



Portrayals Of Transgender People In Tamil Movies (2015–2024)

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Abstract

Movies are powerful because they help people understand the world around them. For a long time in Indian films, transgender people were not shown in a fair or respectful way. They were sometimes used for comedy, fear, or jokes. In Tamil cinema, this problem was very common. But between the years 2015 and 2024, things started to change. Some new movies began to show transgender people as real human beings with emotions, dreams, and struggles. This paper looks at four Tamil movies from this time: Aruvi (2017), Peranbu (2018), Super Deluxe (2019), and Paava Kadhaigal (2020). By studying these films, we can see how transgender characters are shown, what kind of stories they get, and how they are treated in the film world. The study found that movies today are getting better at showing transgender lives honestly, but there are still problems. Some films still show transgender people mainly through pain or sad events. Also, many transgender characters are still played by actors who are not transgender. The paper ends by saying that Tamil cinema is improving but must continue to include transgender voices and give them more meaningful roles.

Keywords: transgender, Tamil cinema, movies, representation, identity

1. Introduction

Movies are a very important part of life in Tamil Nadu. People of all ages watch Tamil films for fun, entertainment, and emotional connection. But movies do more than entertain us—they also shape how we think about people and society. When a group of people is shown unfairly in movies, audiences may begin to believe those ideas. This is what happened for many years with transgender people in Tamil cinema.

In older Tamil movies, transgender characters were not treated with respect. They were often shown as jokes, scary figures, or strange people who did not belong in society. Many times, they were used to make others laugh or feel uncomfortable. Because of this, many viewers grew up with the wrong understanding of what it means to be transgender. These old portrayals made life harder for transgender people, because they encouraged fear, shame, and misunderstanding.

However, in the last decade, especially between 2015 and 2024, Tamil cinema began to slowly change. Filmmakers started to realize that transgender people deserve to be shown as real human beings with emotions, dreams, and struggles. This change did not happen overnight. It happened because society itself began to speak louder about transgender rights. The 2014 Supreme Court judgment in India, which recognized transgender people as a third gender, brought more attention to their lives and needs. More people began to understand that transgender individuals deserve equality, safety, and respect.

As society changed, Tamil movies also began to change. New directors and writers wanted to tell more honest and sensitive stories. They started including transgender characters who were not just side jokes or background faces, but people with real roles in the story. Movies like *Aruvi* (2017) introduced audiences to transgender characters who were kind, helpful, and friendly. *Peranbu* (2018) went a step further by casting a real transgender actress, which made the role feel more true and heartfelt. These films showed that transgender characters can be part of emotional and meaningful stories.

At the same time, movies like *Super Deluxe* (2019) tried to explore deeper feelings and experiences of transgender people. While the film was praised by many for its bravery and strong acting, some parts upset the transgender community because they felt exaggerated or harmful. This shows that even when filmmakers have good intentions, they must be careful and listen to transgender voices to avoid stereotypes or misunderstandings.

Streaming platforms also helped change Tamil cinema. Online spaces like Netflix and Amazon Prime gave filmmakers more freedom to explore sensitive topics without worrying about box office pressure. *Paava Kadhaigal* (2020) is an example of how Tamil creators started telling stories that show the real pressures transgender people face—such as rejection, violence, and family problems.

Even with these improvements, many challenges remain. Most transgender characters in films still experience sadness, loss, or tragedy. There are still very few movies that show transgender people living everyday lives full of happiness, success, and ordinary moments. Another major issue is casting: many transgender roles continue to be played by cisgender actors, which takes away authenticity from the characters.

Overall, the development of transgender representation in Tamil cinema is a mix of progress and gaps. Tamil films today are more respectful than they were years ago, but the journey is not complete. More stories, more opportunities, and more real transgender voices are needed to make cinema truly inclusive.

2. Review of Literature

Many writers, film critics, and researchers have studied how transgender people are shown in Indian cinema, especially Tamil films. Their work helps us understand how movies shape public ideas about gender and identity. Older studies show that transgender characters were often used in negative or shallow ways. Newer studies point out that things are slowly changing, but many problems still exist. This section brings together what different authors have said about transgender representation, why these portrayals matter, and how they affect real people in society.

In earlier years, movies in India mostly showed transgender people in ways that were not fair. Ghosh (2019) explains that transgender characters were often used only as a joke or a shock element. They were rarely given real stories, feelings, dreams, or struggles. Their roles were usually short and sometimes meant to make the audience laugh or feel scared. This made many viewers think that transgender people were strange or not normal.

Narrain (2014) also writes that Indian films used transgender characters to keep old gender ideas strong. Instead of showing transgender people as real human beings, films made them appear mysterious or dangerous. Because of this, many people did not understand what it truly means to be transgender. These movies did not help society learn or show kindness. Instead, they made life harder for transgender communities by spreading wrong ideas.

Tamil cinema faced these same issues. Many film researchers point out that Tamil films used transgender characters in a very limited way for decades. Rajan (2010) explains that transgender roles were usually played by men wearing women's clothes. These portrayals were not based on real transgender experiences. They were exaggerated, funny, or loud, and they made people think that transgender identity was just "acting." This caused a lot of confusion about what being transgender truly means.

Swaminathan (2016) supports this view by saying that Tamil movies often followed "cisnormative" beliefs. This means movies assumed that only cisgender people were normal and everyone else was outside the norm. So, when transgender characters appeared, they were treated as outsiders, strange, or less important. This attitude in films taught viewers to treat transgender people differently in real life too.

