

Platformed Intimacy: Queer Visibility, Infrastructural Governance, and the Political Economy of Indian OTT Media

Aditya Singh

Research Scholar, Ph.D (Cinema Studies)

School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

ABSTRACT

This article examines how queer visibility on Indian over-the-top (OTT) platforms is produced, structured, and governed through platform infrastructures rather than simply expanded through representational freedom. While streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are often celebrated for enabling greater narrative openness around sexuality and gender, this article argues that queer visibility operates as a form of conditional inclusion shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems, subscription economies, linguistic hierarchies, and anticipatory regulatory practices. Drawing on platform studies, queer theory, and Indian media scholarship, the analysis demonstrates how queer intimacy is aestheticised through restraint, emotional legibility, and narrative containment. Forms of queerness aligned with cosmopolitan, middle-class, and English-speaking subjectivities circulate more easily, while queer lives shaped by caste, region, vernacular language, or economic precarity remain structurally marginal. Rather than framing OTT platforms as liberatory alternatives to censorship regimes, the article conceptualises them as infrastructures of governance that modulate desire, risk, and circulation. Queerness thus functions as a diagnostic site for understanding how platform capitalism manages cultural difference in contemporary India.

Keywords: Queer cinema, OTT platforms, Platform studies, Indian media, Algorithmic visibility, Political economy, Digital regulation, Platform capitalism, Queer representation.

Received : 13/10/2025 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18251899> **Acceptance :** 28/11/2025

Introduction:

Queer Visibility Beyond Representation Over the past decade, over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms have transformed media circulation in India. Services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, and JioCinema have reshaped not only distribution but also aesthetic conventions, audience practices, and regulatory arrangements. Within this transformation, queer representation has emerged as one of the most visible markers of change. Same-sex intimacy, queer protagonists, and transgender narratives: historically marginal within mainstream Hindi cinema and broadcast television, now appear with increasing frequency across digital platforms. Early commentary has often framed this shift through a rhetoric of liberation. OTT platforms are positioned as progressive spaces that bypass theatrical censorship and enable creative freedom around sexuality and gender. Queer visibility becomes

evidence of cultural openness and institutional rupture. However, such celebratory narratives remain analytically limited. They treat platforms as neutral conduits that simply allow representation to flourish, obscuring the infrastructural conditions through which visibility is actively produced and governed.

This article reframes the question. Rather than asking whether OTT platforms are progressive, it asks: how is queer visibility organised under platform conditions? What kinds of queer lives become legible, discoverable, and economically sustainable? Which forms remain structurally marginal, not necessarily absent, but difficult to circulate? Shifting attention from representation as textual presence to representation as infrastructural practice reveals visibility as a managed outcome rather than a simple expansion. Platforms organise cultural circulation through recommendation algorithms, subscription models,

interface design, promotional paratexts, and anticipatory regulatory compliance. These mechanisms shape not only what content exists but how it is surfaced, framed, and monetised. The Indian OTT ecosystem shaped by linguistic plurality, uneven digital access, religious nationalism, and regulatory uncertainty provides a particularly instructive site for analysing these dynamics.

Methodologically, the article combines close textual analysis of selected Indian OTT films and series with platform analysis and digital ethnography. By analysing not only scenes and narratives but also interfaces, marketing practices, and audience circulation, the article foregrounds visibility as infrastructural power. The central claim is that OTT platforms do not merely host queer stories; they actively format and govern them. Queerness becomes a diagnostic site for understanding how platform capitalism manages cultural difference through modulation rather than overt censorship.

Theoretical Framework: Platforms, Queer Governance, and Visibility:

Platform studies foreground how digital platforms operate as infrastructures that organise culture through data extraction, algorithmic sorting, monetisation, and regulatory alignment rather than neutral distribution. Srnicek conceptualises platforms as economic infrastructures designed to capture and monetise user activity at scale (43-45). Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal further demonstrate how platforms embed political values into ranking systems, interface design, and data governance (2-4). Visibility is thus an engineered outcome.

However, much platform research treats content as interchangeable. Queer narratives expose the limits of this assumption. Their circulation reveals how infrastructures selectively enable certain forms of difference while disciplining others. Lobato's analysis of streaming infrastructures shows that platforms privilege content that travels easily across markets, minimising friction and regulatory risk (21-24). This helps explain why Indian OTT queer narratives frequently adopt cosmopolitan aesthetics and emotional restraint.

Queer theory offers critical vocabulary to interpret this as normative governance rather than neutrality. Duggan's concept of homonormativity describes how neoliberal cultures incorporate certain queer subjects through respectability, privacy, and emotional moderation (179-81). Berlant's notion of "intimate publics" shows how affect substitutes for structural transformation (8-10). Muñoz's queer futurity further highlights how platform optimisation conflicts with non-linear, unresolved queer temporalities (1-4).

