



JOURNAL OF MASS MEDIA AND MANAGEMENT

ISSN: 3049-3021 (Online)

Journal Website: www.jmmm.in

Research Article

SR: JMMM/09/2026
ISSUE:03

The Representation of LGBTQ+ Community in Bollywood Films (2013–2024): Evolving Narratives and Societal Impact

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Abstract

This paper examines how Hindi-language cinema, popularly called Bollywood, represented LGBTQ+ people between 2013 and 2024, a period bracketed by legal setback and advance: the Supreme Court's 2013 reinstatement of Section 377, its 2018 decriminalization of consensual adult same-sex conduct, and its 2023 refusal to recognize same-sex marriage. Using a qualitative, interpretive design, the study codes a purposive corpus of thirteen films and series on six dimensions and triangulates the textual analysis with judicial texts, trade and critical reception, scholarship, and national survey data. Three findings emerge. First, portrayal moved from coded subtext and comic misreading toward sympathetic, protagonist-centered storytelling, while the most daring work migrated to streaming platforms and independent shorts. Second, the legal calendar shaped narrative mode: indirection and tragedy before 2018, family-centered comedy and drama after it. Third, representation remains narrow in class, caste, and gender-identity terms, and transgender portrayals lag furthest behind. Evidence of social impact is suggestive rather than causal. The paper closes with recommendations for industry, education, and research.

Keywords: *LGBTQ+; Bollywood; queer representation; Indian cinema; Section 377; intersectionality; media studies; cultural impact.*

1. Introduction

Hindi cinema has long worked as both mirror and mold for Indian social life. For most of its history it reproduced a heteronormative, patriarchal order in which queer people were either absent or present as caricature, most often as comic relief (Ghosh, 2010a; Gopinath, 2005). The period from 2013 to 2024 offers an unusually clear window on change. It opens with the Supreme Court's reversal of the Delhi High Court's 2009 reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, passes through the 2018 judgment that decriminalized consensual same-sex conduct between adults, and ends with the 2023 refusal to extend marriage equality. Over the same years, a run of films moved queer characters from the margins of the frame toward its center.

This paper asks what that movement consists of, what drove it, and what it has achieved. It does not catalog every queer-themed release. It reads a selected corpus closely and places each text in its legal, commercial, and cultural setting. Two cautions frame the argument. Visibility is not equality: the presence of queer characters says little about how they are written, who writes them, or who is allowed to play them. And claims of social impact are easy to assert and hard to prove, so the paper separates what the evidence supports from what it only suggests.

The study makes three contributions. It offers a periodized account of the decade that links narrative modes to the legal calendar. It extends the analysis beyond gay and lesbian storylines to transgender, non-binary, and intersectional portrayals, where shortcomings are most visible. And it anchors each claim about a film in dated, checkable sources, which matters in a field where release histories and plot details are often misreported.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

The study has three objectives: to examine how Bollywood films and series released between 2013 and 2024 portrayed LGBTQ+ characters and stories; to understand how legal and social change in India shaped those narratives; and to assess what is known about the influence of these works on public opinion and awareness. They yield three research questions.

RQ1. How has the narrative treatment of LGBTQ+ characters changed across the decade, and which identities and social positions remain marginal?

RQ2. How did the legal calendar, from Koushal to Navtej to Supriyo, shape the modes of storytelling available to filmmakers?

RQ3. What evidence links these films to shifts in public attitudes, and how strong is that evidence?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Queer cinema and the politics of visibility

Scholarship on queer Hindi cinema starts from the observation that popular films were never as silent as the censors hoped. Ghosh (2010a) proposes reading Bombay cinema as a site of competing discourses on sexuality, and Gopinath (2005) shows how its episodic, non-realist structure and its spaces of female homosociality open room for queer spectatorship even where no queer character is named. *Fire* (1996) is the hinge of this literature. After the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) cleared it in 1998, Hindu nationalist groups attacked cinemas screening it, and the controversy turned a film into a public argument about whether same-sex desire belongs to Indian tradition (Ghosh, 2010b; Mahn & Watt, 2014). Davé (2012) traces how the placards reading “Indian and Lesbian” that appeared in the protests’ aftermath became a founding sign of lesbian activism.

