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Reimagining Identity: LGBTQIA+ Voices, Activism, Movements and the Role of NGOs in South India through a Third-World Framework

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Abstract

LGBTQIA+ communities in South India navigate intersecting structures of marginalization shaped by caste, class, patriarchy, and colonial legacies. A Third-World framework — one that foregrounds intersectionality, collective resistance, and localized community strategies — is essential to understanding this terrain. This paper examines the lived experiences, activism, cultural contributions, and organizational support systems that shape LGBTQIA+ lives in South India. It foregrounds activists such as Rumi Harish, A. Revathi, Living Smile Vidya, Akkai Padmashali, Kalki Subramaniam, and Grace Banu, while also detailing the crucial interventions of NGOs such as Sangama, Alternative Law Forum, Orinam, and Sahodari Foundation. The paper situates these contributions within ongoing legal developments, economic conditions, and prospects for prosperity, highlighting both gains and persisting challenges.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+ studies, South India, Third World framework, intersectionality, NGOs, activism, transgender rights, economic inclusivity, cultural advocacy.

Introduction

The South Indian context for LGBTQIA+ identities is structured by complex socio-cultural hierarchies that elude singular Western theoretical models of queer identity. Rather than understanding queerness solely as an individual identity or lifestyle category, a Third-World framework emphasizes collective histories, structural violence, and material conditions that shape queer existence (Spivak 271; Crenshaw 1244). In South India — spanning states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana — queer movements have evolved in dialogue with caste politics, regional cultures, and localized activism. This paper examines how grassroots activism, legal reform, cultural production, and non-governmental organizational support converge to shape the lived realities of LGBTQIA+ communities. It places particular emphasis on the role of NGOs that operate at the intersections of legal aid, health, education, and social inclusion.

Despite constitutional guarantees and legal victories, LGBTQIA+ individuals in South India still encounter pervasive social exclusion. Discrimination in education, healthcare, employment, and housing is common. A 2022 survey from the Kerala Social Justice Department notes that over 60% of transgender respondents reported workplace harassment, while nearly 50% faced serious discrimination in accessing healthcare (Kerala Social Justice Dept. 15).

A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me*, vividly recounts the social exclusion faced by hijra communities: "We are forced to create our own world because society refuses to accept us" (Revathi 67). Her narrative underscores the gap between legal recognition and social acceptance. Rumi Harish's personal account highlights both artistic aspiration and institutional violence. Harish relates experiences of police harassment during communal events and the fear many queer persons face when entering public spaces (Harish). These testimonies reveal that although urban centers provide some shelter, broader social stigma persists.

Economic exclusion remains a key challenge. Many transgender individuals are forced into informal livelihoods — begging, sex work, or precarious daily labor — due to discrimination in formal employment (Padmashali 48). Access to social welfare and employment benefits remains inconsistent, especially outside urban centers. Dalit transgender activist Grace Banu critiques how caste hierarchies compound economic marginalization: "Dalit trans persons are doubly disenfranchised — first by caste, and second by gender and sexuality — making prosperity a distant hope for many" (Banu 39). Her advocacy calls for intersectional policy reforms integrating caste and gender justice.

However, strides are being made. Government welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala offer skill development programs, stipends, educational scholarships, and microfinance support tailored to transgender persons (Kerala Social Justice Dept. 22). NGOs have also designed livelihood programs: the Sahodari Foundation trains queer

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and transgender individuals in digital skills, arts entrepreneurship, and small business development (Subramaniam 61). These initiatives represent important intersections between social support and economic inclusion.

Creative expression has been central to queer visibility in South India. The region's queer literary and artistic output challenges normative assumptions of gender and sexuality. Revathi's personal narrative reclaims community voice against erasure (Revathi 78). Living Smile Vidya's *I Am Vidya* explores gender through performative narrative, insisting on collective recognition (Vidya 105).

Rumi Harish's contributions — including theatre works such as *Liberty Begum* and memoirs like *Jaunpuri Khayal* — illustrate how cultural production becomes direct resistance. Harish's fusion of two worlds, classical music and queer performance, reframes South India's cultural canon to include trans identities (Harish). These creative texts do more than represent queer experience; they *intervene* in public imagination.

