

'Why is your dad wearing a sari?' South Indian films handle queer with care, unlike Bollywood

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Compared to Bollywood's brash, tone-deaf and stereotypical offerings, South India is producing more nuanced queer films. But it is not enough, say critics.

In the 2019 Tamil film *Super Deluxe*, Rasukutty's friends mock his transwoman father, Shilpa. "That's your dad? Why is he wearing a sari?" To which, he replies, "That's his style, dude. Why are you laughing? Have I ever laughed at your dad?" One of the boys emphasises that his father "looks like a dad" while Rasukutty's father "looks like a mom". Visibly shocked, the boy asks, "Why can't dads look like moms?"

The scene speaks volumes when viewed in the context of normalising LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream cinema. And compared to Bollywood's brash, tone-deaf and stereotypical offerings, the South Indian film industry is producing more nuanced queer films. However, it is not enough, say critics and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Films are still guilty of portraying flamboyant over-the-top characters, tired tropes and unrealistic plot lines that play to the gallery.

If seen in isolation, *Super Deluxe* is fine cinematic art. But having a cis-male actor play the role of a transgender woman does little to nothing to address the issue of representation and inclusivity. Tamil horror-comedy *Kanchana* (2011) and the Malayalam *Njan Marykutty* (2018) had a similar casting issue.

Using queer characters as a comic relief has been another problematic trend prevalent across film industries. One may argue that Bollywood is attempting to do better and undo years of misguided depiction in films such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008) with films like *Kapoor & Sons* (2016), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) and *Badhaai Do* (2022), and series like *Modern Love Mumbai*. "But comedy, as a cinematic tool, needs a recheck in Indian cinema, especially when it involves LGBTQ+ characters," says Moulee, co-founder of Queer Chennai Chronicles, a literary forum and independent publishing house.

While South Indian cinema is taking bigger leaps when it comes to queer stories, there are still nagging issues.

There's still queer-baiting

In hindsight, South Indian films have also been guilty of misrepresentation. The '*mada*' character, loosely translated to 'effeminate men', was often used to infuse cheap laughs in Tamil and Telugu films. These characters were reduced to swooning over the hypermasculine hero or any cis-male in the story. Devoid of any layer or depth to their role, these characters would bat their eyelashes, make lewd remarks, and convince the audience to laugh at their expense.

“Dialogues like ‘*Avana nee*’ (loosely translated as ‘Are you gay?’) are even now used often in Tamil Nadu and Tamil films to crack jokes on male characters who don’t explicitly identify as gay but appear to express stereotypical gay mannerisms. It is used as a mockery,” says Sneha, Creative producer with Neelam Social, a web channel run by director Pa Ranjith that focuses on anti-caste politics.

The comedy we see on screen is “often about pulling people down and body-shaming,” says Moulee. In a 2020 anthology *Paava Kadhaigal*, jokes were made about queer life and caste-based violence — the two issues people are struggling with every day in India.

In one of the stories in the anthology, two female characters (played by Kalki Koechlin and Anjali) pretended to be in love only to prevent one of their boyfriends who belonged to an oppressed caste from being killed. This blatant ‘queerbaiting’ (it refers to a marketing technique that uses same-sex love to lure in the audience in the garb of being progressive) does little to nothing to further the ongoing struggle of the LGBTQ+ community. Instead of exploring the same-sex relationship from the lens of realism, the film ends up ridiculing two deeply problematic struggles of minorities in our society.

The Malayalam film *Moothoon* (2019) attempted to strip queer romance of stereotypes. Writer-director Geetu Mohandas wove an intricate love story within the gritty crime drama where two characters — Akbar and Ameer — express their love for each other in a “natural” way. The treatment of the characters and the queer love is similar to how one would expect to see two heterosexual characters in love on the screen. The two characters sing together, and embrace each other — as if challenging the traditional and outdated binaries of their predecessors (queer characters displayed on the screen over the years).

Being seen matters

In the recently held Kerala State Film Awards, Negha became the first trans-woman to win the debut actor award for the Malayalam film *Antharam*, directed by P. Abhijith. The state government had constituted a special award in any category of trans-artiste last year and the first award was presented this year.

Born in Thanjavur, Negha acted in her first short film in 2015. She had to wait for seven years until her first feature film *Antharam* came out. She highlights the dearth of “respectable roles” for trans artists as the actors are often “cast into stereotypical roles in name of a sex worker or something else to glorify the subject in the name of representation”. Among LGBTQ+, perhaps, only trans representation is “somewhat okay” while gay, and lesbian roles “could be counted on fingers, especially in Tamil film industry,” says Negha.

Grace Banu, a trans rights activist from Thoothukudi, believes that South cinema is “doing better” and creating “more sympathetic and nuanced roles”. But she lays emphasis on the need to cast trans artists for the role of trans characters.

In the 2018 Tamil film *Peranbu*, a trans actor Anjali Ameer played the role of a transwoman Meera in the film. Amudhavan (played by Malayalam superstar Mammooty) — spoiler alert — marries Meera towards the end of the film.

Should only trans actors play trans roles?

Should non-LGBTQ+ actors be cast in such roles? It’s a complicated question that’s being debated all over the world. Last year, British actor Eddie Redmayne said that playing a transgender character in the 2015 film, *The Danish Girl*, which was nominated for an Oscar, was a [mistake](#). He

played Lili Elbe (1882-1931), one of the first people who underwent gender reassignment surgery.

Speaking about his film Philadelphia, Tom Hanks said a “straight man wouldn’t play the role” he played in the 1993 film. “...I don’t think people would accept the inauthenticity of a straight guy playing a gay guy,” he told [The New York Times in a Q&A published on 13 June](#).

Mumbai-based gender-fluid LGBTQ+ activist Harish Iyer does not believe in transpersons playing solely trans characters on screen. “Cinema is about playing diverse roles. I do not feel that transpersons should only play characters they identify with. Would we do the opposite too? Inclusion and representation would mean if a character’s queerness becomes one of the many attributes and not the primary identification factor. A trans person playing any role, irrespective of gender dynamics, should be the goal,” he clarifies.

Others stress the need for inclusivity not only in the cast but also while hiring crew or employment ‘equity’. “A film does not just comprise actors. It is a business facilitating many livelihoods. People from the LGBTQ+ community don’t just have to be on the screen. They could be part of the cast and crew. The industry needs to be inclusive of queer people from the ground up,” said Moulee. It’s the first step.

Nidhima Taneja

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