

Rainbow Reels: The Evolution of LGBTQIA+ Portrayals in Indian Cinema After Section 377

Pradumna Kumar Mishra

Abstract: This paper looks at how the reading down of Section 377 transformed the lives of LGBTQ+ people, especially in how they've been portrayed in cinema. It explores how their characters were shown in the past and how that portrayal has slowly shifted away from harsh stigma. Movies like *Raja Harishchandra* to *Bhishma Pitamah* provide testimony that there has always been a quiet presence of queerness. Films like *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, *Sadak*, and *Mastizaade* reflect how queer lives were often misrepresented, exaggerated, or pushed to the margins. But the change after the reading down of Section 377 was significant. With movies like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Badhaai Do*, we can now see how mainstream cinema is shifting from outdated stereotypes toward a more thoughtful, nuanced kind of acceptance. This paper explores that shift.

Keywords: Section 377, LGBTQ+ representation, Indian cinema, queer studies, decriminalization, gender portrayal.A

Introduction:

The Supreme Court of India, in its historic verdict on 6 September 2018, decriminalized Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, bringing tremendous joy to the LGBTQI+ community and sexual minorities. *Aswathy Nair*, in his research, *LGBTQIA+ Rights: Progress and Challenges in India*, writes that, "in September 2018, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark verdict by revisiting Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, thereby legalizing consensual same-sex relationships". It represented a kind of redemption from an inhumane law, one that didn't just strip away their dignity and privacy, but also became a tool for

discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation. Ironically, anyone could insult them with words like “*meetha or chakka*”, yet there was no law protecting them from bullying neither in front of the law nor within society. However, things have started to change after the abolition of Section 377, and it feels like Pride is finally on the way.

Repealing that law sparked a change that’s both visible and, to a large extent, accepted in society. These days, more people are out and proud, especially within the entertainment industry. We’re seeing more stories, that take on queer topics and characters with precision and care. That’s helping this marginalized community step into the mainstream by telling their stories, their suffering, and the difficult, often sorrowful conditions they’ve been living in. Movies released after decriminalization are distinct from those that came before. Take *Maja Ma (2022)*, for example. Directed by Anand Tiwari, it casts Madhuri Dixit as Pallavi Patel, a closeted lesbian who hides her identity and emotions for the sake of her family and society.

Then there’s *Aligarh (2015)*. In this film, Manoj Bajpayee plays a professor who’s also hiding his true identity. The movie powerfully shows how a gay man’s life can feel like living in hell. A few years ago, it would’ve been unimaginable to see actors like Madhuri and Manoj portraying queer characters. That alone speaks volumes about the change happening in cinema and society. It shows how far Indian cinema has come, and clearly, the journey hasn’t been easy.

Since Section 377 was struck down, there’s been a real shift in how queer characters are shown in Indian films. Today’s stories feel more open, honest, and unapologetic. Queer characters are no longer treated as jokes or background punchlines used to liven up dull scenes. Back then, they were often tossed in just to distract from weak plots. But now, LGBTQI+ characters are taking centre stage.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020)*, for instance, the entire plot revolves around a gay couple as the main protagonists. Ayushmann Khurrana and Jitendra Kumar play lovers in a story based on a typical Indian middle-class family. The film’s box office performance was moderate, but still, it marked a massive shift from something like *Fire (1996)*, when theatres were burned for daring to show lesbian characters on screen. Of course, this kind of change didn’t just appear overnight. It evolved slowly, over decades, from a time when queerness was completely pushed aside, to now, when it’s no longer hidden.

This analysis tries to explore how decriminalizing Section 377 gave filmmakers the space and freedom to reimagine LGBTQI+ characters not as strange or comedic or awkward, but as

layered human beings. It looks at how tearing down a colonial-era law didn't just shift legal status — it also transformed how queerness is seen and portrayed in cinema.

