

Twenty years of coming out as Dalit

Coming out is never a singular act. It is shaped by who one is speaking to, and what that audience is prepared to hear.

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The Pride march in New Delhi in November 2015. The Pride mobilisations of 2015, across multiple cities, marked a particularly significant moment. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStock

In 2007, I came out publicly in two different ways.

As part of an early challenge to the criminalisation of “unnatural offences,” Section 377, Indian Penal Code (now Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita), in an affidavit submitted before the Delhi High Court, I wrote:

“That I am Gay. I am also Dalit, a Buddhist, a loving son to my mother, a good neighbour, and a responsible citizen of India.”

Notice the word “gay”. The choice was not incidental.

Legal claims require stability—categories that can travel across jurisdictions and be recognised within constitutional frameworks. To be heard, one must first be legible.

That same year, I wrote an essay titled “Reflections of a Queer Dalit”. There, I chose a different vocabulary. I used “queer” to draw an analogy with “[Dalit](#)”—both words reclaimed and turned into assertions of selfhood. The essay emerged not in a courtroom but through a foreign-funded initiative within activist and non-profit networks, where language could stretch, resist, and reimagine.

Queer and gay were not contradictory assertions. They were responses to different audiences: of course, the court was an obvious audience of my affidavit; the less obvious audience of my essay was a Dalit readership I was trying to engage, in the hope of being recognised.

Yet this distinction has not always been recognised in how such writing is later read. For instance, feminist scholarship, most notably that of Nivedita Menon, has interpreted my 2007 essay as presenting a sequence—where coming out as Dalit precedes coming out as [queer](#), and therefore reshapes or destabilises sexuality. But this reading misidentifies what is at stake.

The difference was not temporal—about which identity came first—but relational: about who was being addressed, and under what conditions identity could be made legible.

The court demanded clarity and familiarity. Activist spaces allowed for critique. What appears, in retrospect, as a sequence—whether of caste and sexuality, or of one identity preceding another—was never about the order in which identity was discovered or declared. It was about the conditions under which identity could be spoken at all.

Coming out, in this sense, is never a singular act. It is shaped by who one is speaking to, and what that audience is prepared to hear.

Visibility without stability

Over the past two decades, I have watched queer Dalit visibility in India expand in ways that would have been difficult to imagine in 2007. That expansion has not been linear. In 2007, both the affidavit and the essay were produced under conditions of criminalisation, where visibility carried real risk and circulation was deliberately limited. The brief decriminalisation following *Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi* (2009) created a moment of possibility, only to be reversed in *Suresh Kumar Koushal & Anr. v.*

NAZ Foundation & Ors.(2013), restoring legal precarity, before the reading down of Section 377 in *Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India thr. Secretary Ministry of Law and Justice* (2018). This uneven legal trajectory shaped not only who could appear, but how.

If earlier articulations were marked by caution and constrained circulation, the post-2018 moment has enabled a more expansive visibility, particularly through digital media. At the same time, this shift has been accompanied by a growing emphasis on personal disclosure and affect, where vulnerability is foregrounded but structural critique is not always sustained.

Pride mobilisations, media coverage, and cultural production have all contributed to making previously marginalised lives more visible in the public sphere. Names, faces, and stories that might once have circulated only within small activist circles now appear in newspapers, films, academic writing, and digital platforms.



Members of the LGBTQIA+ community take part in a queer Pride parade on International Transgender Day of Visibility, in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, on March 31, 2026. | Photo Credit: PTI

And yet, this visibility does not settle into something stable. It appears, recedes, and reappears—often in different forms, across different spaces. A life that becomes legible in one domain may remain unrecognised, or even misrecognised, in another. The language that makes claims possible in law—terms such as “LGBT”, shaped by rights discourse—does not necessarily carry into activist spaces, where it is contested and reworked. What is simplified for legal recognition often has to be reworked, or even resisted, within social movements. What is recognised in journalism may not carry the same weight in academic discourse. And what circulates in cultural production may expand awareness without altering the conditions that produce marginalisation in the first place.

If there is a pattern to these 20 years, it is not one of steady progress from invisibility to inclusion. It is something more uneven. Take the legal arena. The early challenges to Section 377 required individuals and organisations to frame their claims in categories that the court could understand: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT). This was evident in cases such as *Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi* (2009), where the language of rights required identities to be stabilised in ways that could be judicially recognised.

