

The Gender We Perform: Non-Binary Narratives in Contemporary Indian Theatre

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Abstract

Theatre has historically been an agency for the exploration of identity, but Indian theatre in the twenty-first century is increasingly subverting strict gender binaries, providing an exciting platform for non-binary performance. *Performing Gender: Non-Binary Identities in Contemporary Indian Theatre* looks at the way that contemporary performance texts unpick conventional ideas of gender and create mobile identities on stage. Though Indian myth and folk have long acknowledged gender variation via the presence of characters such as Ardhanarishvara, Shikhandi, and transgender performance culture, twenty-first-century theatre recasts those stories in updated socio-political frameworks. This paper primarily focuses on recent Indian plays that centre on non-binary identities, including Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, which unveils the marginalisation of transgender communities, and Abhishek Majumdar's *Kaumudi*, which subverts rigid gendered storytelling structures. Additionally, it analyses Manjula Padmanabhan's *Hidden Fires*, Rudradeep Chakraborty's *Beyond Binary*, and other experimental works that deconstruct heteronormative frameworks. Through a critical reading of these works, the paper examines how Indian theatre functions as a space of resistance as well as a form of reimagining gender outside of the binary. Beyond text analysis, this research also investigates the changing role of non-binary performers, directors, and performance-makers who are reshaping the theatrical landscapes of India. It explores the ways in which immersive theatre, online performances, and alternative storytelling platforms expand non-binary voices, often sidestepping institutional obstacles. Yet, even as it documents these advances, the paper also questions the obstacles that face non-binary performers and stories, whether conservative society push-back, marginalisation from mainstream theatre, or the commodification of queer identity on stage. By braiding play analysis, performance studies, and sociocultural critique, this essay hopes to illuminate the radical potential of theatre to remake gender fluidity discourses in contemporary India. It suggests that Indian theatre is not only responding to changing times but playing a crucial role in breaking the gender binary, making room for inclusive and representative depictions.

Keywords: Non-Binary Identities, Contemporary Indian Theatre, Gender Fluidity, Resistance, Performance Studies

Published: 23 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301142>

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Introduction

Theatre has been a reflection of society itself for ages, displaying its norms, its values, and its contradictions. In Indian theatre, too, theatre has been a powerful tool for examining and disrupting societal constructs, such as gender. The twenty-first century has seen the flowering of plays questioning and deconstructing the traditional gender binary, presenting sophisticated representations of the non-binary self. This essay explores the ways in which current Indian theatre speaks and acts non-binary, considering the relation between performance, identity, and cultural norms.

Body, Desire, and Politics in Performance

In the modern theatrical context, specifically in the arena of Indian theatre that negotiates non-binary stories, the body is not just a location of performance but is more than that, a site of resistance, a subversive canvas, and a cultural metaphor. The body is not passively acted upon but actively enacts identity, desire, and dissent.

In capitalist and patriarchal systems, the body, particularly the gender-nonconforming or feminine body, has already been commodified and objectified. It becomes reduced to mere visual spectacle, devoid of self-agency, and consumed according to heteronormative sexual desire. Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997) famously contended that women end up seeing themselves through others' objectifying view, resulting in self-objectification and loss of control. In theatre, objectification in the past has led to the feminised body being either passive or an object of male desire. Today, though, the paradigm is shifting with Indian theatre reasserting the agency of the body, particularly when embodied by and for queer and non-binary bodies.

Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity, where gender is not a fixed state of being but rather a repeated set of actions, is central to understanding how non-binary theatre engages with desire and embodiment. Desire, traditionally understood through a heteronormative lens, is not merely a private emotion but a culturally encoded script. In non-binary and queer theatre, this script is rewritten. Desire becomes political. The act of expressing queer or homosocial longing on stage disrupts the dominant heteropatriarchal narrative and insists on visibility for marginalised bodies and pleasures.

This interplay between body, desire, and performance is not merely conceptual; it is deeply manifest in how narratives are staged. The performances challenge the assumption that sexual desire must conform to rigid binaries. They reveal how desire, when de-linked from heteronormative narratives, can create new forms of intimacy, community, and representation. They foreground that while desire is often perceived as personal, its staging is inherently political, especially in societies where expressions of non-normative love and longing are still policed or silenced.

In addition, modern Indian theatre is tackling desire ever more intensely through novel means, immersive theatre, site-specific works, and digital narratives that provide a closer bodily connection between performer and viewer. Such formats tend to dismantle the hierarchical

distance between performer and audience, closing the politics of the body to the spectator both physically and symbolically.

The body politics in these theatre contexts is its refusal to be silenced or sanitised. It demands to take up space, feel pain and pleasure, and speak stories of desire that have been relegated to the periphery. The human body, previously used as a symbol or thing, is now found to be a living, sensing repository of history, trauma, identity, and hope.

