

# “Evolving Narratives and Legal Landscapes: Representation of Transgender Persons in Indian Media, Popular Culture, and Law”

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## Abstract:

The representation of transgender individuals in Indian media and popular culture has undergone significant transformation over the years, reflecting broader societal changes and the evolving legal framework. This research article examines the intersection of cultural narratives and legal landscapes to understand their combined impact on the social perception and lived realities of transgender persons in India. Historically marginalized and portrayed in stereotypical roles, transgender individuals have gradually gained nuanced and authentic representation in films, television, digital media, and advertisements. Concurrently, landmark legal advancements, including the NALSA judgment (2014) that recognized transgender persons as the "third gender" and the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2019), have laid the groundwork for legal recognition and protection of transgender rights.

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining content analysis of media portrayals, legal document reviews, and interviews with transgender individuals, legal experts, and media professionals. It explores how cultural representation and legal reforms influence and reinforce each other, shaping societal attitudes and promoting inclusivity. The findings reveal a progressive, albeit uneven, trajectory in the visibility and acceptance of transgender individuals in India. While legal recognition has spurred some positive shifts in media narratives, challenges remain in combating deep-rooted stigma and ensuring authentic representation.

The article underscores the importance of synergizing cultural and legal efforts to combat stereotypes, address systemic discrimination, and foster meaningful inclusion. By analyzing the dynamic interplay between media, law, and society, the study provides actionable insights for media creators, policy-makers, and activists. It concludes with recommendations for leveraging media's transformative power and strengthening legal protections to advance transgender rights and inclusion in India's socio-cultural fabric. This research contributes to the growing discourse on gender justice and inclusivity in India, advocating for a comprehensive approach to achieving equity for transgender individuals.

**Keywords:** Cultural Narratives, Transgender, Media, Discrimination, Law

## 1.Introduction:

Transgender individuals in India have faced significant historical marginalization, often being relegated to the peripheries of society. Traditionally known as "Hijras," they have been subjected to systemic discrimination and social exclusion. This marginalization is rooted in cultural narratives that have historically portrayed transgender identities as deviant or abnormal. The legal recognition of transgender persons has evolved, particularly with the landmark Supreme Court judgment in 2014 that recognized transgender individuals as a third gender, affirming their rights to equality and dignity under the Indian Constitution. However, despite this legal progress, societal acceptance remains low, and transgender persons continue to face violence, discrimination, and stigma in various aspects of life.

### Significance of Media and Law: Their Roles in Shaping Societal Perceptions and Advocating Inclusivity

Media and law play crucial roles in shaping societal perceptions and advocating for inclusivity. The representation of transgender persons in media can influence public attitudes, either reinforcing stereotypes or promoting understanding and acceptance. Positive portrayals can help normalize transgender identities and foster empathy among viewers. Conversely, negative or sensationalized representations can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to societal stigma.

The legal framework surrounding transgender rights is equally significant. Laws serve not only to protect rights but also to signal societal values

regarding diversity and inclusion. Legislative measures such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 aim to provide legal recognition and protection for transgender individuals. However, the implementation of these laws often encounters challenges due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and societal resistance.

### **Challenges in Reconciling Legal Recognition with Cultural Representation**

The primary research problem lies in reconciling legal recognition of transgender rights with cultural representation in media and society. While legal frameworks may provide a foundation for rights, cultural narratives often lag behind, resulting in a disconnect between legal recognition and societal acceptance. This gap can lead to situations where transgender individuals are legally protected yet still face discrimination and exclusion in everyday life. The challenge is further compounded by cultural biases that influence media representations, which may not accurately reflect the realities of transgender experiences.

The purpose of this study is to explore the evolving narratives surrounding transgender persons in Indian media, popular culture, and law. This research seeks to examine the intertwined evolution of media representation and legal recognition of transgender persons in India. It aims to uncover how these two domains influence societal perceptions and contribute to the inclusion of transgender individuals in mainstream society. By analyzing this dynamic interplay, the study seeks to provide actionable insights for fostering equity and justice for the transgender community. The objectives include:

- Analyzing Media Representations:

- To assess how media portrayals of transgender individuals have evolved over time and their impact on public perception.

- To examine the effectiveness of existing laws in protecting the rights of transgender persons and their implementation at various levels.

- To identify cultural barriers that hinder the acceptance of transgender individuals within society.

- Proposing Recommendations: To propose strategies for improving media representations and enhancing legal protections for transgender persons.

## **2. Historical Representations of Transgender Persons in Indian Media**

The representation of transgender persons in Indian media has evolved significantly over the years, often reflecting broader societal attitudes and cultural narratives. Historically, transgender individuals, particularly the Hijra community, have been depicted in a variety of ways that range from reverence to ridicule.

Transgender individuals have been part of Indian culture for centuries, with references found in ancient texts such as the Kamasutra, which acknowledges a third gender, and epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, where Hijra figures are sometimes portrayed with dignity and respect. However, these positive representations have diminished over time, especially during the colonial period when British rule imposed new moral standards that marginalized these identities.