These categories had travelled through international human rights discourse and comparative constitutional law. They made it possible to argue for dignity, privacy, and equality. But they also simplified lived experiences. Intersectional identities—shaped by caste, class, gender, and region—had to be compressed into legally legible forms. Even the eventual reading down of Section 377 in *Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India* *thr. Secretary Ministry of Law and Justice* (2018) did not address how intersectional lives are invisibilised within law.

At the same time, outside the courtroom, other forms of articulation were taking shape. Essays, testimonies, and activist writings began to foreground the entanglement of caste and sexuality. These did not translate into legal recognition. But they circulated through non-profits, small publications, and later, digital media—producing a different kind of visibility.

Journalism played another role. It converted lived experience into public record. Stories that might once have remained local or ephemeral were now documented, named, and

archived. Academic scholarship, in turn, drew on these records to produce recognised knowledge. Together, these sites created a form of endurance—allowing certain narratives to persist beyond the moment of their articulation.

But this endurance, too, has been uneven. Some lives become emblematic, repeatedly cited and circulated. Others remain peripheral, appearing briefly before fading from view. Even when intersectional experiences are documented, they are not always treated as sources of theory or analysis. More often, they are framed as testimony—as illustration rather than argument. This distinction matters. It shapes not only who is seen, but how they are understood.

Pride and the limits of collective visibility

If the courtroom demanded one kind of articulation, the street demanded another. Public mobilisations—especially Pride marches—created spaces where identities could be asserted without the same constraints of legal legibility. Here, bodies, slogans, and presence itself became a form of expression. One did not have to translate oneself into the language of rights. One could appear, collectively, and be seen.

Over time, these spaces began to accommodate more explicit articulations of caste within queer politics. The Pride mobilisations of 2015, across multiple cities, marked a particularly significant moment. These assertions echoed similar moments in Delhi Queer Pride and parallel mobilisations in cities such as Bengaluru and Kolkata. Queer Dalit participants asserted caste not as a background condition, but as central to their presence within queer spaces. Placards, speeches, and informal conversations foregrounded caste alongside sexuality, challenging the assumption that queer politics could remain indifferent to caste hierarchies.

For a moment, something shifted.

For perhaps the first time, caste was not incidental to queer presence but asserted as constitutive of it. These assertions disrupted the apparent unity of queer publics, revealing internal hierarchies structured by caste, class, language, and access.

And yet, this visibility did not fully carry forward.

Pride, by its very nature, is episodic. It produces intensity—of presence, of recognition, of collective energy—but that intensity is difficult to sustain once the event disperses. The visibility generated in a parade does not automatically translate into institutional memory, organisational change, or enduring political frameworks. What appears powerfully in one moment can dissipate in the next.

In some cases, caste-based assertions within Pride were treated as interruptions—seen as complicating or “dividing” a movement that preferred to present itself as unified. The terms of inclusion were uneven. To be visible was not always to be heard.

Journalism and the problem of repetition

This pattern—of appearance without consolidation—has repeated itself across other domains as well. Journalism, for instance, has played a crucial role in extending the life of such moments. It records, names, and circulates what might otherwise remain transient. A speech delivered at a parade, a placard held in a crowd, a personal account shared in a small gathering—these can become part of a public archive once taken up by the media.

Through this process, lives become retrievable. Stories are given names, faces, and narrative form. They can be cited, revisited, and circulated beyond the immediacy of the moment. In this sense, journalism does not simply report events; it participates in shaping what endures.

But here too, the pattern is uneven. Not all lives are recorded in the same way. Some figures become emblematic—appearing repeatedly across platforms, standing in for broader experiences. Others remain peripheral, their presence noted briefly, if at all. The selection is not random. It reflects existing hierarchies of language, class, region, and recognisability.



Dalit and transgender activist Grace Banu. | Photo Credit: By special arrangement

This pattern is visible in the repeated introduction of certain figures in the media. Take the case of Dalit transgender activist, Grace Banu. Across platforms and years, she is continually reintroduced—“meet” her again and again—as if visibility must always begin from scratch. The same life is made legible repeatedly, but rarely allowed to accumulate into structural recognition. What is produced is familiarity without transformation: recognition of the figure without engagement with the conditions she names.

