

Shifting Paradigms: Evolving Portrayals Of Gender Minorities In Indian Media

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ABSTRACT

The transgender community in India, referred to as Hijras, has been acknowledged as the third gender in Indian tradition, holding a distinct position within the religious and socio-cultural fabric for centuries. However, in contemporary society, they find themselves marginalized and relegated to a life marked by stigma, fear, and poverty. The mainstream Indian entertainment media has played a role in shaping societal perceptions by often portraying the transgender community as subjects of mockery, framed through humiliation and derision, or depicting them as sinister and unscrupulous individuals. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to the authentic experiences of the transgender community, as it fails to capture the true depth of their pain, struggles, and sensitivity. This study delves into the evolving representation of transgender individuals in Indian mainstream media, tracing a transition from distorted portrayals to more realistic depictions in recent times.

Keywords: Transgender, Hijras, Socio-cultural milieu, Marginalization, Stigmatization, Skewed portrayal, Realistic media representations, Sensitivity, Transition

Introduction

The Indian transgender community, known as Hijras or kinnars, represents one of the world's oldest ethnic transgender communities. Born biologically male, they undergo an initiation ritual known as 'nirvaan,' involving castration, or in their terms, liberation into hijrahood (Bockrath, 2003). In contrast to the Western binary system, Indian cultural values have historically embraced gender fluidity, offering recognition and space for diverse gender identities.

World history reveals the institutionalization of alternative genders in various regions, such as the alyha of North America, the kathoey of Thailand, and the xanith of Oman, emphasizing that gender fluidity extends beyond Indian boundaries. The sexual ambiguity of Hijras is associated with mythical divine powers, contributing to the cultural belief in South Asian countries that Hijras possess the ability to bless or curse fertility. Consequently, they are invited to participate in and bestow blessings during weddings and childbirths. While these cultural practices persist as mythical remnants, the contemporary reality for Hijras involves social ostracization. Their relegated status as social outcasts has, until recently, been exacerbated by a one-sided portrayal in mainstream movies by the popular media.

Gender Fluidity in Ancient India:

In ancient India, the transgender community was officially recognized as the third gender in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain texts, underscoring the acceptance of sexual diversity as an integral aspect of Indian culture (Reddy, 2005). Notably, in the Mahabharata, a revered Indian epic, Pandava Prince Arjuna assumed the identity of Brihannala, a eunuch-transvestite, during the final year of his 13-year exile while living incognito at King Virat's Palace (Goel, 2016; Hiltelbeitel, 1980; Nanda, 2014). The Hindu deity Lord Shiva also embodies the androgynous Ardhanarishvara, representing both man and woman in one divine form and receiving veneration from the Hijras (Sepie (nee Morton), Amba J, 2015).

During the Mughal period, spanning the 16th to 18th century, transgender individuals enjoyed elevated status, leading lives of glory and power. They served as protectors of royal harems and held esteemed positions within the royal court.

Colonial Imprints:

Once a land that embraced sexual diversity, contemporary India has unfortunately evolved into a transphobic nation, a transformation largely attributed to the influence of colonizers. In 1871, the British Government in India enacted the Criminal Tribes Act, categorizing Hijras as inherently 'criminal' and individuals 'addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences.' This legislation prescribed a two-year imprisonment for eunuchs dressing in a feminine manner, imposed penalties for singing and dancing, and barred them from holding any office or job. While the Act was repealed in August 1949, its repercussions persist, with the transgender community still facing societal exclusion and grappling with the daunting challenge of safeguarding their fundamental human rights.

The enduring social ostracization has compelled the Hijra community into desperate measures such as begging, engaging in prostitution, and assuming other socially unacceptable roles to make ends meet. Consequently, they have become the 21st-century untouchables of India (Khatri, 2017).

The marginalization of the transgender community in India can be traced back to the cultural imperialism imposed by British colonizers. The patriarchal reinforcement of masculinity and the perpetuation of the belief that transgenders are morally corrupt have left an enduring mark on societal attitudes. This engrained perspective contributes to a continuous cycle of powerlessness, leaving the transgender community ostracized, exemplifying how sexuality serves as a prominent illustration of cultural imperialism (Hinchy, 2014; Reddy, 2005; Sinha, 1995).

Despite growing awareness and calls for understanding and accepting gender fluidity, mainstream educational and cultural systems persist in promoting the superiority of heterosexuality. In various forms of expression, including performance art, music, film production, and media platforms like radio and podcasts, transgender individuals have yet to receive their rightful space and recognition. Notably, the movie and television industry, with its wide-reaching influence and cultural significance, has, until recently, failed to authentically portray the transgender community, perpetuating skewed narratives.