BEFORE READING DOWN TO 377:

Queer characters have existed in Indian cinema even before people were familiar with terms like LGBTQI+. When Dadasaheb Phalke made his first film, *Raja Harishchandra*, a male actor played a female role. This wasn't done to represent queerness directly, but rather because the society of that time was deeply conservative and considered it inappropriate for women to work in public. Still, in hindsight, this can be seen as an early form of queer representation.

Later, in 1922, a film by Venkaiah Naidu and R.S. Prakash, *Bhishma Pitamaha*, showed one of the earliest depictions of a mythological transgender character, Shikhandi. That marked the beginning of a journey where many films would go on to portray transgender characters on screen.

Since transgender people have long been part of Indian society, audiences didn't find them unfamiliar. But a harmful misconception took root: that being queer meant being a hijra. Indian cinema largely represented queer identity through the lens of eunuchs, ignoring the broader LGBTQI+ spectrum. *Himadri Roy* In her *Ignou Queering Cinema* that, “for decades, only eunuchs were taken to represent the entire gamut of the “queer people” in films. This trend continued till the turn of the century, when such depictions began to be questioned. This, to some extent, led to the uncovering of a subject that has remained ‘invisible’ for so long –the silent world of the gays”. As a result, when gays and lesbians began to appear in films, many people were confused. Homosexuality wasn't something openly discussed in India, especially in a society shaped by rigid conservative values.

This misunderstanding had serious consequences. Even those limited portrayals of hijras were often negative, depicting them as villains, beggars, or people living on society's margins. Again *Roy*, “Bollywood categorised them first as eunuchs and later as cross-dressers or drags or transvestites. This reflects the heterosexist attitude of the majority that pushes queer people deeper into their unspoken, invisible space”. For instance, in *Sadak (1991)*, Sadashiv Amrapurkar played Maharani, a brothel owner involved in criminal activities. Similarly, *Sangharsh (1999)* featured Ashutosh Rana as Lajja Shankar Pandey, a psychotic killer and the film's antagonist, who is presented as transgender. This wasn't limited to Bollywood—regional

cinema followed the same pattern. In the Tamil movie *Arul* (2004), a minor transgender character was used for comic relief and as a villain in brief scenes.

Instead of respectfully including hijras in cinema, filmmakers started creating caricatures: men who walked effeminately, wore makeup, and were portrayed as “cheap” or predatory, often shown touching men inappropriately. This reinforced harmful stereotype of queer people as overly sexual, unclean, or deviant. In *Mastizade* (2016), for example, Suresh Menon’s character Das is a flamboyant gay man who constantly makes unwanted advances, meant only to make the straight male characters uncomfortable.

Another instance is in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003), where Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan’s characters are framed as a gay couple—purely for comedic effect—again pushing the idea that queerness is something to laugh at. In *Kya Kool Hain Hum 3* (2016), lines like “*yeh to meetha lagta hai*” or “*chhaka to nahi hai na*” are used to mock queer-coded characters.

Such portrayals are not just disrespectful, they are damaging. They shape public perception, making people believe that queer individuals behave in exaggerated or inappropriate ways. In this way, a large part of Indian cinema has contributed to a deeply flawed and harmful understanding of queer identities.

This clearly shows that past portrayals of queer people in Indian films were largely inappropriate. The reasons for this are complex: a lack of social awareness, no legal protections for LGBTQI+ individuals, and no checks on how their images were used or misrepresented in media.

After The Verdict:

The auspicious day of 6 September 2018 marked India’s freedom from yet another colonial rule and brought a “new dawn” for the LGBTQ+ communities. With the simple decriminalization of Section 377, Indian society witnessed a beautiful, strong, and effective change. The proof of this change is visible everywhere, especially in the entertainment industry. This time, Indian cinema is trying to correct its

Earlier, Indian films often cast hijras as the sole representatives of the queer community, usually using them to add humour or distract the audience so they wouldn’t feel bored while watching. *Kaustav Bakhsi in his research, India’s queer expressions on-screen: the aftermath of the reading down of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code*, argues that, “Nevertheless, neither of these films attempt to locate the character of the hijra within a larger

social genealogy of the hijra community in India. Also, the sexual life of the hijra remains unexplored”. But now, there’s a tremendous shift. Mainstream movies and web series are increasingly including queer characters, portraying them the same way they portray straight couples with equal importance and dignity.