Even when intersectional experiences are documented, they are often framed in particular ways. Queer Dalit lives frequently enter public discourse as stories—of struggle, resilience, survival. These narratives are important. But they are not always treated as sources of analysis. They are received as testimony, as lived experience, rather than as interventions that produce knowledge about social structures. This distinction shapes what becomes visible—and what becomes thinkable.

From individual assertion to collective voice

This unevenness also appears in the forms that queer Dalit assertion has taken over time. For the most part, such assertions have been mostly individual. Testimonies, essays, interviews, and media profiles tend to centre singular figures—each carrying the weight of articulation within specific spaces. Even moments that appear collective often resolve into individual visibility.

The Pride mobilisations of 2015 offer a partial exception. In Delhi, figures such as Dhrubo Jyoti, Dhiren Borisa, and Akhil Kang appeared together, explicitly naming caste within queer public space—through speeches, poems, and direct address. This was not merely visibility, but a coordinated assertion within a shared space.

And yet, even here, the collectivity was fragile. Across other cities—such as Bengaluru and Kolkata—similar articulations emerged, but through the individual presence of Dhrubo Jyoti rather than through sustained collective formation. The moment did not consolidate into an enduring infrastructure through which such assertions could recur.

In this context, initiatives such as Across the Nala mark a different kind of intervention. As a Dalit Bahujan queer zine emerging through workshops, collaborations, and institutional support, it gathers multiple narratives into a shared frame. It is not a single voice, but a curated collection—produced at the intersection of academia, civil society, and cultural production. In doing so, it moves towards a more collective form of articulation.

This is significant. It suggests the possibility of building archives that are not dependent on singular figures, but on aggregated experiences—where multiple lives appear together, without being reduced to a single representative narrative.

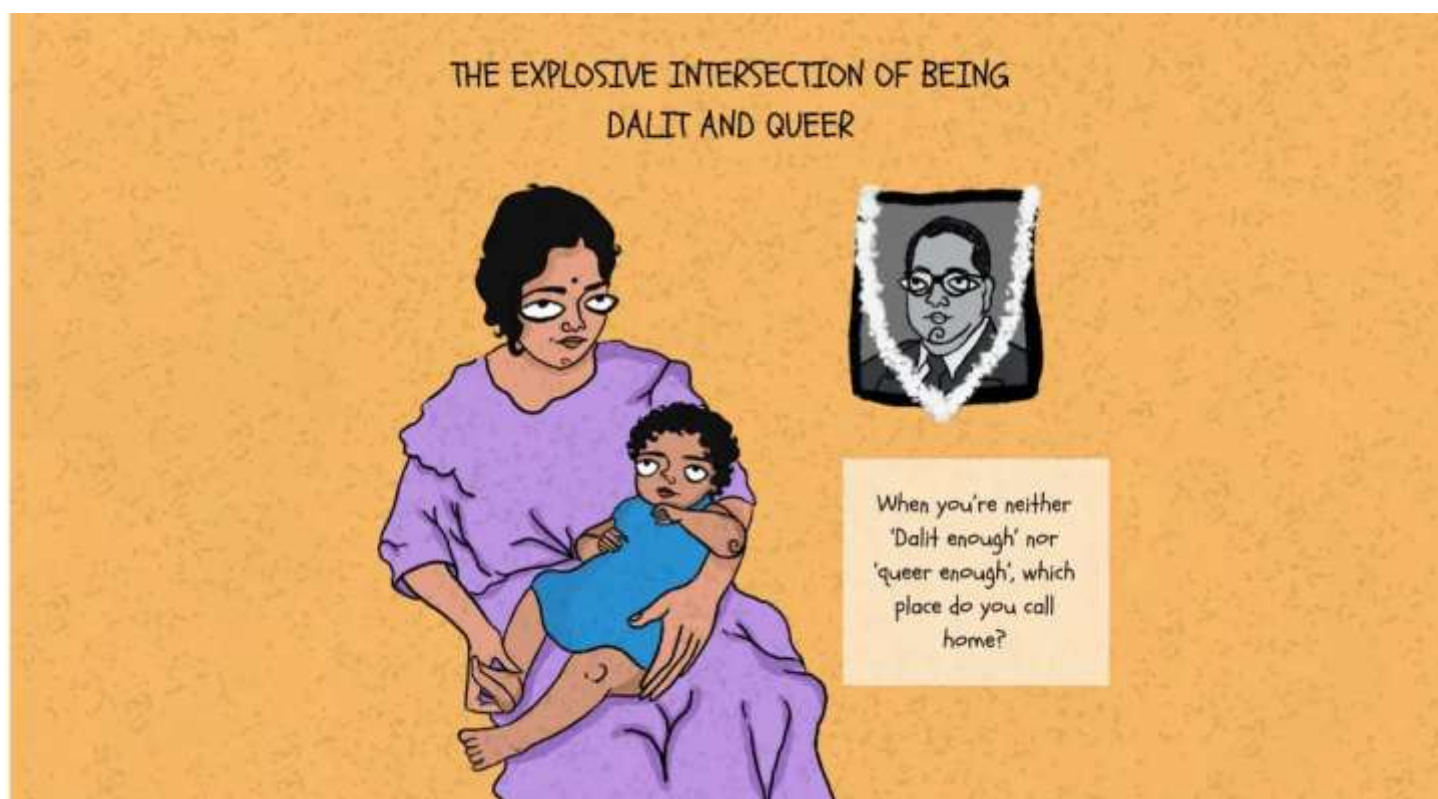
Who is being addressed?

