

Emerging Perspectives on Gender in India: Explorations of Masculinity, LGBTQ+ Identities and Other Under-Represented Experiences

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Abstract: *Examining the changing views on gender in India entails examining a complex web of cultural, historical and modern settings. From the changing terrain of LGBTQ+ identities to traditional ideas of masculinity, India offers a complex and diverse setting that exhibits continuity and change. This study will cover significant historical developments, cultural influences and contemporary tendencies to present a thorough picture. It's an intricate and dynamic terrain that is revealed when examining gender in India from various angles, such as masculinity, LGBTQ+ identities and other underrepresented experiences. Indian society has always been organised around strict gender roles, which frequently reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal values. Nonetheless, there have been notable changes in recent years and a rise in the acceptance of different gender identities and presentations. The diversity of gender experiences in India is becoming more and more highlighted by academics, activists and cultural gurus. Research on generational changes, geographical variances and the relationship between gender and caste, class and religion are all included in this. Digital activism and media presence are also essential for dispelling myths and elevating marginalized voices which are mentioned in the study.*

Keywords: Masculinity, LGBTQ+, Femininity, Marginalization, Activism, non-binary

India's gender dynamics are intricately entwined with its history and culture, having been moulded by colonial influences and centuries of tradition. The explanation of how traditional gender roles and identities have been created

and viewed in Indian society serves as the starting point for the investigation. The conversation in India on gender identities, gender roles and expressions has changed significantly in the last several years.¹ India, which has historically been defined by a strict binary conception of gender roles, is currently seeing a revolutionary investigation of masculinity, LGBTQ+ identities and other marginalized realities. Social media, search engines and easy communication methods have also contributed individuals to getting the answers to their questions they don't feel asking openly and connecting with people with LGBTQ+ identities.² Talbot et al.³ also claim that LGBTQ+ students utilise social media platforms to investigate, conceal, safeguard and articulate their identities. India is experiencing similar online trends and youth expressing their views. These new viewpoints provide fresh perspectives on how gender is experienced and interpreted, upending long-held preconceptions and redefining societal norms.

The study of gender in India today reveals a changing landscape influenced by underrepresented groups' experiences, changing views on masculinity and LGBTQ+ identities. In their study on the Social Media Ecosystem for the LGBTQA+; DeVito, Walker and Birnholtz⁴ discovered that participants utilise the affordances, networks and standards within their 'personal social media ecosystems' to evade stigmatisation while still enabling the expression of their LGBTQ+ identity and the ability to adapt their presentation over. India has long struggled with strict gender roles that dictated expectations of behaviour and opportunities based on binary distinctions, stemming from a traditionally patriarchal society.⁵ Nonetheless, social movements, legislative changes and evolving cultural perspectives have all contributed to a paradigm that is evolving in today's conversation.

The traditional definition of masculinity, which was characterised by stoicism and dominance, is being challenged by a new perspective that includes emotional expression, vulnerability and a range of identities and behaviours.⁶ Given the cultural and social frameworks of India, where conventional masculinity has frequently been intricately entwined with ideas of power and control, this transformation is especially striking. Strength, stoicism and taking on the role of the family provider have long been central to Indian traditional ideas of masculinity. Although these expectations are necessary for maintaining social institutions, they have also played a role in problems like gender-based violence and mental health difficulties among men. Wojnicka⁷ asserts that there is currently a revival of patriarchal and hegemonic types of masculinity as a reaction to political and social difficulties. However, Shpancer⁸ claims that characteristics such as violence and self-entitlement are currently undergoing reassessment, since there is a movement towards promoting more wholesome manifestations of masculinity. Simultaneously, there is an increasing acknowledgement and investigation of alternative masculinities that subvert these conventions, prioritizing emotional articulation, caregiver responsibilities

and overall wellness.