Platform governance scholarship clarifies how regulation operates indirectly. Gillespie demonstrates that platforms govern culture through classification systems and complaint infrastructures rather than direct bans (20-24), while Bucher shows how algorithms encode assumptions about safety and relevance (52-54). Together, these frameworks support the article's central claim: queer visibility on Indian OTT platforms functions as conditional inclusion shaped by infrastructural power.

Beyond representation, visibility itself functions as a form of infrastructural power. Rather than operating as a simple condition of appearance, visibility emerges as a distributed assemblage produced through technical systems, economic incentives, regulatory environments, and cultural norms. This shift requires moving away from representational paradigms that treat visibility as inherently emancipatory toward a more material analysis of how visibility is engineered, regulated, and differentially allocated.

Bruno Latour's notion of infrastructure as an assemblage of human and non-human actors helps clarify how platforms operate not merely as neutral technologies but as active mediators shaping social relations. Algorithms, interfaces, contractual agreements, content moderation policies, and advertising logics collectively participate in shaping what becomes culturally legible. Visibility is therefore not granted by platforms but assembled through interlocking systems of optimisation, compliance, and monetisation.

From a media political economy perspective, visibility functions as a scarce resource distributed

unevenly according to market value and risk tolerance. Cultural content that aligns with advertiser safety, subscription retention, and regulatory stability gains infrastructural priority, while content that threatens reputational or political risk is marginalised or rendered less discoverable. This uneven allocation reveals how platform capitalism reorganises cultural hierarchies rather than neutralising them.

Queer theory complicates this further by foregrounding how visibility has historically functioned ambivalently within sexual politics. Visibility has enabled recognition and rights claims while simultaneously exposing queer subjects to surveillance, regulation, and commodification. As scholars of queer media have long noted, incorporation into mainstream visibility often requires alignment with dominant norms of respectability, privacy, and affective legibility. Platform infrastructures intensify this dynamic by translating normative assumptions directly into algorithmic systems and content governance practices.

Importantly, infrastructural visibility does not operate uniformly across social categories. Class, language, caste, region, and gender variance intersect with platform governance to produce differentiated regimes of legibility. The visibility of an English-speaking urban gay couple does not carry the same infrastructural risk as the visibility of a caste-marked trans subject speaking in vernacular registers. Platform governance thus produces what might be understood as stratified visibility: inclusion without equality.

Understanding visibility as infrastructural power allows the analysis to move beyond binary debates of censorship versus freedom. Instead, it foregrounds how governance increasingly operates through modulation, calibration, and anticipatory alignment with market and regulatory logics. Queer visibility on OTT platforms becomes a site where the political economy of culture becomes materially legible.

Infrastructures of Visibility: Algorithms, Monetisation and Class:

Visibility on OTT platforms is organised through algorithmic recommendation systems, subscription models, and telecom infrastructures. Recommendation systems reward predictability, retention, and

engagement, privileging narratives that conform to familiar emotional arcs. Queer stories framed through reconciliation, personal growth, and moral uplift circulate more easily than narratives foregrounding antagonism or structural critique.

Categorisation practices further structure discoverability. Queer content is often grouped under identity-specific collections rather than integrated into mainstream genres, producing algorithmic containment. Visibility circulates primarily among users already marked as receptive, limiting cross-audience exposure (Gillespie 20-22).

Monetisation intensifies these dynamics. Subscription platforms disproportionately address urban middle-class audiences with private viewing environments and stable internet access. Athique and Parthasarathi describe this as "tiered participation," where digital access reproduces class inequality (27-29). Queer visibility becomes structurally classed. Telecom bundling further narrows platform choice, reinforcing ecosystem lock-in rather than open access.

These infrastructures shape narrative form. Badhaai Do frames queer politics through emotional sincerity and familial reconciliation, displacing structural critique into affective resolution. Conversely, niche platforms such as ALTBalaji commodify queer intimacy as sensational spectacle rather than political presence. Both models produce visibility but restrict political possibility. Queerness becomes compatible with consumption rather than transformation.

The governance of queer visibility also operates upstream through commissioning practices, creative labour management, and institutional risk assessment. While platform discourse often foregrounds creative freedom and experimentation, commissioning decisions remain tightly structured by data analytics, audience segmentation models, and perceived regulatory exposure. Creative autonomy is negotiated within industrial constraints rather than exercised independently.

Streaming platforms increasingly rely on predictive analytics to evaluate audience demand, completion rates, and genre performance. Scripts and development pitches are assessed not only for artistic

merit but for algorithmic compatibility: narrative pacing, genre recognisability, emotional resolution, and binge potential. Queer narratives that conform to familiar romantic or coming-out templates are more easily legible to commissioning models than stories that foreground political confrontation, non-linear temporality, or unresolved conflict.