At the same time, the conditions of its production and circulation reveal a familiar tension. The zine's launch within elite urban spaces—reportedly in a five-star venue—and its pricing at Rs.600 per copy place it within a particular circuit of circulation. This is a public already institutionally proximate: English-speaking, urban, and relatively privileged. The project documents exclusion, but its mode of address risks reproducing it. In contrast,

digital platforms such as queerbeat—where illustrated narratives like Shoi’s circulate freely—demonstrate how form and access can reshape who is able to encounter and inhabit these narratives.

This is not a contradiction unique to this project.

It reflects a broader pattern. Queer Dalit assertion has often had to pass through dominant publics in order to become visible at all—whether in courts, media, academia, or cultural institutions. Speaking “upwards” becomes a condition of being heard. But when articulation remains confined to that direction, it can leave other publics—those most directly implicated—partially unaddressed.



From an illustrated narrative by Shoi on the digital platform, queerbeat. | Photo Credit: By special arrangement

The contrast with digital platforms is instructive here. Projects such as queerbeat, including illustrated narratives like Shoi’s, circulate freely and accessibly, reaching audiences beyond institutional or elite spaces. Their form—visual, immediate, and digitally available—allows for a different mode of engagement. They demonstrate that circulation need not be restricted by format or price in order to produce visibility.

The question, then, is not whether one form is preferable to another, but how address is structured.

If earlier moments (such as my affidavit in 2007) were necessarily directed towards a single institution, and later interventions (such as *Pride*) towards specific publics, the present offers a different possibility. Articulation need not be singular in its direction. It can be multiple.

A project can speak to courts, to media, to academic audiences, and to community spaces—not sequentially, but simultaneously. This might involve choices that appear logistical but are, in fact, political: where a work is launched, how it is priced, whether it circulates digitally as well as in print, and which languages and forms it adopts.

These decisions shape not only who encounters a work, but also who is able to recognise themselves within it. The challenge, then, is not only to produce visibility, but also to consider how that visibility travels—and whom it reaches.

Limits of “dual oppression”

If *Pride* makes visibility possible, media and cultural production determines what survives of it. Over the past decade, journalism, film, and digital platforms have expanded the range of queer Dalit presence in the public sphere. Stories that might once have remained local or fleeting now circulate widely. They are archived, shared, and revisited. In this sense, visibility acquires a certain durability.

But durability is not the same as transformation. What circulates is shaped by selection. Media does not simply reflect reality; it organises it. It chooses which lives to foreground, which narratives to repeat, and which forms of experience are most easily recognisable to its audiences.

Some figures come to stand in for broader histories. Others remain at the margins of that representation, even when their experiences are no less significant. This unevenness is not always visible on the surface. It operates through familiar narrative patterns.

Queer Dalit lives are often framed through stories of adversity—of exclusion from family, humiliation within institutions, or marginalisation within queer spaces themselves. These

accounts are important, and often necessary. They make visible forms of violence that might otherwise remain unspoken. But they also risk narrowing how such lives are understood.

When experience is repeatedly framed as suffering, it becomes easier to recognise pain than to engage with analysis. The subject appears as someone to be empathised with, rather than as someone producing knowledge about the structures that shape that experience.

