytical Study

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### Abstract

*This research paper examines the evolution of gender representations in Indian cinema, focusing on the portrayal of women, homosexuality, and transgender characters. The study highlights the gradual transformation of female characters from submissive and passive roles to more independent and strong ones while acknowledging the challenges that persist, such as objectification and the gender pay gap. Additionally, the paper explores the representation of LGBTQ+ characters, discussing the shift from marginalization and caricatures to more nuanced and empathetic portrayals. The analysis draws from various films and scholarly sources, reflecting on the progress made in recent years and emphasizing the need for continued efforts to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive and authentic representations in Indian cinema. By examining the progress and challenges in gender representation, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and diversity in the Indian film industry and society as a whole.*

Keywords: Gender Representation, Indian Cinema, Gender Identity

### Introduction

Indian cinema has been continuously evolving from its inception to the present day. This evolution has seen a transformation in the role of gender and various aspects of acting (Sen, 2016). This paper will reflect on various aspects of gender, such as the roles of female characters, homosexuality, and various manifestations of transgender.

Gender representations in Indian cinema can be traced back to its early days when traditional norms and societal expectations heavily influenced the portrayal of both male and female characters (Ganti, 2004). Over the years, Indian cinema has evolved and witnessed a transformation in the depiction of gender roles, with filmmakers pushing boundaries and challenging stereotypes.

In the early years of Indian cinema, women were not allowed to act. All the female characters were played by men. As time passed, women marked their origin in the films, but the female characters

were often depicted as submissive, passive, and confined to traditional roles such as wives, mothers, and daughters (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). Male characters, on the other hand, were portrayed as strong, dominant, and the primary breadwinners for their families. This disparity in gender representation can be attributed to the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms in Indian society (Ganti, 2004).

Further, as Indian cinema evolved, the roles of female characters gradually began to change, with an increase in the number of self-reliant and strong female characters in films (Kapoor, 2009). This shift was a reflection of the changing face of society, as more women entered the workforce and began to challenge traditional gender norms (Chakravarty, 1993).

However, despite the progress in female representation, the objectification of female characters and their portrayal in item numbers continue to persist (Dwyer, 2014). Similarly, the representation of alternative sexualities, such as homosexuality and transgender identities, has been a slow and challenging process, with filmmakers often resorting to stereotypes and caricatures in the past (Ghosh, 2012).

Gender representations in Indian cinema have seen significant changes over the years, with the portrayal of women and alternative sexualities gradually evolving to reflect societal changes. However, there remains much work to be done to ensure equal and authentic representation in the Indian film industry.

### **Gender Discrimination and Female Roles**

Gender discrimination in Indian cinema has been documented for decades. During the decades of independence, female characters were generally portrayed as timid and submissive (Ray, 2011). However, beginning in the 1970s, the roles of female characters gradually began to change. The number of self-reliant and strong female characters in films increased, reflecting the changing face of society (Kapoor, 2009).

Despite this progress, the representation of women in Indian cinema still faces challenges. The objectification of female characters and their portrayal in item numbers continue to persist (Dwyer, 2014). The Bechdel Test, a measure of the representation of women in fiction, reveals that only a small percentage of Indian films pass this test (Mathur, 2017).

As mentioned, from the early years of Indian cinema, female characters were often portrayed in submissive and passive roles, conforming to traditional gender norms prevalent in Indian society at the time (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). Male characters, in contrast, were depicted as strong, dominant, and responsible for supporting their families (Ganti, 2004).

Over the years, the portrayal of female roles in Indian cinema has witnessed a gradual transformation. Beginning in the 1970s, female characters started to be portrayed in more independent and strong roles, reflecting the changing dynamics of society and the increasing presence of women in the workforce (Kapoor, 2009). Films like "Arth" (1982) and "Mirch Masala"

(1987) showcased strong female characters who challenged traditional gender norms and fought for their rights (Rao, 2014).

However, despite the progress made in the portrayal of female characters, gender discrimination continues to persist in Indian cinema. The objectification of women, as seen in item numbers and glamour-centric roles, remains a significant issue (Dwyer, 2014). Female actors often receive less screen time and fewer substantial roles compared to their male counterparts, resulting in a skewed representation of gender (Ghosh, 2017).

Moreover, the gender pay gap in the Indian film industry highlights the continued discrimination against female actors. According to a 2016 study by the Indian Journal of Gender Studies, the pay gap between male and female actors in Bollywood ranges between 30% and 50% (Puri, 2016). This disparity reflects the broader issues of gender inequality in the entertainment industry and society as a whole.

While Indian cinema has made strides in transforming the portrayal of female roles, gender discrimination remains a significant concern. Filmmakers and the industry as a whole must continue to challenge gender stereotypes and work towards a more balanced and equal representation of gender in Indian cinema.

### **Representation of homosexual characters in Indian Cinema**

Indian cinema has come a long way in depicting alternative sexualities, such as homosexuality. In the past, homosexuality was often portrayed in a stereotypical manner or as comic relief (Ghosh, 2012). Films like 'My Brother Nikhil' (2005) and 'Aligarh' (2016) have helped break the mould and portray homosexuality more realistically and sensitively (Chatterjee, 2016).

The representation of homosexuality in Indian cinema has evolved significantly over the years, moving from the fringes to more nuanced and complex portrayals in mainstream films. Early depictions of homosexuality in Indian cinema were often stereotypical, stigmatized, or relegated to the status of comic relief (Ghosh, 2012). Films like "Dostana" (2008) and "Kal Ho Naa Ho" (2003) portrayed homosexual characters as caricatures, reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating ignorance about the LGBTQ+ community (Joshi, 2017).