At the same time, non-binary and fluid gender identities are becoming more widely recognized and accepted due to the visibility and campaigning of LGBTQ+ people.⁹ As the push for equal rights and representation has gathered steam, laws and cultural norms that recognize and value the range of gender identities outside of the binary have been passed. In addition, a wide range of marginalized gender experiences are represented in India's rich cultural fabric and are becoming more and more visible in activism, media and literature.¹⁰ Previously disadvantaged voices are rising to prominence with stories that show the complexity of gender in varied communities across the nation and challenge popular notions.

Gender studies in India go beyond these specific topics and include the experiences of marginalized groups including transgender persons, non-binary and genderqueer people and people who are straddling the boundaries of caste, class and religion. These communities deal with additional discrimination and difficulties, yet grassroots activity, media representation and academic studies are magnifying their stories more and more.

Masculinity and the Role of Society

In India, the idea of masculinity has historically been connected to traits like power, dominance and taking up provider roles in the home and community. Globalization, urbanization and socioeconomic shifts have shaped these conventional conceptions of masculinity over time. Connor et al.¹¹ claim that the current changes in masculinity have resulted in the creation of alternative forms of masculinity that question conventional masculine norms. It also looks at the difficulties that males now confront in modern-day India, such as mental health concerns, shifting relationship standards and the effects of patriarchy on male identities. As societal expectations change, masculinity – which has historically been characterized by standards of strength, stoicism and dominance – faces new difficulties.¹² Traditionally, the duties of protector, provider and authority figure within the family and community have been intimately associated with the concept of masculinity in various cultures, including India. Stereotypes that can be harmful and confining for men and those around them are frequently reinforced by these expectations. Consalvo¹³ sounds in the study that media portrays boys and masculinity, often depicting boys as inherently aggressive and dominant. These portrayals influence boys' self-perception and societal expectations, reinforcing traditional gender roles. So more diverse and positive representations of boys in media are necessary to promote healthier gender identities.

Modern India is witnessing a dramatic shift in the conversation about masculinity. Although conventional qualities like bravery and assertiveness are still regarded highly, the constraints and demands attached to these principles are becoming increasingly apparent. Gone is the idea that strength must always

be shown externally as men are encouraged to explore and express a wider range of emotions, including vulnerability and empathy. Furthermore, traditional masculinity faces fresh difficulties in the contemporary setting. Traditional roles and duties are being reshaped by changes in the economy, family structures and the dynamics of gender in the workplace and communities. Men may experience stress and confusion throughout this shift as they attempt to balance their old values with modern reality while navigating shifting expectations. The results in terms of health and well-being also show the effects of these adjustments. Interpersonal aggression, substance misuse, and mental health disorders are among the problems that might be associated with strict adherence to conventional masculine ideals.

While masculinity and males are commonly perceived as dominant in Western society, the reality is that the majority of men do not hold positions of dominance regularly.¹⁴ Similarly, understanding how masculinity is produced and experienced in India today's diverse circumstances is crucial to acknowledging and resolving these issues. The nuances of modern masculinity in India and its traditional norms and contemporary challenges. It aims to dispel myths, celebrate the variety of masculine experiences and advance more positive, inclusive gender identity models that enable people to negotiate their identities responsibly and authentically in a world that is changing quickly. Although formal equality discourses and meritocratic pledges are widely recognised, the persistence of gender differences in visibility and experience adds complexity to the organisation of social relations based on gender ideals. Budgeon¹⁵ claims that hegemonic masculinity is neither rigid nor unavoidable, but it is important to be careful not to exaggerate the degree to which the empowerment associated with new femininities allows its practitioners to achieve a social influence that could reshape gender hierarchy.

Changing Norms Regarding Femininity

Simultaneously, comprehending the evolving roles and views of femininity is essential to the investigation of gender in India. This covers the impact of feminist movements, the advancement of gender equality and the traditional roles that women play in Indian society. Budgeon¹⁶ claims the concept of transformed gender ideals is manifested in the image of the 'empowered' and independent yet still traditionally feminine lady. The discourse surrounding femininity in India has seen a substantial change in recent decades, primarily due to empowerment movements that aim to redefine women's roles and identities by challenging established standards. In India's past, femininity has been linked to qualities like domesticity, modesty and caring; these associations frequently serve to uphold patriarchal systems that restrict the freedom and possibilities available to women.

