

Article

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## Changing the Portrayal of Transgender Protagonists in Indian Cinema



*Tamanna* (Hindi, 1997)

### Introduction

In the Indian society have deeply rooted unequal socio-eco-political structure for thousands of years. With blind devotee, Sati Partha, Keshawpan, dowry, Rudaali, breast tax, untouchability, Devadasi, Jogata & Jogtin, Potaraj, Vaghya & Murali, and caste inequality were practiced by the Hindu scriptures and the name of God & Goddess. Since modern society practices some of the brutal customs in its daily life. The impact of Brahmanical patriarchy, people are still blindly believing in inhuman practices like Devadasi, Jogata & Jogtin, Potaraj, Vaghya & Murali, caste untouchability has been

annihilated, but gendered untouchability has still existed during the female menstrual cycle. Many females are always in the closet door room in their house, ordered by patriarchs to maintain purity. Similarly, mainstream society has denied acceptance of the third gender as human for thousands of years (Maity et al. 2024). They are excluded from the mainstream society, denied access to the public sector, private sector, and service sector. Without financial resources and human dignity, how are they surviving in society? Some filmmakers have produced movies on the theme of transgender life. The study has purposefully selected four movies

based on the transgender theme or transgender protagonists. The study analyzes movies like *Tamanna* (Hindi, 1997), *Jogwa* (Marathi, 2009), *Naanu Avanalla Avalu* (Kannada, 2015), and *Taali: Bajaungi Nahi, Bajwaungi* (Hindi, 2023). *Tamanna* (Hindi, 1997) and *Jogwa* (Marathi, 2009) are portrayals of the transgender life struggle. *Naanu Avanalla Avalu* (Kannada, 2015) and *Taali: Bajaungi Nahi, Bajwaungi* (Hindi, 2023) are biopics about transgender activists and artists. Living Smile Vidhya authored an autobiography titled 'I Am Vidhya,' which inspired the film *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, meaning 'I'm Not He...She.' Guiry Sawant, a Mumbai-based transgender activist, is featured in a web series produced by director Ravi Jadhav that chronicles her life struggles and the transgender movement.



The movies critically analysis through the perspective of transgender film theory. It examines the ethics of representation, who tells the story, how trans bodies are visualized, and whose gaze is prioritized, while also considering how narrative structures, aesthetics, and genre conventions support or challenge traditional gender ideologies (Stryker 2017, 423). Transgender Film theory is not merely about cataloging

trans characters on screen; it is about analyzing how gender is constructed, destabilized, and reimagined through cinema (Nowlan 2010, 16). It pushes for ethical, intersectional, and transformative modes of storytelling that reflect the lived realities of trans people (Keegan 2025, 16). When applied to transgender-centric films, the theory helps differentiate between tokenistic inclusion and genuine, embodied representation, highlighting the power of film not just to reflect society but to reshape its understanding of gender itself (Nagoshi 2023, 546). The study explains how changing the portrayal of transgender protagonists in Indian cinema.

### **Stereotypes Portrayal**

**Social Exclusion and Screen Exclusion:** The glaring absence of transgender narratives in mainstream cinema is emblematic of a wider societal trend of exclusion that severely limits visibility and representation. Transgender individuals faced systemic social exclusion as well film industries. This marginalization is exacerbated by the pervasive dominance of Brahmanical male perspectives in filmmaking, which often leads to misrepresentation and underrepresentation of transgender experiences (Mehraj and Amrita 2020, 85). Too often, transgender characters are relegated to the role of victims, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that not only distort reality but also fuel societal misconceptions and prejudice against the transgender community (Raveendran 2023, 14). This victimization narrative is not just a misrepresentation; it is a deliberate choice by filmmakers who fail to recognize the multifaceted identities and lived experiences

of transgender individuals. Such portrayals contribute to a narrow, damaging view that reinforces stigma and discrimination. Historically, Indian cinema has often marginalized transgender characters, portraying them negatively or relegating them to peripheral roles (Kumari & Singh, 2022; Chanana, 2024). Throughout the journey of Indian cinema, many films have depicted transgender individuals as victims in a negative light. Most transgender characters have been portrayed through stereotypes. Emotions such as depression, joy, desire, shame, and pliability are explored as political, embodied, and cinematic experiences (Mayer 2015, 498). The study identified significant themes within these portrayals: first, as sexual victims; second, as social victims; and third, as (Trans) gender victims.