However, around the mid-2010s, researchers began noticing slow but meaningful changes. New films and new voices in cinema pushed for better representation. Sundar (2020) writes that movies like *Aruvi* and *Peranbu* were important because they treated transgender characters with respect. They were shown as regular people with emotions, friendships, pain, and joy. These movies surprised audiences because they did not follow the old style of mockery or fear. Some of these films even cast actual transgender actors, which made the characters feel more authentic and believable.

Gopal (2021) also agrees that Tamil cinema is moving forward but says the process is not perfect. She notes that *Super Deluxe* tried to give a deep, emotional story to a transgender character, but some scenes upset members of the transgender community. These parts felt exaggerated or harmful. Gopal explains that even when filmmakers try to help, they must listen carefully to transgender voices to avoid mistakes.

Another major change came with the growth of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Jayasree (2022) points out that filmmakers who work with online platforms often have more freedom to explore sensitive topics. They can make stories that might not be accepted in traditional theatres. The Tamil anthology film *Paava Kadhaigal* is one example where transgender struggles were shown as part of larger social issues like honor and violence. This helped audiences understand the pressures transgender people face in real life.

Even with all these improvements, many writers say more needs to be done. Biswas (2021) writes that many new films still show transgender lives mostly through sadness, rejection, or suffering. While these experiences are real and important, it is also important to show transgender people living happy, ordinary lives. Movies rarely show transgender people going to school, working regular jobs, falling in love, or enjoying friendships without something tragic happening. This creates an image that transgender life is always filled with pain.

A few scholars focus on what needs to change behind the camera. Manoharan (2023) believes that films will only improve when transgender people are included as writers, actors, directors, and consultants. If their voices are not part of the storytelling process, films will continue to make mistakes or rely on stereotypes. Real stories come from real experiences.

Finally, most researchers agree on one thing: Tamil cinema is slowly moving in the right direction. It has begun taking steps away from harmful portrayals and toward more respectful and meaningful storytelling. But the journey is not finished. The film industry must continue listening, learning, and giving transgender people the space to tell their own stories.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a simple method called content analysis. This means watching the movies carefully and noting how transgender characters are shown. Four movies were chosen because they became popular and discussed transgender themes directly. These movies are: Aruvi (2017), Peranbu (2018), Super Deluxe (2019), and Paava Kadhaigal (2020).

During the analysis, the following points were checked:

What role the transgender character plays in the story

How the character is described and treated

Whether the actor is transgender or not

What message the movie gives about transgender identity

Books, articles, and reviews were also read to better understand how other people viewed these films. This method helps us see both the good and the bad sides of transgender representation in modern Tamil cinema.

4. Data Analysis

The results show that Tamil movies are slowly improving in showing transgender people fairly. Aruvi and Peranbu show transgender characters kindly and with depth. Super Deluxe tries to create a complex character, but some parts of the film upset members of the transgender community. Paava Kadhaigal tells a sad and emotional story, but again focuses mainly on tragedy. The study shows that while transgender characters are becoming more visible, they still don't often get happy or simple everyday roles. Also, many roles are still played by cisgender actors.

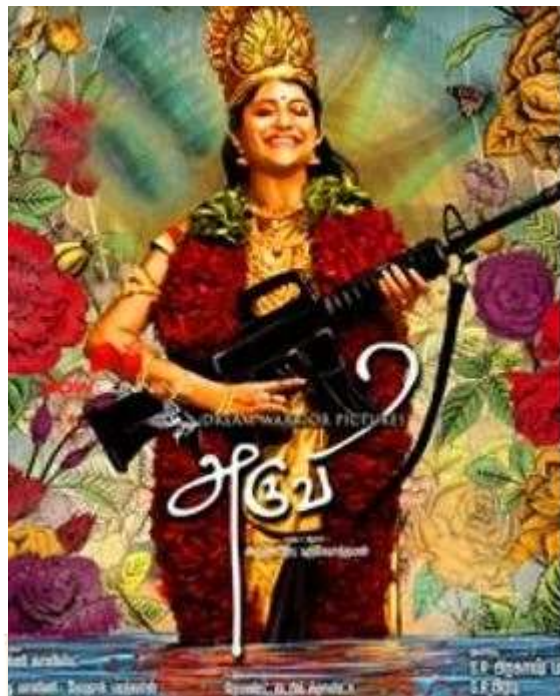
Movie posters



Peranbu



Super Deluxe



Aruvi

5. Findings

The study discovered several important points:

- Better Representation
- Recent movies try to show transgender characters as real people with emotions, not jokes or enemies.
- Still Mostly Side Characters
- Many transgender characters are not the main characters. They support the story but do not lead it.
- Too Much Focus on Sadness
- Many films still show transgender lives as full of pain, rejection, or suffering. While these struggles are real, movies rarely show joyful or normal parts of life.
- Casting Problems
- In most films, transgender roles are still played by actors who are not transgender. This makes the portrayal less genuine.
- Some Harmful Scenes Remain
- Even films trying to be respectful sometimes include scenes that can create wrong ideas or hurt feelings.

- Growing Kindness in Storytelling
- New filmmakers are trying harder to tell stories with empathy and respect.
- Need for Transgender Voices in Filmmaking
- Better representation will happen when more transgender people write, act, and work behind the camera.

6. Conclusion

Tamil cinema is changing. It is slowly moving away from harmful stereotypes and starting to show transgender people more fairly. Movies like *Aruvi* and *Peranbu* prove that respectful and touching stories are possible. However, there is still room for improvement. Many movies still focus too much on sadness, and many roles are given to cisgender actors. To make real progress, Tamil cinema needs to include transgender people in all parts of filmmaking. When this happens, audiences will begin to see transgender characters as ordinary human beings with dreams, problems, love, and happiness—just like everyone else.

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