After *Fire*, Ghosh argues, mainstream cinema developed strategies that acknowledged queerness while managing the anxiety it provoked. The best known is the “misreading” trope, in which heterosexual men are mistaken for a gay couple, as in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008) (Ghosh, 2007, 2010a, as discussed in Pai, 2019). Pai (2019) shows that by 2014 the strategy had shifted again: *Dedh Ishqiya* rewrites Ismat Chughtai’s story “*Li-haf*” to imagine queer female desire that escapes both the *zenana* and the patriarchal frame, while keeping its erotic content deliberately light.

3.2 Law, activism, and the state

A second body of work places representation within the legal and political struggle over Section 377. Puri (2016) analyzes how the state’s governance of sexuality sustained the antisodomy law, and Vanita and Kidwai (2000) document a long record of same-sex love in Indian literature that undercuts the claim that queerness is a foreign import. For trans identities, Dutta and Roy (2014) caution that “transgender” as a legal and media category sits unevenly beside older identities such as *hijra*, which matters when films flatten distinct lives into a single figure. The 2014 NALSA judgment recognized a right to self-identify as a third gender, but the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, has drawn criticism (Bhatt & Chudawala, 2022).

3.3 Representation and media effects

Hall (1997) treats representation as constitutive: images do not merely reflect identity but produce the meanings through which it is understood. Dyer (1993) shows how stereotypes work as shorthand that fixes difference, and Russo (1987) documented the Hollywood sequence of invisibility, ridicule, villainy, and tragedy, a useful if imperfect template for Indian cinema. On effects, cultivation theory holds that sustained exposure to media shapes perceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and the parasocial contact hypothesis proposes that mediated encounters with minority characters can reduce prejudice much as personal contact does (Schlappa et al., 2005).

3.4 Gaps

Three gaps remain. Indian scholarship concentrates on *Fire* and its aftermath, leaving the post-2013 decade under-examined. Studies of gay and lesbian representation

seldom engage transgender and non-binary portrayals or intersections with caste and disability. And claims of social impact are often asserted without evidence. This paper addresses all three.

4. Theoretical Framework

The analysis combines four lenses. Hall's constructionist account treats each film as a producer of meaning rather than a window onto reality. Queer theory's critique of heteronormativity (Warner, 1991) directs attention to how narratives presume a heterosexual default and restore it, for instance through the "reactionary closures" Ghosh (2007) identifies. Duggan's (2002) concept of homonormativity, developed in a US context and applied here with caution, helps explain why mainstream films often favor respectable, couple-centered, urban queerness. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality asks whose queerness is shown, and whose is missing, once class, caste, religion, disability, and gender identity are considered together. Cultivation and parasocial contact theory supply the hypotheses against which the evidence on social impact is weighed.

5. Methodology

5.1 Design and corpus

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive design based on purposive sampling and analysis of secondary sources. No interviews or audience surveys were conducted; reception evidence comes from published material. A title was included if it (a) was made by the Hindi-language industry or by Hindi-language creators for streaming platforms, (b) was released between 2013 and 2024, (c) gave a queer character or relationship narrative significance, and (d) drew enough public critical response to be analyzed. A few independent works were included deliberately as a contrast to commercial releases. Table 1 lists the thirteen titles analyzed.