Through advancing gender equality, women's education and economic independence, as well as amplifying women's voices in both public and private

domains, empowerment movements have been essential in challenging these conventions. A recent comprehensive international study examined the social, political and economic variables that contributed to the development of gender equality policies in 120 countries from 1975 to 2015. The study found that the most influential factor in driving change towards gender equality, especially in policies aimed at combating violence against women, is the presence and influence of a robust autonomous women's movement or feminist mobilisation, both at the national and international levels.¹⁷ These movements highlight the variety of women's experiences and goals while highlighting the significance of leadership, self-expression and agency. The redefining of beauty standards and body image is one noteworthy facet of the shifting conventions surrounding femininity.¹⁸ Advocating for inclusivity and body positivity, these movements celebrate diversity in look, size and form, challenging limited notions of beauty.

Women are being empowered by this change to accept their bodies and to resist social pressures to uphold unattainable standards. In addition, the interconnectedness of gender with other facets of identity, including caste, class, religion and sexual orientation, is becoming increasingly acknowledged. One of the recent examples is Jane Garrett, who amidst a society where beauty norms frequently impose limited standards, Jane has emerged as a pioneer, reshaping the story of beauty and inclusivity.¹⁹ At the age of 22, she achieved a historic milestone by becoming the first contender with a plus-size physique to win the Miss Universe Nepal 2023 title and participate in the prestigious Miss Universe competition.

The inclusiveness of empowerment movements is growing as they recognize the difficulties marginalized women confront and fight for their representation and rights. Growing opportunities for women to undertake previously male-dominated jobs in the workplace and educational system are indicative of shifting attitudes surrounding femininity. Women are now more empowered to question traditional gender roles in homes and communities and attain economic independence thanks to efforts to remove barriers to education and work.²⁰ Hence, notwithstanding these advancements, obstacles still exist.

Social conventions and behaviours are still shaped by deeply ingrained patriarchal views and practices, which creates obstacles to genuine gender equality. To give women in India greater equality and inclusion, empowerment movements are still pushing for structural adjustments to the country's laws, regulations and cultural norms. In 2020, the representation of women in the Indian police force was only 12 per cent. Several states have enforced quotas for female representation in the police force, although none of them were able to achieve the intended objective. The scarcity of women in the workforce extends beyond these specific areas and is also evident in the general Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) in India. During the statewide lockdown in India due to the epidemic, the FLFPR declined to 16.1 per cent in the months of July-September 2020. These figures are lower compared to the data of our

surrounding Asian countries, with Bangladesh's rate at 30.5 per cent and Sri Lanka's at 33.7 per cent.²¹

It can be said that empowerment movements have a major role in bringing about change and influencing the way that Indian standards of femininity are evolving. These movements support a more equal and empowered society where everyone, regardless of gender, can fully flourish and contribute to society by dispelling outdated prejudices, encouraging inclusivity and fighting for women's rights and chances.

India's Legal Evolution of LGBTQ Rights

Despite decades of marginalization and prejudice, the LGBTQ+ population in India has made great progress in recent decades toward acknowledgement and rights. LGBTQ+ identities have long been marginalized and discriminated against in India. This is because of cultural norms and legislative frameworks that frequently overlook or fail to uphold the rights of sexual and gender minorities. In their research on the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals in India spanning from 2009 to 2019, Wandrekar and Nigudkar²² discovered that this population faces notable mental health obstacles, such as elevated levels of despair, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Nonetheless, the past few decades have witnessed notable advancements in terms of increased awareness, advocacy and legislative modifications, signifying a pivotal juncture for the nation's LGBTQ+ communities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is working with governments and partners to improve laws, policies and initiatives that address inequalities and protect the human rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals in India.²³ This effort is in line with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasises inclusivity.