In recent years, however, there has been a notable shift in the portrayal of homosexual characters in Indian cinema. Films like "My Brother Nikhil" (2005) and "Aligarh" (2016) have presented homosexuality more sensitively and realistically, exploring the complexities and struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Indian society (Chatterjee, 2016). These films have played a crucial role in sparking conversations and challenging societal norms around homosexuality.

The decriminalization of homosexuality in India in 2018 has created new opportunities for filmmakers to explore LGBTQ+ themes without fear of legal repercussions (Mishra, 2018). This landmark decision has resulted in a surge of films addressing homosexuality in mainstream cinema, such as "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga" (2019) and "Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan" (2020).

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These films have shown that it is possible to address homosexuality while maintaining commercial viability and reaching wider audiences (Kumar, 2020).

Despite the progress made in recent years, challenges remain in the accurate and sensitive representation of homosexual characters in Indian cinema. Stereotypes and tokenism continue to plague the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals in films, and there is still much work to be done to ensure that homosexual characters are portrayed authentically and fairly (Nair, 2019).

The representation of homosexual roles in Indian cinema has come a long way, but there is still room for improvement. Filmmakers must continue to push boundaries and challenge societal norms to create more inclusive and diverse narratives that accurately represent the LGBTQ+ community in India.

### **Transgender Representation in Indian Cinema**

Transgender characters have been a part of Indian cinema since its inception. Early representations were often one-dimensional and focused on depicting transgender characters as either beggars or sex workers (Nayar, 2013). However, recent years have witnessed a shift in how transgender characters are portrayed on screen.

Films like 'Nanu Avanalla Avalu' (2015) and 'Super Deluxe' (2019) have depicted transgender characters with depth and empathy, highlighting their struggles and resilience (Raj, 2019). Moreover, the casting of transgender actors in prominent roles, such as Anjali Ameer in 'Peranbu' (2018), has further emphasized the need for authentic representation in cinema (Prasad, 2018).

Transgender representation in Indian cinema has been a complex and evolving subject. Historically, transgender characters were often portrayed in a one-dimensional manner, with the focus primarily on depicting them as beggars, sex workers, or subjects of ridicule (Nayar, 2013). These portrayals perpetuated negative stereotypes and reinforced the marginalization of transgender individuals in Indian society.

In recent years, however, there has been a shift in how transgender characters are portrayed in Indian cinema. A growing number of films have begun to depict transgender characters with greater depth, empathy, and complexity, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and humanity (Raj, 2019). Films such as "Nanu Avanalla Avalu" (2015) and "Super Deluxe" (2019) have played a significant role in breaking the mould and bringing transgender narratives to mainstream audiences (Raj, 2019).

Moreover, the casting of transgender actors in prominent roles has further emphasized the need for authentic representation in cinema. For instance, Anjali Ameer, a transgender actress, played a significant role in the critically acclaimed film "Peranbu" (2018), marking a significant milestone for the transgender community in the Indian film industry (Prasad, 2018).



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Despite the progress made in recent years, challenges remain in achieving a fair and accurate representation of transgender individuals in Indian cinema. Tokenism and the perpetuation of stereotypes continue to hinder the portrayal of transgender characters in many films, and there is still much work to be done to ensure that transgender narratives are adequately represented on screen (Nair, 2019).

In conclusion, transgender representation in Indian cinema has come a long way from its early days of marginalization and stereotyping. With an increasing number of filmmakers recognizing the importance of authentic representation and the growing presence of transgender actors in prominent roles, there is hope for a more inclusive and diverse portrayal of transgender characters in Indian cinema in the future.

### **Conclusion**

This shift towards inclusivity and diversity in cinema is not only important for the representation of marginalized communities but also for the growth and evolution of the film industry as a whole. It allows for a wider range of stories to be told and for audiences to connect with characters from all walks of life. The representation of gender in Indian cinema has come a long way from its early days. While progress has been made in the portrayal of female characters, homosexuality, and transgender representation, there is still much work to be done. Filmmakers must continue to challenge gender norms and stereotypes to create more inclusive and diverse narratives that reflect the complex realities of Indian society. This will not only provide more opportunities for underrepresented groups in the film industry but also promote greater acceptance and understanding of diverse identities among audiences. Ultimately, this can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

Gender representations in Indian cinema have evolved significantly over the years, with filmmakers increasingly pushing boundaries and challenging societal norms (Ghosh, 2017). From the early portrayals of women in submissive roles to the more recent depictions of strong, independent female characters, Indian cinema has made substantial progress in addressing gender stereotypes (Kapoor, 2009). However, challenges such as objectification and the gender pay gap remain, indicating that there is still much work to be done to achieve gender equality in the industry (Puri, 2016).

Similarly, the representation of LGBTQ+ characters, including homosexual and transgender individuals, has witnessed a considerable shift from marginalization and caricatures to more nuanced and empathetic portrayals (Raj, 2019; Chatterjee, 2016). The decriminalization of homosexuality in India and the growing presence of transgender actors in prominent roles have further opened doors for filmmakers to explore diverse narratives and promote authentic representation (Mishra, 2018; Prasad, 2018).

Despite the progress made in recent years, filmmakers, actors, and the industry as a whole need to continue challenging stereotypes and pushing for more inclusive and authentic gender representations in Indian cinema. By doing so, they can contribute to the broader social discourse on gender equality and help promote a more diverse and equal society.



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