Table 1. Corpus of films and series analyzed

Title	Year	Creator(s)	Format	Principal queer focus
Dedh Ishqiya	2014	Abhishek Chaubey	Theatrical	Coded female desire
Margari-ta, with a Straw		Shonali Bose	Theatrical	Bisexual woman with cerebral palsy

Title	Year	Creator(s)	Format	Principal queer focus
Aligarh		Hansal Mehta	Theatrical	Gay professor (biographical)
Kapoor & Sons	2016	Shakun Batra	Theatrical	Gay secondary character
Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga	2019	Shelly Chopra Dhar	Theatrical	Lesbian protagonist; family acceptance
Made in Heaven	2019–	Z. Akhtar, R. Kagti (creators)	Streaming series	Gay lead character
Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan	2020	Hitesh Kewalya	Theatrical	Gay couple; family comedy
Laxmii	2020	Raghava Lawrence	Streaming film	Trans identity in horror-comedy
Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui	2021	Abhishek Kapoor	Theatrical	Trans woman protagonist
Geeli Pucchi (in Ajeeb Daastans)	2021	Neeraj Ghaywan	Streaming short	Dalit queer woman; caste
Sheer Qorma	2021	Faraz Arif Ansari	Festival short	Queer Muslim women; non-binary character
Badhaai Do	2022	Harsha- vardhan Kulkarni	Theatrical	Lavender marriage; gay man, lesbian woman
Cobalt Blue	2022	Sachin Kundalkar (writer)	Streaming film	Desire between a lodger and two siblings

5.2 Analytical framework

Each title was coded on six dimensions: (1) narrative centrality (protagonist, supporting character, or comic device); (2) genre and tone; (3) identity specificity, meaning whether orientation or gender identity is named and explored; (4) intersectional positioning (class, caste, religion, region, disability); (5) narrative resolution, including whether the ending affirms or retreats from queerness; and (6) production and distribution context, including theatrical or streaming release and certification. Reception was assessed from dated press reports, trade figures, and published scholarship, with attention to who is speaking: queer critics, trade analysts, or general reviewers. Release dates, credits, and figures were checked against more than one source where possible;

where trade sources conflict, only the more reliably reported figure is used, and lifetime box-office totals are omitted.

6. Historical and Legal Context

Before 2013, mainstream queer representation worked mostly through ridicule and evasion. *Dostana* (2008) used a pretend gay couple for comedy, a version of the misreading trope that lets an audience laugh at homophobia and at homosexuality in the same breath (Ghosh, 2010a, as discussed in Pai, 2019). Producers had learned from the *Fire* episode that open queerness could cost money and invite violence.

Behind that caution stood Section 377, a colonial-era provision that criminalized “unnatural offences” and had been used to stigmatize queer people for well over a century. The decade that followed was governed by a legal calendar, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Legal milestones, 2009–2023

Year	Event	Significance for film culture
2009	Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi: Delhi High Court reads down Section 377 for consenting adults	Briefly opens legal space
2013	Koushal v. Naz Foundation (11 December): Supreme Court reverses the 2009 ruling	Recriminalization; queer stories again carry legal risk
2014	NALSA v. Union of India: third-gender recognition	Constitutional recognition for trans identity
2018	Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (6 September): consensual adult same-sex conduct decriminalized	Removes criminal stigma
2019	Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act	Contested in practice
2023	Supriyo v. Union of India (17 October): Court declines to recognize same-sex marriage	Marriage and family remain unsettled

The calendar supplied both subject matter and risk. Between December 2013 and September 2018 the law again treated queer people as criminals, and filmmakers

working on explicitly queer subjects faced a distinct set of constraints. After 2018 the criminal stigma lifted, but the 2023 ruling left marriage and family law unresolved. That helps explain why later films dwell on family acceptance and marriage of convenience rather than on sexual liberation.