Stigma, discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society are among the many ways that LGBTQ+ people in India are marginalized. There has been a great deal of discrimination against non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities in areas including work, healthcare, education and family acceptance because of traditional beliefs and cultural standards that frequently saw these identities as abnormal or aberrant.²⁴ As a result of these difficulties, LGBTQ+ activism has become a potent force for improvement. Community organizations, grassroots movements and advocacy groups have come together to oppose legislation and cultural attitudes that discriminate against LGBTQ+ people, increase public awareness of these concerns and offer resources and assistance to those who are disenfranchised.

Greater awareness and acceptance of various gender identities and sexual orientations in Indian society have been made possible in large part by these initiatives. The legalisation of consensual same-sex relationships in 2018 following the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was a significant turning point in the LGBTQ+ rights movement in India. On September 6th, 2018, a group of five judges unanimously declared Section 377 of the Indian

Penal Code illegal, notably concerning the restriction of consenting same-sex relationships among adults in *Navtej Singh Johar v UOI* and *Akkai Padmashali v UOI* case. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code categorises consensual sexual intercourse between individuals of the same sex as an 'unnatural offence' that is seen to be 'contrary to the natural order'. The punishment required a sentence of 10 years in imprisonment. The provision was legislation that was established during the Victorian era and was in force even in the 21st century. Section 377 demonstrated discriminatory behaviours against individuals based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, thereby violating the prohibitions of Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution. Furthermore, Section 377 violated the basic rights to life, dignity and autonomy of human decision, which are protected by Article 21. In the end, it was found that it impairs the ability of an LGBTQ+ individual to fully express their identity, as it violates their right to freedom of speech as stated in Article 19(1)(a). On September 6th, 2018, a group of five judges declared that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was largely invalid. This ruling resulted in the elimination of criminal punishments for consensual same-sex relationships between adults. Individuals who self-identify as LGBT and are of legal age are now legally allowed to engage in sexual intercourse.²⁵ Years of campaigning and activism paid off in this court case, which represents a major advancement in the legal recognition of the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ people. However, obstacles still exist despite legal advancements.

In the case of *National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India* in 2014, a court ruling upheld the rights of transgender individuals, establishing the basis for their acknowledgement and approval. The case of *Anita vs. State of Maharashtra* 2016 granted legal recognition of marriage and equal rights to transsexual individuals. The Patna High Court's 2022 judgement in the case of *Reshma Prasad v. State of Bihar* acknowledged and supported the unique characteristics of gender and caste, hence advocating for comprehensive welfare initiatives for transgender individuals. Verdict of the Allahabad High Court The case of *Neha Singh v. State of U.P. and 2 Others* 2023 affirmed the right of a transgender police officer to have Sex Reassignment Surgery, highlighting gender identity as an inherent and essential entitlement. Similarly, the Bombay High Court issued an order in a case advocating for specific rules to safeguard the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals, emphasising the importance of sensitivity in the implementation of laws. The Madras High Court ruling invalidated a discriminatory resolution that denied transgender individuals their land rights, hence encouraging social inclusivity. On August 7, 2023, the Kerala High Court issued a landmark ruling regarding the rights of intersex individuals and non-consensual medical procedures. These judgements jointly promote the rights and acknowledgement of LGBTQIA+ individuals in India.²⁶

As per UN (2024), despite some progress made for India's LGBTQIA+ community, there remains a substantial amount of work to be done to address

social discrimination and bias. Ensuring that the rights of all individuals in the country, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, are protected is of utmost importance. Numerous LGBTQ+ people still experience violence and prejudice, especially in more conservative or rural places where ingrained beliefs persist. To guarantee complete equality and inclusion for LGBTQ+ populations, more progress is required in the areas of healthcare access, legal recognition of relationships and protection from discrimination in the workplace and housing.

Transgender identities are becoming more prominent in current societal discussions on gender, particularly in public political debates around the world.²⁷ Advancements in LGBTQ+ rights in India appear likely to continue in the future given the changing legal environment and ongoing agitation. Building a culture that respects and celebrates diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity will require initiatives to modify legislation, advance comprehensive sex education and create inclusive work and educational environments. Even in the face of ongoing obstacles, LGBTQ+ people and their allies' tenacity and resolve to propel constructive progress in the direction of a more just and inclusive society for everybody.