Non-governmental organizations have played a transformative role in supporting South India's LGBTQIA+ movements, building both institutional infrastructure and grassroots resilience. One of South India's longest-standing NGOs, Sangama provides legal aid, crisis intervention, mental health support, HIV prevention services, and community training for marginalized groups, especially transgender persons and sex workers. Sangama's documentation of police harassment and community violence has been critical for policy advocacy and public accountability. By providing safe spaces for peer support and counseling, Sangama addresses both immediate needs and long-term resilience. Alternative Law Forum (ALF) specializes in legal advocacy and rights literacy. ALF has assisted countless queer individuals in navigating bureaucratic barriers, challenging discriminatory practices in public institutions, and contesting rights violations. ALF's strategic litigation work amplifies grassroots struggles into formal legal accountability.

Orinam is a grassroots collective focused on queer solidarity, public education, and cultural visibility. Through community workshops, social campaigns, and publications, Orinam builds public awareness of queer history and rights, particularly in contexts where queer narratives are still marginalized. Founded by Kalki Subramaniam, the Sahodari Foundation engages queer youth through education, digital empowerment, artistic expression, and mental health support. Its programs include digital storytelling, entrepreneurship training, and peer learning — all designed to enhance both dignity and economic opportunity.

Together, these NGOs bridge gaps between policy intentions and lived experience, providing structural support for community members and cultivating new frameworks of queer solidarity.

South Indian pride events, including Bangalore Pride and Chennai Rainbow Pride, are not merely celebrations; they are *political acts*. These marches reclaim public spaces, challenge normative gender orders, and foster communal identity across caste and class lines. Pride marches also serve as important opportunities for NGO mobilization, health camps, and public education campaigns.

Activists such as Akkai Padmashali and Kalki Subramaniam are prominent advocates at these events, using performance, speeches, and public testimony to link personal narratives with broader political demands. The visibility generated through these marches has contributed to greater public recognition of queer struggles, even as resistance from conservative groups persists.

Legal reforms have shaped opportunities for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in South India, but implementation remains uneven. Key legal milestones include: NALSA v. Union of India (2014): Recognized transgender persons as a third gender and affirmed their right to self-identification. Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018): Decriminalized consensual same-sex relations, striking down colonial Section 377. These rulings have established constitutional foundations for equality. However, activists note gaps: procedural hurdles in gender documentation, inconsistent welfare distribution, and persistent moral policing in certain districts continue to undermine practical benefit (Padmashali 67). Rural communities, in particular, lack awareness of legal protections, creating regional disparities in access. An intersectional approach — articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw — recognizes that gender, caste, class, and religion intersect in ways that shape opportunities and vulnerabilities (Crenshaw 1244). In South India, caste hierarchies exacerbate economic conditions for queer individuals from marginalized communities. A Third-World framework pushes beyond universalizing Western queer categories by insisting that structural inequalities are central to identity formation and social experience. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, the subaltern voice must be centered to disrupt dominant narratives (Spivak 283). This lens helps explain why legal reform, media visibility, or NGO interventions are necessary but not sufficient for full inclusion. Social acceptance, economic equality, and cultural belonging require sustained community engagement and structural transformation.

South India's LGBTQIA+ landscape is shaped by dynamic intersecting forces: persistent discrimination, legal progress, activism, cultural creativity, and organizational support. Activists such as Rumi Harish, A. Revathi, Living Smile Vidya, Akkai Padmashali, Kalki Subramaniam, and Grace Banu illustrate how queer resistance is grounded in lived experience and collective struggle. NGOs such as Sangama, Alternative Law Forum, Orinam, and Sahodari Foundation provide critical infrastructure for change, addressing legal rights, health, economic empowerment, and public engagement. While legal rulings have established vital protections, the full realization of dignity and prosperity for LGBTQIA+ persons in South India remains an ongoing project of community agency, policy implementation, and cultural transformation. A Third-World framework offers the most accurate lens through which to understand these complex conditions.

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