This distinction becomes even more pronounced in cultural production. Consider the growing presence of queer Dalit characters and narratives in digital media and film. These representations matter. They bring into view lives that have long been absent from mainstream storytelling. They expand what can be seen and imagined. At the same time, they are shaped by the conditions under which they are produced.



A still from Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi*. | Photo Credit: By special arrangement

Decisions about casting, authorship, language, and distribution all influence how a story is told—and how it is received. In Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi*, the protagonist may be written as female, Dalit, and queer. Yet the framework through which that identity becomes legible is mediated by institutional and aesthetic choices—of authorship, casting, and production—that remain unevenly distributed, including a Dalit male filmmaker working within a Savarna-dominated industry, and a Savarna actor such as Konkona Sen Sharma inhabiting the protagonist role.

Recognition, in such cases, is real, but it is also structured.

One of the most persistent ways in which this structuring appears is through what is often described as “dual oppression.” The idea is familiar: that to be Dalit and queer is to experience two forms of oppression, which combine to produce a compounded disadvantage.

This arithmetic appears in cultural representation as well. In a poignant scene of self-disclosure in *Geeli Pucchi*, the protagonist remarks: “You already know half my truth.” This divides her identity into caste and sexuality as separable components that can be revealed in parts.

The film performs an important act of representation. Yet its narrative also reflects the limits of this framing. By presenting identity as divisible, it simplifies what is, in lived experience, inseparable. The result is a form of legibility that travels easily, but at the cost of analytic depth.

The formulation is compelling because it is easy to grasp. It offers a clear way of naming layered exclusion. But it also simplifies. It suggests that caste and sexuality operate as separable axes—distinct elements that can be added together. In doing so, it risks missing how deeply entangled these structures are. Caste does not simply sit alongside gender or sexuality; it shapes how both are lived, recognised, and regulated. The same is true in reverse.

To think of marginalisation as additive is to adopt a kind of arithmetic that mirrors the very systems that produce these categories in the first place.

Legal, administrative, and cultural institutions often require identities to be stabilised into discrete forms. They work through classification—through naming, grouping, and separating. The language of “dual oppression,” while politically useful in some contexts, can unintentionally reproduce this logic.

What it leaves out is the complexity of lived experience—how caste, gender, sexuality, labour, and language are not simply layered, but co-constituted. This becomes visible in moments when individuals are recognised in one frame but not in another. One may be

seen as queer within certain spaces, but not as Dalit. Or recognised as Dalit within caste discourse, but not as queer. The fragmentation is not accidental. It reflects the limits of the frameworks through which recognition is organised.

Over time, these fragments disperse rather than accumulate; they may return, but they do not necessarily cohere.

Building enduring recognition

Looking back over 20 years, what stands out is not simply the expansion of visibility, but its instability.

There are more platforms now. More stories, more names, more moments of recognition. What was once difficult to say in public can now be articulated across media, academia, and culture. And yet, this expansion has not resolved the problem of recognition. Visibility does not accumulate on its own; it must be structured.

What the past two decades show is that recognition fragments when it is addressed to only one audience at a time. The courtroom hears one version. Activism produces another. Media records a third. Each articulation travels—but only partially, and often without arriving where it is most needed.

Coming out, in this sense, is not only about disclosure. It is about address. Who one speaks to—and how many publics are engaged at once—shapes whether recognition endures or dissipates. If earlier moments were necessarily singular in their direction—an affidavit to the court, an essay to activist networks—the present offers a different possibility. Articulation can be designed to move across multiple spaces simultaneously.

This is not an abstract proposition. It is a matter of practice. A text can circulate in more than one form—print and digital. A project can be launched in more than one location—elite and accessible. A narrative can speak not only upwards to dominant publics, but also laterally and inward, to those whose lives it reflects.

These are decisions about form, access, and circulation. But they are also decisions about politics. They determine whether visibility remains episodic or begins to endure.

Twenty years on, the lesson is not that recognition has failed. It is that recognition does not stabilise on its own. It must be built—across audiences, across institutions, and across the boundaries that otherwise keep these worlds apart.

This requires more than visibility. It requires forms of articulation that do not remain confined to a single domain—legal, activist, academic, or cultural—but move across them. Without this, what appears will continue to disperse. With it, recognition may begin to endure.

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