Emerging Perspectives Beyond Binary

In India, the acknowledgement of non-binary and fluid identities is expanding beyond conventional binary conceptions of gender. There is a rise of alternative gender identities and expressions such as hijra communities and transgender activism. However, there are both advancements as well as difficulties in gaining societal and legal acceptability. The gender identities that go beyond the conventional binary classifications of male and female are becoming more widely acknowledged and explored in modern-day India. This change is indicative of a larger worldwide trend away from gender standards and toward an appreciation of the diversity of human experiences.

The idea that gender occurs only within a binary framework is challenged by the concept of non-binary identities. People who identify as non-binary may do so by having a gender identification that is outside, in between or surpasses the binary distinctions between male and female.²⁸ This covers identities that represent many ways in which people experience and express their gender, such as genderqueer, agender, bigender and others. The push for more exposure and acknowledgement of non-binary people in society is one of the main tenets of emerging perspectives beyond the binary in India. Community organizations and activists are striving to dispel prejudices, increase acceptance of non-binary identities and advance inclusive language and legislation that recognizes the legitimacy of various gender identities.

In this campaign or movement awareness-raising and education are essential. To create a more accepting and encouraging atmosphere, conversations about gender diversity must be incorporated into school curricula, comprehensive sex

education be promoted and healthcare personnel receive training in providing non-binary patients with culturally competent treatment. Furthermore, important in influencing how the public views and comprehends non-binary identities is media depiction. Stories and narratives that examine the experiences of non-binary people are appearing in Indian books, movies and digital media more frequently.²⁹ This helps to legitimize and normalize different gender identities in popular culture. The remaining areas of campaigning and reform concern the legal recognition and protection of non-binary people. Even while India's legal system has made progress in recognizing transgender rights, such as the freedom to self-identify as a certain gender, more changes are required before non-binary people can also benefit from legal recognition and protections.

Societal stigma, prejudice and a general lack of understanding among the populace are among the ongoing difficulties. New viewpoints that go beyond the binary are showing that people in India are becoming more accepting of the range of gender identities.³⁰ This movement helps to create a more inclusive society where everyone can express their gender identity honestly and without fear of prejudice by questioning binary conventions, increasing visibility and fighting for legal and social acceptance.

Obstacles and Challenges

An analysis of the ongoing obstacles to gender equality and inclusivity in India is presented as the exploration ends. It delves into the significance of education, advocacy and grassroots endeavours in cultivating a society that is more just and inclusive of all genders. Emerging perspectives on gender in India can be characterised by several major themes, barriers, difficulties and opportunities for the future, with a special emphasis on masculinity, LGBTQ+ identities and other experiences that are underrepresented.

Traditional Gender Standards: Men and women in India are expected to conform to strict roles that are strongly rooted in traditional gender standards. These standards frequently marginalize LGBTQ+ identities and limit masculinity manifestations that go beyond popular tropes.

Discrimination and Social Stigma: People who don't fit the mould of traditional gender norms frequently face discrimination and social stigma due to deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and societal norms. Many manifestations of this stigma exist, such as social isolation, verbal and physical abuse and denial of opportunities and even fundamental rights.

Violence and Discrimination: In India, having a different sexual orientation is often categorised as a mental health issue even by the family. Familial violence is still there against the child or even adults if they express their feelings and orientation to their close ones.³¹ These persistent challenges are gender-based violence and discrimination. LGBTQ+ persons experience high rates of assault, harassment and exclusion from public and private areas, especially transgender and gender nonconforming individuals.

Legal Recognition and Protection: Although there have been notable legal developments as discussed above in the paper; like the decriminalization of same-sex relationships and the acceptance of transgender rights, there are still insufficient comprehensive legal frameworks to completely safeguard the rights of people who identify as gender non-binary or who are gender diverse.

Access to Healthcare: Getting inclusive and professional healthcare treatments might be difficult for people who identify as gender non-conforming. This includes discriminatory practices in medical settings, obstacles to gender-affirming care and a lack of awareness among healthcare providers. Therefore, in healthcare and support services there is a dearth of resources specifically designed to meet the needs of those who identify as LGBTQ+. The difficulties in obtaining necessary services are made worse by discrimination on the part of healthcare providers.

