

News

Seen, then forgotten: The limits of queer visibility in India

For caste-marginalised queer voices, visibility often arrives as a moment, not a condition. It's endurance, not appearance, that remains deeply unequal.



Participants carry a large rainbow flag during a Pride march in India. Image for Representation

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Across queer public life in India, visibility is often treated as a political achievement in itself. Marches, performances, and moments of collective presence are taken as signs of inclusion and progress. Yet visibility alone does not determine whose presence endures, accumulates authority, or enters collective memory. These outcomes are shaped by infrastructure —

Take, for instance, the Delhi Queer Pride, which from its inception in 2008 to its most recent iteration this month has presented itself as community-led and institution-free, consciously distancing itself from sponsorships and formal organisational control. This self-understanding has shaped Pride's political imagination, where visibility is expected to emerge from community participation rather than through institutions.

This tension becomes especially clear when Pride is read alongside recent queer Dalit cultural projects, particularly the collaborative zine *Across the Nala*. Produced through an international research grant and launched through a university programme, the zine documents Dalit, queer, and Bahujan narratives in Delhi, tracing how caste, sexuality, and class shape everyday life in the city. It brings forward voices negotiating belonging in spaces where visibility is never guaranteed.

At the same time, the zine exposes a structural tension within queer public life. It exists through precisely the kinds of institutional frameworks Pride has historically sought to keep at a distance. Produced in English, launched at a university venue located within a five-star hotel complex, and priced at Rs 600, the project is shaped by conditions of access that determine who it reaches and how it circulates. These choices are not incidental. They place the zine within academic, institutional, and globally legible publics, rather than the open and transient publics through which Pride typically moves.

This contrast matters, because the infrastructures that make critique visible and legible are unevenly distributed within queer public life itself.

Visibility without infrastructure

The first major public articulation of queer Dalit visibility within Delhi Pride took place in 2015, when three participants publicly asserted caste identity alongside queerness through placards, speeches, and performance. The moment was powerful precisely because it was exceptional. But repeating such interventions would have required sustained coordination, institutional memory, and infrastructural support — resources that Pride, by design, has not consistently built.

intersectional experiences can be documented over time. Institutional frameworks provide access to venues, materials, networks, and time — the slower resources needed for sustained storytelling.

The material form of the zine makes this reality visible. Printed on thick, stiff paper with a tight spine, the publication discourages casual browsing. Portions of text and image sit deep within the binding, requiring deliberate engagement. These physical qualities mirror the social conditions of access around the project: structured, selective, and mediated. This is not accidental. Material design, venue, language, and price together shape who can engage with critique, and in what ways.

Where *Pride* operates through performance, movement, and relational visibility, projects like *Across the Nala* work through documentation, legibility, and carefully curated publics. Each produces visibility differently. Each also excludes differently.

This is not a critique of intent. The zine performs important archival and narrative work, documenting experiences that have long remained marginal even within queer spaces. It builds on decades of queer Dalit storytelling and activism. But its existence also underlines a broader point: visibility is never just about being present. It depends on infrastructure — who has access to time, money, venues, materials, and institutional legitimacy.

The irony here is structural rather than personal. *Pride's* emphasis on community ownership and distance from institutions limits its ability to sustain archival and reflective critique. Institutional projects make detailed articulation possible, but they also reproduce inequalities in access, audience, and participation.

Unequal endurance

Together, these formats reveal something deeper about queer public life in India. Inclusion is not shaped only by ideology or intent. It is shaped through infrastructures — material, institutional, linguistic, and economic — that determine which voices circulate, which are archived, and which appear only in passing.

continuity. Visibility opens briefly, then closes, leaving behind no institutional memory, no accumulated authority, and no durable trace.

The burden of renewal falls again and again on the same bodies, who must restage their presence each time recognition becomes possible. When infrastructures fail to meet — when movement spaces reject institutions and institutional projects bypass mass publics — intersectional visibility remains fragile. What is lost is not only inclusion, but the ability of critique to endure, to travel, and to be remembered as part of queer public life rather than as an exception.

When Pride cannot sustain its own interventions

Moments like the 2015 Pride intervention matter precisely because they are fragile, temporary, and risky. But their rarity also points to the need for spaces that can sustain critique over time. Cultural projects, institutional archives, and mediated publications can offer continuity where movement spaces often produce fleeting visibility.

Understanding this distinction matters as queer public life continues to expand in India. Visibility is not neutral. It is produced through infrastructures that distribute recognition unevenly. Pride and institutional cultural production do not represent opposing political futures; they represent different ways in which visibility is produced, stabilised, and remembered.

Recognising this interplay allows for a more honest conversation about inclusion, representation, and power — not only between queer and caste politics, but within queer public life itself. It shifts attention away from momentary visibility and towards the conditions that allow critique to last. Without addressing how infrastructures distribute endurance unevenly, queer public life risks repeating cycles of recognition that are vivid but short-lived — inclusive in appearance, yet unstable in memory.

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