After the decriminalization of Section 377, a wave of films started portraying gays and lesbians as protagonists. For example, the recent movies *Amar Prem Ki Prem Kahani (2024)*, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, and *Badhai Do (2022)* all focus on love stories between queer couples. They feature everything Bollywood is famous for: romance, drama, quarrels, and the iconic *DDLJ* (Dill wale Dulhaniya ley jayenge) effect. These stories show that society is changing. In *APKPK*, the film centers around typical desi families who accept, and even go so far as to arrange, their gay son’s marriage, something never seen before. In *Badhai Do* and *SMZS*, the characters fight with their families for their rights, but in that sweet, traditional Indian family way, and in the end, they get accepted. These are just three examples, and there are many more.

However, while things are improving, simply showing positive aspects isn’t enough. Focusing only on love stories and romance doesn’t do justice to the many other issues that the community still faces behind the scenes. There are many other topics that the film industry is now addressing, such as social acceptance, family support, depression, and how queer people think about their place in society. These stories are coming to the screen with great force, proving that every part of the queer experience deserves attention.

Films like *Super Deluxe (2019)* and *Geeli Puchi (2021)* go beyond ordinary queer stories. They act as protests and challenges against the rigid social norms and laws. In *Super Deluxe*, Vijay Sethupathi plays Shilpa, a transgender woman who faces public humiliation, mockery, and transphobia from neighbours and even the police. This film shows exactly what transgender people still face in society today. *Devansh Saraf*, in an analysis paper, *Gender Representation in Bollywood*, “it is evident that there has not been much progress in thought and the kind of narratives that are communicated through such films. Even when a character is not written expressly as a joke or a villain, subtly transphobic details colour the viewer’s experience of the film”. On the other hand, *Geeli Puchi* is a short film that offers a nuanced look at two women with lesbian desires who are caught in their social hierarchies. Bharti Mandal, a Dalit woman, and Priya Sharma, a high-caste woman, struggle not only with their sexual identities but also with their social status. *Geeli Puchi* highlights how queer people,

marginalized and discriminated against for their sexuality, often end up accepting the dominant social norms and hierarchies.

These stories are loud, proud, and dignified. They are becoming powerful mediums of change in society.

Conclusion

So, reading down draconian colonial laws was not just necessary to break the shackles of injustice, but also helped to improve their image. Section 377 was a roadblock for the LGBTQI+ community, which was a staunch threat to their freedom and dignity, as we have seen in the upper section about this. The entertainment industry was one of the most affected areas, which used them according to its needs and portrayed them negatively in its films, which was a fatal setback to their image. However, things started changing after the decriminalization of 377; now, a more nuanced focus is given to their character and portrayals. But yes, there is a kind of partiality in their portrayals till now, for example, there is no prominent LGBTQI+ actors in the industry, the roles of queer character are also played by straight actors. Even though there is discrimination present in the Indian cinema, especially in the regional cinema, where it's becoming a fashion to add a gay character who is always acting like a seducer. Nevertheless, things have been changing; filmmakers like *Onir* and *Pradipta Ray*, doing tremendous work by making such a fabulous movie which are queer centric. This is all happening because of the acceptance of society, which comes from the disintegration of 377. However, the journey would still be very long for the queer community to gain full rights, i.e., marriage, adoption, inheritance, and most importantly, pride to live on their terms.

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Author Bio:

Pradumna Kumar Mishra is a Master's student in the Department of History at Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar. Alongside his academic pursuits, he volunteers with the Darbhanga Film Club and Rebel Theatre. He is passionate about research in Film Studies and Queer Studies.