Over more than a century of cinematic history, there has been a notable lack of films centered on transgender characters. This gap highlights a disinterest among mainstream and regional filmmakers in producing movies that address transgender issues. Nonetheless, some films have offered a more positive representation of transgender characters. While many portrayals depict them as victims excluded from mainstream society, some filmmakers have taken the initiative to create narratives where transgender characters are depicted as protagonists, showcasing their stories and experiences more authentically. The emergence of transgender protagonists in cinema marks a pivotal shift, allowing for more nuanced and empowering narratives that challenge traditional portrayals and celebrate their identities. The film industry has a responsibility to challenge these entrenched social norms and biases. It must

actively work towards inclusivity by amplifying authentic transgender narratives that go beyond victimhood, showcasing the richness and diversity of transgender lives (Steinbock 2016, 421). By doing so, filmmakers can foster a more nuanced understanding of transgender individuals, allowing audiences to engage with a broader spectrum of stories. This shift is essential not only for the representation of transgender people in film but also for fostering a more equitable and just society. Contemporary Indian filmmakers are transforming trends from passive to active and from negative to positive, portraying transgender characters in more aggressive and progressive ways. They embrace change, genuinely reflect the diversity of human experiences, and dismantle the barriers of exclusion that persist in cinema. This helps create a diverse and content-rich film industry that can stand out on the world stage.



### Changing the Portrayal of Transgender Protagonists

In the past decades, Indian cinema has decisively transformed stereotypes in movie production and storytelling. One compelling example is the film *Tamanna*, directed by

Mahesh Bhatt, a prominent figure in the Hindi film industry. This film centers on the life struggles and aspirations of a transgender character, Tikku, who is portrayed with positivity and depth. Tikku is not only an independent individual thriving in the fashion industry but also defies conventional narratives by adopting a girl child, Tamanna, and ensuring she receives an education. Tikku is an educated, empowered, creative, and productive individual working in the film industry as a makeup artist. Despite facing significant humiliation from society, he stood up for himself with pride and honesty as a transgender creative person in Bollywood (Bhugra et al. 2015). This bold move challenges and disrupts the longstanding, stereotypical portrayal of transgender characters in Hindi cinema, marking a significant shift in representation. The Marathi movie *Jogwa*, directed by Rajiv Patil, powerfully portrays the real-life experiences of the Hijra and transgender community. It exposes the inhumane practices prevalent in Maharashtra and Karnataka, where a brutal custom forces male and female individuals, especially transgender people, into marriages with deities. These individuals, known as 'Jogtin' for females and 'Jogta' for males, live apart from the temple as lifetime devotees, a life of beggars known as 'Jogwa'. The movie *Jogwa* sheds light on the harsh traditions imposed on the transgender community, rooted in blind beliefs and oppressive rituals. The protagonist, Tayappa, emerges as a fierce advocate against this brutality and becomes a powerful voice for the transgender community. Initially, Tayappa endures the painful practices, but, in the name of religion and God, he witnesses the social, economic,

mental, and sexual exploitation of his community (Billard 2022, 197). He boldly rebels against the system alongside the Suli Jogtin, fighting for freedom, identity, and dignity against the deeply entrenched gender bias and brutal practices. This film stands out as groundbreaking work. It masterfully tackles themes such as female-centric narratives, gender identity, oppressive social customs, and societal realities, ultimately culminating in a powerful rebellion (Sriram 2024, 332). By the end, the male-centric traits of Tayappa resurface, showcasing the complexity of his character. Meanwhile, Suli awakens to her true self, and together they experience a profound and mutual love. This film brilliantly illustrates the natural bond between a man and a woman. A *Jogta* (male spiritual devotee) and a *Jogtin* (female spiritual devotee) spark a social revolution through their love, celebrating the essence of selfhood and existence.

In the movie *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, the transgender protagonist is portrayed as a powerful, independent, and confident figure, breaking stereotypes and showcasing strength on screen. The film compellingly portrays the story of a young boy, Madesha, who identifies as a girl and ultimately accepts life as a woman. Accepting a woman's life, Madesha wore pants and a shirt daily, breaking the stereotypical norms that are practiced in the other transgender community (Miller and Russell 2012). It powerfully illustrates the emotional struggles, family and societal rejection, and the courageous journey toward self-acceptance. This impactful narrative is rooted in the real-life experiences of Living Smile Vidya, a prominent transgender activist and writer in India. The scholar Horak

highlights the requirement of trans filmmakers and artists to raise their voices from the cinema (Horak 2017, 15). Marathi film director Ravi Jadhav produced a Hindi web series titled "Taali: Bajaungi Nahi, Bajwaungi," which focuses on the transgender activist Gauri Sawant. The phrase "Bajaungi Nahi, Bajwaungi" translates to "I won't clap for you, but I'll make you clap for me." Gauri Sawant is an internationally recognized human rights and transgender activist from Mumbai. Throughout her life, Sawant has faced family and social exclusion, leading her to join the LGBTQ+ community in Mumbai (Pachori et al. 2024). She has observed and experienced significant neglect from society, as well as from government institutions like hospitals and corporations. Sawant has taken on the challenge of fighting for fundamental human rights. 'Taali' is one of the most significant films in the history of Hindi cinema, as it portrays a strong, positive, and assertive transgender character as the protagonist. Gauri Sawant has become an inspiring figure for the LGBTQ+ community and marginalized groups.