In contemporary media, the portrayal of transgender persons has often been stereotypical and negative. Research indicates that transgender characters are frequently depicted as objects of mockery or as villains. For instance, films often use Hijra characters for comedic relief or to highlight their differences rather than presenting them as complex individuals with their own narratives. A notable example is the film Sadak, which features a transwoman character depicted as a cruel brothel owner, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about transgender individuals being associated with criminality and violence.

Bollywood has played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of transgender identities. Despite occasional attempts at more sensitive portrayals, such as in films like Chhapaak, which features a Trans character in a more nuanced manner, the overall trend has leaned towards caricatured representations. The lack of authentic voices from the transgender community in mainstream cinema often results in narratives that do not accurately reflect their lived experiences. The portrayal of cross-dressing male characters for comedic effect has also been prevalent, further trivializing transgender identities.

The media's portrayal of transgender individuals significantly impacts societal attitudes. Negative representations can perpetuate stigma and discrimination, while positive portrayals can foster understanding and acceptance. The Press Council of India has recognized the need for responsible media representation and has issued guidelines aimed at improving how LGBTQ+ individuals are depicted in news and entertainment. These guidelines emphasize the impor-

tance of using appropriate language and avoiding reductive stereotypes that diminish the complexity of transgender lives.

In summary, while historical representations of transgender persons in Indian media have included moments of respect and recognition, contemporary portrayals have often leaned towards negative stereotypes. The challenge remains to shift these narratives towards more authentic and respectful representations that reflect the realities and struggles of transgender individuals in society. As media continues to evolve, it holds the potential to either reinforce harmful stereotypes or promote inclusivity and understanding.

### 3. Legal Milestones in India for Transgender Rights

The journey towards legal recognition and rights for transgender persons in India has been marked by several significant milestones. These legal developments reflect changing societal attitudes and the growing advocacy for the rights of transgender individuals.

#### A. Supreme Court Judgment (2014)

A pivotal moment in the legal landscape for transgender rights in India occurred on April 15, 2014, when the Supreme Court delivered its landmark judgment in the case of *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*. The Court recognized transgender individuals as a third gender under the Indian Constitution, affirming their right to self-identification and directing the government to ensure their inclusion in all aspects of society. This ruling mandated that transgender persons be treated with dignity and respect and that they should have access to education, employment, and healthcare without discrimination.

On April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court of India delivered a historic judgment in the case of *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (commonly referred to as the NALSA judgment), marking a watershed moment for transgender rights in the country. This ruling was instrumental in redefining gender identity and laid the foundation for a more inclusive legal and social framework for transgender individuals.

#### Key Highlights of the Judgment

##### 1. Recognition of Transgender Individuals as the Third Gender:

The Supreme Court recognized transgender persons as a distinct "third gender" under the Constitution of India. This recognition was a significant step in affirming their identity beyond the binary framework of male and female.

##### 2. Right to Self-Identification:

The Court emphasized the principle of self-identification, affirming that transgender individuals have the right to determine their gender identity without the requirement of medical or surgical validation.

##### 3. Equality Under the Constitution:

The judgment underscored that the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 14, 15, 16, 19, and 21 of the Indian Constitution apply equally to transgender persons:

Article 14: Guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law.

Article 15: Prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

Article 16: Ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.

Article 19: Protects the right to freedom of speech and expression, including gender expression.

Article 21: Upholds the right to life and personal liberty, which includes the right to dignity.

#### Impact of the NALSA Judgment

##### 1. Legal Framework:

The judgment catalyzed the formulation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, which sought to operationalize the rights recognized in the NALSA case.

It provided a legal foundation for challenging discriminatory practices and policies.

## 2. Visibility and Empowerment:

The recognition of transgender individuals as a third gender helped affirm their identity and dignity in a legal and social context.

Increased representation and advocacy in political, social, and cultural spheres followed the ruling.

## 3. Challenges in Implementation:

Despite the judgment, the actual enforcement of its directives has faced hurdles due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of political will, and deep-rooted societal prejudices.

Transgender individuals continue to struggle with discrimination in education, employment, and healthcare access.

## 4. Inspiration for Advocacy:

The judgment inspired other marginalized communities and activists to demand similar legal protections and recognition of their rights.

It set a precedent for addressing broader issues of gender identity and expression.

The NALSA judgment remains a cornerstone in India's journey toward achieving gender justice, but sustained efforts are essential to realize its full potential.

## B. Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2016

Following the Supreme Court's judgment, the Indian Parliament introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill in 2016. This bill aimed to provide a legal framework for the protection of transgender rights, defining a transgender person as someone whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth. However, it faced criticism for including provisions that many activists deemed discriminatory, such as requiring individuals to undergo sex reassignment surgery for legal recognition.

## C. Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, was passed by Parliament after several revisions following protests against earlier drafts. Introduced on July 19, 2019, and enacted on December 5, 2019, this act aims to protect the rights of transgender persons and includes provisions against discrimination in various sectors such as education, employment, and healthcare.