Employment and Educational Discrimination: Based on a 2017 survey conducted by the National Human Rights Commission, which involved 900 transgender individuals in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, it was found that 96% of them had experienced job rejections or were compelled to resort to begging and engaging in sex work.³² Both employers and educational institutions continue to discriminate against people based on their gender identity and expression. Due to prejudice and a lack of inclusive legislation, people who identify as gender non-conforming may encounter obstacles when trying to obtain education, pursue employment and advance in their careers.

Intersectional Challenges: The crossing identities of gender, sexuality, caste and religion present additional difficulties for marginalized communities including Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities. They too faced compounded prejudice because of the intersections between gender variety and other dimensions of identity, such as caste, class, religion and disability.

Outlooks for the Future

There is increasing momentum in India towards a legal acknowledgement, the inclusion of gender diversity and more acceptability, even if there are still many formidable obstacles to overcome India's emerging gender perspectives point to both obstacles and possibilities for development. Gender equality, debunking stereotypes and creating a more inclusive society for all gender identities and expressions in India require legal reform, cultural change, inclusive education, healthcare advancements and international cooperation. To overcome all challenges and get closer to a time when everyone can live truly and with dignity, regardless of gender identity or expression, lobbying, education, legislative changes and community support must continue.

An overall shift is being seen in the understanding of the emotions and heart of the LGBTQ+ people in India. In every paradigm, there has been continuous work by the activists and the results have been visible. India's gender diversity movement is gaining visibility through media representation and advocacy,

dispelling myths and promoting inclusivity. Legal and policy reforms aim to strengthen protections for non-binary gender identities, ensuring equality in all areas. Cultural shifts and community support are fostering acceptance of diverse gender identities. Education and awareness efforts are integrating gender diversity into school curriculums, training healthcare professionals and supporting workplace diversity programs. Healthcare services and provider training are being developed to enhance access to treatment for the LGBTQ+ community. India's involvement in global movements for gender diversity and LGBTQ+ rights offer opportunities for international cooperation and advocacy.

Conclusion

India's gender research is evolving rapidly due to advocacy groups, changing legal frameworks and shifting social norms. This journey includes exploring masculinity, LGBTQ+ identities and experiences from underrepresented groups, creating a nuanced understanding of gender beyond traditional binaries. The traditional concept of masculinity in India is being redefined, challenging ideas of strength and dominance. Emotional expression and vulnerability are increasingly recognized as aspects of masculinity, reflecting global trends towards more inclusive gender norms. Similarly, LGBTQ+ identities have gained visibility and legal recognition, marked by the decriminalization of same-sex relationships. Activism has been crucial in overcoming discriminatory laws and attitudes, fostering hope for further progress despite ongoing challenges like social stigma and healthcare inequalities. Discussions on gender diversity in India now encompass non-binary and other underrepresented identities, challenging binary norms and promoting tolerance.

The study of gender in India reveals both long-standing challenges and significant changes. Traditional notions of masculinity, characterized by stoicism and dominance, are being re-examined. Modern perspectives emphasize emotional openness and a broader range of behaviours, encouraging men to embrace more authentic and diverse identities. Legal and social advancements for LGBTQ+ individuals, including the repeal of Section 377, have shifted societal perceptions of sexual and gender diversity. However, LGBTQ+ people still face stigma, discrimination and legal gaps, particularly those with multiple marginalized identities. Community activism and collaboration are essential for promoting structural change and amplifying marginalized voices.

In summary, India's gender landscape is marked by both continuity and change. Progress towards greater acceptance, legal protection and social inclusion for diverse gender identities is evident, driven by advocacy movements and the visibility of disadvantaged voices. While obstacles remain, the trend towards fairness, acceptance and inclusion for all gender identities is clear. Continued dialogue, education and policy reforms are vital for valuing gender

diversity as a fundamental aspect of human experience, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

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