7. Analysis: Narrative Phases and Thematic Shifts

7.1 Subtext and tragedy, 2013–2016

The first phase coincides with legal reversal and is marked by indirection and tragedy. *Dedh Ishqiya* arrived within weeks of the Koushal verdict. It built its queer relationship through an intertext, Chughtai’s “Lihaf,” and kept the eroticism light and suggestive, a choice the director linked to not losing conservative viewers (Pai, 2019). Even so, it let its two women choose each other over male suitors and drive away together, and the Mumbai LGBT organization Humsafar co-hosted screenings for community members, according to press reports cited by Pai (2019). *Margarita*, with a Straw paired queerness with disability, but like other critically admired queer films of the period it found a limited audience (Business Today, 2020).

Aligarh is the decade’s pivotal tragic text. It dramatizes the case of Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a professor of Marathi at Aligarh Muslim University who was suspended in February 2010 after reporters filmed him with another man and was found dead two months later (Agence France-Presse, 2015). After its world premiere at the Busan festival in October 2015, the film opened the Mumbai Film Festival on 30 October 2015 and reached Indian cinemas on 26 February 2016 (Agence France-Presse, 2015; Silverscreen India, 2015). Critics singled out Manoj Bajpayee’s restrained performance as a man broken by public shaming and legal proceedings (Singh, 2015). The film puts dignity, loneliness, and institutional cruelty at its center and so departs from the comic template. Its arc, though, follows the older pattern Russo (1987) described, in which the gay protagonist’s story ends in death. A sympathetic portrayal is not the same as an affirming one.

7.2 Mainstreaming and the comic frame, 2016–2020

After 2016, queer characters appeared in commercially positioned films. Kapoor & Sons (2016) wrote a gay character, played by Fawad Khan, into a family drama as a secondary strand. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), released months after *Navtej*, put a lesbian protagonist at the center of a family-oriented film that

resolves in acceptance. On our reading, the central romance is shown with marked restraint, a plausible concession to conservative viewers. Critics praised the film, but trade coverage observed that such films had rarely turned critical goodwill into audience numbers (Business Today, 2020).

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020) is the clearest instance of the comic-accessible strategy. Ayushmann Khurrana and Jitendra Kumar played a couple facing a family's resistance, and the humor largely targeted homophobia rather than the lovers; one trade outlet called it a film more about homophobia than homosexuality (Business Today, 2020). It earned about ₹32.66 crore over its first weekend, though that ranked only fourth among the same star's releases since 2017 (Business World, 2020), and weekday collections fell sharply (Business Today, 2020). The film also illustrates what Duggan (2002) calls homonormativity: its lovers are middle-class, monogamous, and eager for absorption into family life. Whether that absorption is a strength or a limitation depends on what one thinks representation is for.

7.3 The trans question

Transgender and non-binary portrayals trail gay and lesbian ones and show the limits of mainstream goodwill. Laxmii (2020), released directly on a streaming service, cast a cisgender male star in a horror-comedy about possession by the spirit of a trans woman; commentators quoted in coverage of the later film grouped it with earlier cisgender performances they judged offensive and stereotypical (Silverscreen India, 2021). Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021) made a trans woman, Maanvi, its heroine and sought to critique her love interest's prejudice, but it cast a cisgender actress in the role and drew criticism on that ground (Silverscreen India, 2021). Bhatt and Chudawala (2022) add that the film's emphasis on Maanvi's medical history reinforces a model in which a trans person must undergo medical intervention to be legitimate, at a moment when trans rights were already under strain from the 2019 Act. These cases show that identity-specific representation needs more than a sympathetic script. It needs consultation, casting, and an understanding of how medical, legal, and social narratives intertwine.

7.4 Streaming, independent work, and intersections, 2019–2022

The most intersectional work appeared outside the multiplex. Streaming titles are not pre-certified by the CBFC; since 2021 they have fallen under a self-regulatory framework set out in the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021), which arguably gives creators more room.