This study examines the gradual shift from distorted portrayals of the transgender community in mainstream Indian media to a more realistic representation, fostering increased positivity, acceptance, and inclusivity towards transgender individuals in society.

Depiction of Transgenders in Popular Media:

Mainstream media in India, encompassing both movies and television, has frequently presented the transgender community in limiting roles, often relegating them to either comic relief or portraying them in morally ambiguous shades as villains. Their identity becomes a subject of mockery, ridicule, and disdain, perpetuating stereotypes that contribute to the prevailing societal apathy and animosity towards transgender individuals. The pervasive influence of media, instead of mitigating the existing prejudice and ostracization faced by the transgender community, tends to exacerbate it through its skewed portrayal.

While there are instances of movies that offer a more realistic representation of transgender individuals, these often fall within the niche of art films, which lack mass appeal and struggle to reach a wider audience. This biased representation not only reinforces false myths surrounding the transgender community but also contributes to the societal perception that heteronormality is the established order, dismissing any deviation or diversity as abnormality.

The Indian film industry has frequently perpetuated stereotypes, with the misrepresentation of transgender individuals taking a prominent place among these cinematic biases. The disparity between real-life experiences and their on-screen depictions is glaring, and when it comes to portraying transgenders in movies, this gap has only widened. Examples such as the demonic representation of a transgender character, Lajja Shankar Pandey, in Sangharsh (1999), a religious chauvinist sacrificing children for immortality, and the tyrannical transgender pimp Maharani in Sadak (1991) are instances where ruthlessness is depicted in every frame.

Even in regional films, until recently, transgender portrayals have often lacked sensitivity. Cisgender men frequently assume transgender roles as sidekicks or comic relief, perpetuating harmful stereotypes. In the Tamil movie Thulladha Manamum Thullum (1999), for instance, actor Vaiyapuri plays a character slowly transforming into a transgender. However, in every scene featuring the character, he is subjected to taunts, mockery, and ridicule. His effeminate mannerisms, desire to use cosmetics, and drape sarees become objects of sarcastic commentary, leading to social alienation. The primary objective seems to be providing comic relief, reinforcing the damaging notion that transgender individuals should not be taken seriously in society, further contributing to their alienation.

Moreover, the cinematic approach to showcasing transgender characters seems to swing between two extreme emotional ends, portraying them either as horrific villains, as seen in Sangharsh (1999) and Sadak (1991), or reducing them to objects of farce instead of allowing them to be active participants in the humor.

From Skewed to Realistic Portrayal:

In recent times, there has been a notable shift in the portrayal of transgender individuals in movies, with a noteworthy aspect being that these roles are increasingly being performed by transgender actors rather than cisgender men. A significant example is found in the 2018 Tamil movie "Thimiru Pudichavan," where transgender Sinduja, inspired by Tamil Nadu's first transgender Policewoman Prithika Yashini, takes on the role of a Police constable. The film serves as a vehicle to raise awareness about transgender rights and highlights the directions for leading a life marked by self-respect and dignity. Several scenes in the movie focus on showcasing the grit, confidence, and self-esteem of transgender individuals, portraying them as any other respectable human being.

Another noteworthy instance is found in the Tamil movie "Peranbu" (2018), where transgender actor Anjali Ameer plays a crucial role involving complex emotions. What adds a layer of authenticity to her portrayal is that she was specifically recommended by the lead actor due to her real-life experience of undergoing sex reassignment surgery. This choice not only contributes to more genuine and nuanced depictions of transgender characters but also reflects a positive trend in the industry toward greater inclusivity and representation.

The distorted representation of transgender individuals creates a harmful cycle, subjecting them to frequent harassment and humiliation, which often forces them to retreat into isolated ghettos. Discrimination experienced in educational settings results in elevated dropout rates, depriving them of a basic education and leading to widespread unemployment and unstable living conditions. Consequently, many find themselves compelled to engage in survival-based activities such as sex trade, theft, drug peddling, and other illicit pursuits.

The 2017 critically acclaimed film "Aruvi" poignantly captures the agony and frustration of its HIV-infected protagonist and her transgender friend, Emily. In a significant scene, Emily remarks to the heroine, "these men might even overlook Aishwarya Rai (the Miss World title winner and Bollywood actor), but would never stop ogling at a transgender because we are so much more beautiful!" The film sheds light on the societal bias and objectification faced by transgender individuals.