Key features of this act include:

- Definition of Transgender: It defines a transgender person as one whose gender does not align with the gender assigned at birth, encompassing trans-men, trans-women, intersex individuals, and others.

- Prohibition against Discrimination: The act prohibits discrimination against transgender persons in education, employment, healthcare, and access to public services.

- Certificate of Identity: It allows transgender individuals to apply for a certificate of identity from the District Magistrate, which serves as proof of their gender identity.

- Welfare Measures: The act mandates state governments to formulate welfare schemes aimed at ensuring social inclusion and participation of transgender persons in society.

Despite these legal milestones, challenges remain in implementing these laws effectively. Activists have pointed out that while the act provides a framework for rights protection, it lacks specific provisions for reservations in education and employment that were part of earlier proposals. Furthermore, there are concerns regarding bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining certificates of identity and accessing welfare schemes.

The legal milestones achieved for transgender rights in India reflect a significant shift towards recognition and inclusion. However, ongoing advocacy is essential to address implementation gaps and ensure that these rights translate into real-world protections and opportunities for transgender individuals.

## 5. The Interplay of Media and Legal Recognition:

The relationship between media representation and legal recognition of transgender persons in India is complex and multifaceted. As legal frameworks evolve to protect the rights of transgender individuals, media portrayals can either reinforce or challenge societal norms and perceptions. This interplay significantly influences public understanding and acceptance of transgender identities.

The legal recognition of transgender persons in India began to take shape with the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014), which recognized transgender individuals as a third gender. This ruling affirmed their fundamental rights under the Indian Constitution, including the right to self-identify their gender, access to education, employment, and healthcare without discrimination. Following this judgment, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was enacted to provide a legal framework for safeguarding these rights. This act prohibits discrimination against transgender persons in various spheres, including education and employment, and mandates the government to implement welfare measures.

Media plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes towards transgender individuals. Historically, representations in Indian media have often been negative or stereotypical, portraying transgender persons as objects of ridicule or as marginalized figures. Films frequently depict Hijras in a comedic light or as antagonists, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that contribute to societal stigma. However, there has been a gradual shift towards more nuanced portrayals, with some contemporary films and television shows beginning to present transgender characters with depth and complexity.

Positive media representation can complement legal recognition by fostering empathy and understanding among the public. When media narratives highlight the struggles and achievements of transgender individuals, they can challenge prevailing stereotypes and promote acceptance. For instance, films that authentically depict the lives of transgender characters can help normalize their existence in society and encourage discussions around their rights and experiences.

Despite legal advancements, challenges remain in ensuring that the rights granted by law translate into real-world protections for transgender individuals. Activists have criticized certain provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, particularly those requiring medical interven-

tions for legal recognition. These requirements can create barriers for many individuals who may not wish to undergo surgery or who cannot afford it. Furthermore, bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining certificates of identity can hinder access to essential services.

Media also plays a dual role here; while it can advocate for change by highlighting these issues, it can also perpetuate misconceptions that lead to further marginalization. For example, sensationalized news coverage of transgender issues can reinforce stereotypes rather than promote understanding.

The interplay between media representation and legal recognition is critical in shaping societal perceptions of transgender persons in India. As legal frameworks evolve to protect their rights, media must also adapt to portray these individuals authentically and respectfully. By doing so, both sectors can work together to foster a more inclusive society that recognizes and values the dignity of all its members.

## 6. Conclusion:

The representation of transgender persons in Indian media, popular culture, and law reflects a significant evolution in societal attitudes and legal frameworks over the years. The landmark Supreme Court judgment in 2014 and the subsequent enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 have laid a crucial foundation for recognizing the rights and identities of transgender individuals. These legal milestones signify a commitment to inclusivity and equality, affirming the dignity of transgender persons within the broader fabric of Indian society. However, the journey towards full acceptance and integration is far from complete. While legal recognition provides essential protections, the reality is that societal attitudes often lag behind legislative advancements. Media representation plays a pivotal role in this dynamic, with its potential to shape public perceptions and challenge stereotypes. Positive portrayals of transgender individuals can foster empathy and understanding, while negative or sensationalized representations can perpetuate stigma and discrimination.

To bridge the gap between legal recognition and cultural acceptance, it is imperative for both media and legal institutions to collaborate in promoting authentic narratives that reflect the diverse experiences of transgender persons. This collaboration can help dismantle harmful stereotypes, encourage informed discussions, and ultimately contribute to a more inclusive society. In conclusion, as India continues to navigate the complexities of gender identity and rep-

resentation, ongoing advocacy, responsible media practices, and effective implementation of legal protections will be essential in ensuring that transgender individuals are not only recognized by law but also embraced by society as equal members deserving of respect and dignity. The interplay between media narratives and legal frameworks will be crucial in shaping a future where all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, can thrive without fear of discrimination or marginalization.

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