Geeli Pucchi, a short in Netflix's anthology Ajeeb Daastaans (2021), follows Bharti, a Dalit queer factory worker, and Priya, a Brahmin colleague. A Dalit queer writer called it the first film she had seen with a Dalit queer woman as its lead, while noting that an upper-caste actor played the role, though the director himself comes from a Dalit background (Malakar, 2021; Film Companion, 2021). Sheer Qorma, a short film, premiered at San Francisco's Frameline festival in 2021 and won its audience award; it centers queer Muslim women and a non-binary character, and its director has said that Bollywood production houses responded with homophobia when he pitched a queer script (The Quint, 2021). Cobalt Blue (2022), adapted from Sachin Kundalkar's novel and released by Netflix India in April 2022, was read by one reviewer as a mainstream Indian film that centers queer lives, though the same review found its characters' interior lives thin (Foreign Policy, 2022). Streaming also permits private viewing, which may widen access for audiences who would not attend a public screening.

7.5 After Navtej: family, marriage, and recognition

Badhaai Do (2022) shows the family-centered mode at its most developed. A gay policeman and a lesbian physical-education teacher enter a lavender marriage to satisfy their families, and the film gives its female lead a girlfriend. Its director described the marriage as a compromised reality for the characters, not a solution the film endorses (Filmibeat, 2022). Reception was mixed and the opening weak, at ₹1.65 crore on day one (Filmibeat, 2022). Its themes of secrecy, parental pressure, and arranged marriage anticipate the questions the Supreme Court declined to settle in 2023, when it refused to recognize same-sex marriage and left the matter to Parliament (Associated Press, 2023).

8. Societal and Cultural Impact

Claims that these films changed Indian attitudes need careful handling. National survey data show a substantial shift: according to the Pew Research Center, the share of Indians saying homosexuality should be accept-

ed by society rose from 15 percent in 2013 to 37 percent in 2019, an increase of 22 percentage points (Poushter & Kent, 2020; Associated Press, 2023). That change coincided with the period under study, but it also coincided with the Navtej judgment, the growth of online queer communities, and generational change. The survey question asks about acceptance of homosexuality in general and says nothing about exposure to films, and no study known to us isolates cinema's contribution. The claim should therefore be held as plausible rather than established.

Theory suggests mechanisms. If cultivation theory is right, repeated exposure to sympathetic portrayals can make queer lives part of everyday social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Parasocial contact theory predicts that identifying with a likable queer character can reduce prejudice among viewers who have never knowingly met a queer person (Schiappa et al., 2005). The pattern in this corpus, with stars playing gay or lesbian characters in family-friendly comedies, is consistent with that mechanism, since it places queer characters in familiar settings and invites identification.

Cinema also shapes public discourse, not only opinion. Activists hoped Aligarh would put a spotlight on Section 377 while the law was still in force (Agence France-Presse, 2015), and *Dedh Ishqiya* became the occasion for community screenings (Pai, 2019). Commentary around Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui shows trans critics contesting a mainstream portrayal in public (Bhatt & Chudawala, 2022; Silverscreen India, 2021). Claims that such films are screened in small towns or used in college teaching are plausible but lack systematic evidence, so we treat them as hypotheses for audience research.

The reach of this influence is uneven. Reception of the corpus is documented largely in English-language, urban media, and the boldest titles reached audiences through streaming or festivals rather than small-town theaters. The urban–rural divide in access to these narratives deserves empirical study, and until it is studied, claims of national transformation should be tempered.

9. Challenges and Limits of Representation

Scarcity. The corpus is selective, not a census, but mainstream theatrical releases that place queer protagonists at the center appear few beside the industry's annual output, and the most striking intersectional work is in shorts and streaming titles.

Narrow social positioning. Most portrayals are urban, middle-class, and cisgender. Caste, disability, and reli-

gion appear in exceptions such as *Geeli Pucchi*, *Margaita*, with a Straw, and *Sheer Qorma*, which proves these intersections are possible and shows how rarely they occur (Crenshaw, 1991).

Commercial softening. The strategies that win wide audiences, such as stars, comedy, and family reconciliation, also limit how explicitly desire and conflict can be shown, as in the restraint of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* and the comic framing of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*. Ganti (2012) shows how commercial logic governs the contemporary industry, and queer stories are not exempt.