In the climax, the lead character Aruvi emphasizes that transgender friend Emily was the only person who offered unconditional love when society, including her own family, abandoned her. This portrayal aims to underscore the humanity of transgender individuals, highlighting their capacity for genuine love and compassion in contrast to societal prejudices.

Beyond the realm of movies, various mass entertainment platforms are actively challenging stereotypical portrayals of transgender individuals. A notable example is the recent advertisement by Brooke Bond Red Label Tea, which staunchly champions inclusivity through a simple cup of tea. In this ad, a grandmother and her school-going granddaughter find themselves stuck in a traffic jam on a rainy day in a cab. To their surprise, a transgender woman approaches the cab window.

Anticipating a request for alms, the grandmother reluctantly takes out money and offers it. Contrary to expectations, the transgender woman explains that she runs a wayside tea stall and, witnessing people enduring the rain, decided to offer them tea instead. After the grandmother and granddaughter sip the tea, the grandmother gestures for the transgender woman to come closer. When the transgender woman mentions that she is not accepting payment for the tea, the grandmother responds with a smile, expressing that she had called her over not to pay for the tea but to receive her blessing.

In less than a minute, this advertisement skillfully transforms prejudice into acceptance, receiving acclaim for promoting inclusivity and self-esteem. It serves as a powerful example of how mainstream media can contribute positively to reshaping societal attitudes.

The more recent film "Super Deluxe" (2019) boldly confronts the hostility prevalent in society and the police brutality faced by transgender individuals. Cis male actor Vijay Sethupathi skillfully portrays the complexity of the character Shilpa, a transgender who faces insult at his son's school despite pleading with the authorities. Shilpa becomes a victim of both physical and sexual abuse at the police station, highlighting the harsh realities that transgenders endure. The film poignantly captures the societal reluctance to accept transgender individuals, as exemplified by a simple yet profound question from Shilpa's six-year-old son, Rasukutty: "Do you use men's washroom or the women's washroom?" Shilpa responds with the poignant observation, "Should be a women's washroom ideally, but then, we are not permitted to use them!"

In the 2020 Netflix Tamil Anthology "Paava Kadhaigal," the story "Thangam" vividly illustrates the culture of guilt, apathy, and shame surrounding the transgender community through an authentic portrayal of the character Sathar. The cinematic lens delicately captures the nuanced emotions of Sathar, including her love and desire for her friend Saravana, affectionately called "Thangam." Sathar's family, rather than offering support, recommends that she end her life to avoid taunts from the community, further highlighting the challenges faced by transgender individuals. In a poignant scene, when Saravana hugs Sathar to bid farewell, she expresses the painful reality that no one had touched her with love—encounters were either physical abuse or sexual exploitation. This portrayal reflects the stark and brutal reality faced by transgender individuals in society.

In the movie *Super Deluxe* (2019), there is a poignant moment that serves as a ray of hope. In a departure from conventional narratives, the character Shilpa, a transgender individual, makes the courageous choice to leave behind her former life and return to her family. This decision, however, takes an unexpected turn when her six-year-old son, Rasukutty, responds with pure innocence and empathy.

Upon learning of Shilpa's intention to leave again, Rasukutty, in a moment of sincerity, expresses, "You wanted to run away from here because everybody around is mocking at you... But, you never thought of mom and I who have accepted you as you are. So just stay with us!" (*Super Deluxe* 02:36:48-02:36:53). This display of acceptance and love from Shilpa's family towards her transgender identity resonates profoundly with the audience. In reality, it conveys a powerful message of inclusivity, encouraging the creation of a progressive and accepting space for all individuals, irrespective of their gender identity.

Conclusion:

Examining the representation of transgender individuals in mainstream media reveals a recurring theme of constructing characterizations through the lens of trans-misogyny. These portrayals tend to not only objectify the physical appearance of transgender individuals but also perpetuate stereotypes and personal biases, often depicting them with exaggerated makeups, eccentric attire, and peculiar behaviors. Such depictions contribute to the marginalization and prejudice faced by transgender individuals within society.

However, there is a positive shift noted in recent times, marked by an increasing awareness and efforts to foster an inclusive environment that acknowledges and respects the unique experiences of each individual. Particularly in the realm of Indian movies and advertisements, there is a gradual progression towards more authentic and realistic depictions of the transgender community in popular media. This shift reflects a more thoughtful and considerate approach, aiming to break away from harmful stereotypes and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of transgender lives.

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