Creative labour itself becomes precariously positioned within this environment. Writers, directors, and showrunners must anticipate platform sensitivities, advertiser comfort, and potential public backlash while pitching projects. Informal self-censorship emerges not through explicit instruction but through institutional memory of controversies and market consequences. This produces what might be understood as anticipatory creativity: aesthetic decisions shaped by speculative risk calculation rather than solely by narrative imagination. Such dynamics disproportionately affect politically charged queer storytelling. Projects foregrounding caste violence, religious conflict, police harassment, or medical precarity often face higher scrutiny or delayed commissioning because they threaten regulatory stability and brand neutrality. As a result, many queer creators adapt by translating structural critique into affective individualism, framing conflict through personal trauma rather than collective politics.

Labour hierarchies within the industry further reproduce stratification. English-dominant writers, metropolitan production houses, and internationally networked creators possess greater access to platform gatekeepers and pitching infrastructures. Vernacular creators and regionally rooted storytellers face higher barriers of entry, reinforcing linguistic and class-based filtering within queer visibility.

These dynamics demonstrate that platform governance extends well beyond algorithms and interfaces. It shapes the cultural field at the level of creative possibility itself. What appears on screen is already the outcome of layered negotiations between labour precarity, institutional caution, market analytics, and political risk. Visibility, therefore, is not merely curated after production but structured long before cameras roll.

Language and Linguistic Gatekeeping:

Language functions as a central infrastructural filter of queer legibility. Hinglish dominates prestige OTT storytelling, operating as a marker of cosmopolitan cultural capital. While presented as natural urban speech, Hinglish smooths over caste, region, and class difference, enabling global portability (Lobato 70-72).

Series such as *Made in Heaven* distribute language hierarchically: English and polished Hinglish articulate professional and intimate spaces, while Hindi indexes conflict or labour. Queer intimacy articulated in English is framed as controlled and emotionally intelligible, while vernacular registers are marginalised or subtitled into flattened legibility. Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital clarifies how dominant speech forms acquire symbolic authority (55-57).

Exceptions such as *Sheer Qorma* demonstrate alternative possibilities, where Urdu-inflected dialogue and silence resist platform smoothness. Yet such linguistic plurality remains rare. OTT infrastructures institutionalise stratified recognition, aligning queer visibility with elite speech worlds (Dasgupta 41-43).

Regulatory Negotiation and Anticipatory Self-Regulation:

The regulatory environment further shapes visibility. The 2021 IT Rules integrated OTT platforms into post-publication accountability regimes. The *Tandav* controversy demonstrated how decentralised legal vulnerability produces sustained risk rather than singular censorship events. Rather than overt bans, platforms internalise regulatory risk through anticipatory self-regulation: script dilution, promotional modulation, and project abandonment. Governance operates upstream, shaping what is imagined before production. Queer intimacy remains permissible but carefully calibrated to avoid political provocation. This aligns with Gillespie's analysis of indirect platform governance and Bucher's account of algorithmic normativity. Regulation becomes infrastructural rather than episodic.

Queer visibility operates through managed transgression. Intimacy is sanctioned when aestheticised through restraint and emotional legibility.

In *Modern Love: Mumbai*, intimacy unfolds through caregiving and domestic quiet rather than erotic display. Geeli Pucchi embeds desire within caste and labour hierarchies but ultimately resolves critique affectively rather than structurally. *Kaathal - The Core* displaces queerness into legal discourse, evacuating sensual presence. Spectacle-driven texts such as *Made in Heaven* and *Four More Shots Please!* transform political conflict into lifestyle affect or emotional struggle. Excess becomes style rather than critique. Berlant's "intimate publics" explains how affect substitutes for transformation (8-10). Visibility expands, but antagonism is contained.

Platformed Publics and Counter-Visibility:

Visibility remains contested within digital publics. YouTube comment cultures oscillate between moral panic and counter-speech, amplified by engagement algorithms. Instagram compresses queer visibility into brand-safe affect, producing apparent consensus. Twitter/X enables polarised debate and queer-authored critique of classed representation. Reddit sustains longer counter-discursive archives. Vernacular and activist digital cultures: blogs, WhatsApp networks, crowdfunded series maintain linguistic plurality and political urgency outside platform infrastructures, though they remain precariously governed by moderation and monetisation systems (Duguay 7). Visibility thus emerges as negotiated rather than settled.

A brief methodological reflection clarifies the scope and limits of the analysis. This article draws on close textual analysis, interface observation, and informal digital ethnography rather than large-scale data scraping or proprietary platform metrics. While such qualitative methods cannot capture algorithmic operations directly, they allow attention to the experiential, cultural, and discursive dimensions through which visibility becomes meaningful to users and creators.