Authenticity and authorship. Cisgender casting in trans roles, an upper-caste actor in a Dalit role, and the scarcity of queer writers and directors in commercial cinema all limit authenticity. The director of *Sheer Qorma* has described the resistance he met from production houses (The Quint, 2021).

Censorship and regulation. Theatrical releases require CBFC certification under the Cinematograph Act, 1952, which gives the board leverage over what reaches theaters, and its record of intervention is long. In 2015, for example, it muted the word “lesbian” in a Hindi film (Agence France-Presse, 2015). Streaming operates under a different, self-regulatory regime. Meanwhile the 2019 Act and the 2023 marriage ruling show that formal recognition remains incomplete.

10. Discussion

The findings answer the research questions in turn. On RQ1, the decade moved from coded and comic treatment toward sympathetic, protagonist-centered narratives, but identity specificity grew unevenly: gay and lesbian stories reached theaters first, while transgender, non-binary, and caste-inflected stories mostly appeared on streaming or festival circuits. On RQ2, the legal calendar acted as both prompt and constraint. Koushal encouraged indirection and tragedy, Navtej enabled humor and celebration, and the unresolved question of marriage after *Supriyo* helps explain the later emphasis on family acceptance and lavender marriage. On RQ3, survey data show attitudinal change but cannot attribute it to cinema, so the most defensible claim is that films contribute to a wider ecology of visibility rather than driving it alone.

A tension runs through all three answers. The strategies that expand reach, namely humor, stars, and family frames, can domesticate queerness by presenting it in respectable, non-threatening forms. The strategies that

deepen representation, namely intersectional casting, specific identities, and uncompromising endings, tend to travel to smaller platforms. Whether the two modes converge is the central question for the next decade.

A further point concerns visibility and recognition. Cinema made queer lives more visible in the years around Navtej, yet recognition in law, in marriage, family, and protection against discrimination, lags behind, and the 2023 ruling shows that cultural visibility does not by itself move institutions. Film's role is better understood as agenda-setting and norm-shaping than as a substitute for the legal and political mobilization documented by Davé (2012) and Puri (2016).

11. Recommendations

Producers and writers should involve queer writers, consultants, and performers from development onward; cast trans and non-binary actors in trans and non-binary roles; and move beyond coming-out narratives toward stories of work, friendship, aging, and joy, across genres from thriller to period drama. Film and media schools can build queer media literacy into curricula so that future filmmakers learn to recognize stereotypes and their history. Regulators and platforms should apply certification and self-regulation transparently, avoiding cuts that treat queer references as inherently objectionable. Researchers can fill the gaps this paper could not close with systematic content analysis of annual releases, audience-reception studies outside metropolitan centers, and interviews with queer filmmakers.

12. Limitations of the Study

This is an interpretive study with a purposive corpus. It is not a census, and it is weighted toward 2014–2022; titles from 2023–2024 are thinly represented and warrant follow-up. Reception evidence comes from published sources skewed toward English-language, urban media, and no primary audience data were collected. The findings should be read as grounded hypotheses rather than generalizable conclusions.

13. Conclusion

Between 2013 and 2024, Hindi cinema's treatment of LGBTQ+ lives moved from invisibility and mockery toward recognition and, at its best, empathy. Films such as *Aligarh*, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, and *Badhaai Do* mark milestones in that movement, and streaming and independent work have extended it to caste, religion, and non-binary identity. The progress is partial.

Trans portrayals lag, casting and authorship practices lag, commercial caution persists, and the law still withholds full recognition. Cinema cannot supply what legislatures and courts have not, yet it can make queer lives familiar, and familiarity is a precondition for the public argument on which legal change depends. If Bollywood is to contribute meaningfully, it must tell stories that are more varied, more specific, and written with the community, one film at a time.

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