In 2000, Gauri Sawant established the *Sakhi Char-Chowghi Trust* with the mission of creating a safe and supportive environment for transgender individuals, particularly Hijras. The organization offers a comprehensive range of services, which include counseling, health services focused on safe sex practices, as well as HIV prevention and treatment, and STI prevention and treatment. The trust provides legal aid and social security support to enhance the well-being of its beneficiaries. Gauri Sawant has emerged as a prominent advocate for transgender rights, having served as a

petitioner in the landmark NALSA case (National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India) (Waggy, Maqbool, and Bashir 2025, 103). This significant Supreme Court ruling in 2014 officially recognized transgender individuals as a third gender, thereby affirming their fundamental rights under the Indian Constitution. Moreover, Gauri Sawant actively leads several important initiatives, such as *Ajji Ka Ghar*, a safe residence for senior transgender individuals and children of sex workers, and *Swayam Siddha* (Self empowered), a program committed to empowering transgender individuals through various support services. Ravi Jadhav portrays transgender characters as empowered, educated, awake, honest and self-identified protagonists on screen. Notably, the Indian spectators have massively appreciated the role that Farmer Miss Universe winner Sushmita Sen played as Gauri Sawant.

The protagonists Tikku, Tayppa, Madesha, and Gauri are portrayed as aware of human rights, educated, empowered, financially independent, activists, and popular personalities. The selected four movies, written and directed by male filmmakers, avoid a dominant male perspective regarding the transgender protagonists. These movies actively challenge and dismantle the effacing stereotypes of transgender characters typically depicted as beggars on trains or in the streets. The protagonists endure significant struggles as they navigate life as transgender individuals, yet they also forge new paths and possibilities for their community (Halberstam and Judith 2004). They boldly defy societal norms and rules that exploit transgender people. In the

movie *Tamanna*, a baby girl is found in a dustbin by Tikku. The head of an elite Indian political family harbors a deep hatred for girls, which leads him to kill three infant girls. Tikku, a non-binary transgender individual, takes on the responsibility of parenting the baby girl and enrolls her in a quality school in the city. Both Tikku and the girl face exclusion from mainstream society and try to navigate their lives according to societal norms (Chanana 2024, 172). Over time, the girl learns about the true circumstances of her birth and the animosity harbored by her biological father. Growing up in a transgender household, the girl and her friends question her biological mother and father. The complexities of being a woman raised by a transgender person, along with the societal label of calling a trans individual father, lead to transformative experiences and expose both to multiple layers of intersectional challenges (Halberstam 2022, 220). As a transgender parent, Tikku endures daily humiliation while raising the girl, challenging societal expectations. In the Marathi movie *Jogwa*, a man is compelled to live as a transgender individual for the rest of his life after he experiences blood release during urination. A blind devotee interprets this event as a sign from God and regards him as a pure devotee. Similarly, a girl named Suli also becomes a pure devotee for life alongside other transgender members.

The films *Tamanna*, *Jogwa*, *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, and *Taali: Bajaungi Nahi, Bajwaungi* assertively confront the transgender experience through distinct aesthetic lenses. *Tamanna* powerfully showcases the struggles of a transgender woman against societal norms, emphasizing

her indomitable quest for acceptance (Dutta, 2015, 184). In *Jogwa*, spirituality is interwoven with transgender identities, presenting a narrative that, while thought-provoking, risks reinforcing certain stereotypes. *Naanu Avanalla Avalu* electively employs humor to tackle societal prejudices, ultimately fostering empathy toward transgender individuals. Meanwhile, *Taali* addresses contemporary challenges faced by transgender people, merging activism with personal stories to deliver a nuanced understanding of their realities (Halberstam 2001, 296). Each film contributes vital perspectives on transgender lives, emphasizing both resilience and the necessity for authentic representation in cinema. The aesthetics of these movies showcase a unique realism without prejudiced narration or representation of trans characters, both minor and major, particularly protagonists (Kumari et al. 2022).

### Conclusion

Contemporary Indian cinema powerfully showcases these transformative moments by portraying transgender characters in a positive, inclusive light. The major transgender characters are portrayed in strong, supportive roles instead of depicting victimhood. Regional filmmakers are producing movies that focus on gender issues, telling the stories of marginalized individuals from their unique perspectives. The production of films centered around transgender themes has increased, often representing these characters in a positive light. This growth contributes to a more diverse and inclusive film industry worldwide. Indian films are gaining

appreciation from international audiences and film critics on OTT platforms and at prestigious film festivals. The findings suggest a progressive trend in Indian cinema, moving towards authentic storytelling that respects and validates transgender identities.

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