Digital ethnography enables the tracing of how texts circulate across platforms, how audiences interpret representation, and how affective economies shape engagement. Comment cultures, fan discourse, backlash narratives, and activist interventions provide insight into how platform governance is encountered

and negotiated in everyday digital life. These practices reveal how visibility functions not only as institutional design but as lived experience. At the same time, platform opacity imposes methodological constraints. Recommendation algorithms, content moderation systems, and internal commissioning criteria remain largely inaccessible to external researchers. This opacity necessitates interpretive caution: patterns of visibility can be analysed through observable effects rather than definitive causal attribution. The article therefore treats infrastructural power as relational and probabilistic rather than deterministic.

The analysis also recognises its partiality. The selected case studies privilege mainstream Hindi and English-language OTT content because these texts dominate visibility economies and cultural influence. Vernacular streaming cultures, regional OTT ecosystems, and independent digital distribution networks merit deeper empirical study beyond the scope of a single article. Similarly, audience ethnography here remains indicative rather than exhaustive.

Rather than presenting definitive claims about platform causality, the article advances a critical framework for interrogating how infrastructure, political economy, and aesthetics intersect in shaping queer visibility. The goal is not to close the debate but to open analytical pathways for future research across regional media, labour politics, algorithmic governance, and non-platform digital cultures.

Conclusion:

Queer visibility on Indian OTT platforms represents not unqualified liberation but conditional inclusion. Platforms expand representation while governing how queerness circulates through algorithms, monetisation, language, regulation, and aesthetic form. Cosmopolitan, middle-class queer subjects circulate most smoothly; vernacular, caste-marked, and precarious lives remain structurally marginal.

Cinema form itself becomes governance. Intimacy is sanctioned when emotionally legible and politically contained. Platforms manage difference through modulation rather than censorship. At the

same time, publics contest and rework visibility through digital practices and vernacular circulation.

Queerness thus functions as a diagnostic site for understanding how platform capitalism manages cultural difference. Visibility increases, but unevenly. Inclusion expands, but conditionally. The politics of streaming reside not only in what appears on screen but in how infrastructures organise circulation, risk, and legibility.

Notes:

1. The article uses "OTT" to denote subscription-based streaming platforms operating within the Indian digital media ecosystem.
2. Examples discussed are illustrative rather than exhaustive and are selected to demonstrate infrastructural patterns rather than textual evaluation.

Works Cited:

1. Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke UP, 2017.
2. Athique, Adrian. *Digital Media and Society in India*. Polity, 2019.
3. Athique, Adrian, and Vibodh Parthasarathi. *Platform Capitalism in India*. Palgrave, 2020.
4. Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
5. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard UP, 1991.
6. Bucher, Taina. *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. Oxford UP, 2018.
7. Dasgupta, Rohit K. *Digital Queer Cultures in India*. Routledge, 2021.
8. Duggan, Lisa. "The New Homonormativity." *Materializing Democracy*, Duke UP, 2002, pp. 175-94.
9. Duguay, Stefanie. "Algorithmic Visibility in the Platformed Social Field." *Social Media + Society*, 2020.
10. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. Vintage, 1978.

11. Gillespie, Tarleton. *Custodians of the Internet*. Yale UP, 2018.
12. Lobato, Ramon. *Netflix Nations*. NYU Press, 2019.
13. Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia*. NYU Press, 2009.
14. Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Polity, 2017.
15. van Dijck, José, et al. *The Platform Society*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Filmography:

16. *Badhaai Do* Directed by Harshavardhan Kulkarni, performances by Rajkummar Rao and Bhumi Pednekar, Jungle Pictures, 2022.
17. *Geeli Pucchi* Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, performance by Konkona Sen Sharma, part of Ajeeb Dastaans, Netflix, 2021.
18. *Kaathal - The Core* Directed by Jeo Baby, performances by Mammooty and Jyothika, Mammooty Kampany, 2023.
19. *Made in Heaven* Created by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti, Excel Entertainment and Tiger Baby Films, Amazon Prime Video, 2019-2023.
20. *Modern Love: Mumbai* Created by Shonali Bose et al., Amazon Studios India, Amazon Prime Video, 2022.
21. *Sheer Qorma* Directed by Faraz Arif Ansari, performances by Swara Bhasker and Divya Dutta, 2021.
22. *Four More Shots Please!* Created by Rangita and Ishita Pritish Nandy, Pritish Nandy Communications, Amazon Prime Video, 2019-2022.
23. *His Storyy* Directed by Ishaan Nair, ALT Balaji, 2021.
24. *Little Things* Created by Biswapati Sarkar, Dice Media / Netflix India, 2016-2021.
25. *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* Created by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Netflix India, 2024.