The theatre stage, in this sense, is a field of visibility where the body resists both the commodification of desire and the annihilation of its nuance. Performers redefine being seen, desiring, and being desired through gestures, movement, and presence. The new politics of being is therefore enacted by the contemporary Indian non-binary theatre that does not simply narrate but performs.

Historical and Mythological Context

Indian folklore and mythology have long recognised gender variance. Ardhanarishvara, a merge of Parvati and Shiva, represents the merging of masculine and feminine energies. Shikhandi, who is born a woman but lives as a male warrior in the Mahabharata, defies the conventional roles of gender. These accounts indicate an ancient recognition of gender fluidity in Indian society.

Nonetheless, colonisation and the enforcement of Western norms of gender caused non-binary identities to be pushed to the periphery. Criminalisation of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions by the British colonial state helped perpetuate the stigmatisation of communities like the hijras. Indian theatre today aims to reclaim and reinterpret these narratives, placing them in contemporary socio-political realities.

Contemporary Indian Theatre and Non-Binary Identities

Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire

Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) is a seminal work that brings the experiences of the hijra community to the forefront. The play follows Uma Rao, a sociology researcher, as she investigates the murder of Kamla, a hijra. Through Uma's journey, the play exposes the systemic discrimination and violence faced by hijras in Indian society.

Dattani portrays the hijras not as caricatures but as individuals with desires, emotions, and agency. The play challenges the audience to confront their own biases and the societal structures that perpetuate marginalisation. As Dattani notes, "I write about people who are not heard" (Dattani, 2000), emphasising his commitment to giving voice to the voiceless.

Abhishek Majumdar's Kaumudi

Abhishek Majumdar's *Kaumudi* (2014) is a complex exploration of identity, performance, and familial relationships. The play centres on the strained relationship between a father and son, both theatre practitioners, and delves into themes of legacy, memory, and the fluidity of identity. While not explicitly focused on non-binary identities, *Kaumudi* employs meta-theatrical techniques to question the rigidity of roles, both on stage and in life. The play

suggests that identity is not fixed but is continually constructed and reconstructed through performance. Majumdar's work invites audiences to reflect on the performative aspects of their own identities.

Manjula Padmanabhan's Hidden Fires

Hidden Fires (2003) by Manjula Padmanabhan is a collection of monologues written in response to the 2002 Gujarat riots. The monologues give voice to individuals affected by communal violence, highlighting the intersectionality of identity, including gender, religion, and class. Padmanabhan's work underscores the vulnerability of marginalised communities during times of crisis. The monologues reveal how societal structures often fail to protect those who do not conform to dominant norms. By centring these voices, Hidden Fires challenges audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about societal complicity in perpetuating violence and exclusion.

Rudradeep Chakraborty's Beyond Binary

Rudradeep Chakraborty's Beyond Binary is a contemporary play that explicitly addresses non-binary identities. The play follows the journey of a protagonist who navigates the complexities of gender identity, societal expectations, and self-acceptance.

Beyond Binary employs innovative storytelling techniques, including nonlinear narratives and audience interaction, to immerse viewers in the protagonist's experience. The play emphasises the importance of self-definition and the right to exist beyond prescribed categories. Chakraborty's work contributes to the growing body of Indian theatre that centres non-binary narratives.

Shikhandi: The Story of the In-Betweens

Written and directed by Faezeh Jalali, Shikhandi is a riotous, irreverent, and poignant retelling of the Mahabharata character who is neither man nor woman. Rather than presenting Shikhandi as a passive, tragic figure, Jalali reclaims the character as a powerful metaphor for the "in-betweens", those who do not conform to normative gender identities. The play uses drag, movement, and satirical humour to both celebrate and question traditional gender narratives. In one striking moment, the character addresses the audience directly:

"I am not your metaphor. I am not your symbol. I am real. I live in your discomfort."

This line encapsulates the crux of the play's politics; it refuses to render gender fluidity as a mystical or symbolic element and instead asserts its lived, embodied reality. The use of physical theatre, absurdist dialogue, and stylised movement allows Shikhandi to transcend mere representation and engage in active deconstruction.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Even with the progress made in depicting non-binary identities onstage, there are a number of issues left to contend with. Non-binary artists frequently find themselves excluded from mainstream casting, stereotyped into tokenistic roles or simply ignored altogether based on entrenched biases. Theatre venues, particularly those with institutional or state-based origins,

are still under the dominant influence of cis-heteronormative views, with limited space for genuine representation.

In addition, it is also raising concerns regarding the commodification of non-binary and queer identities. With theatre embracing more "diversity" to add its liberal gloss, a few shows find themselves commodifying non-binary figures as symbolic icons instead of developed human beings. Activist and scholar Alok Vaid-Menon cautions against this impulse, observing that "visibility without structural change can become a trap." This caution rings especially true in a cultural landscape where non-binary identities are at once celebrated and exoticised, yet in many ways remain unseen in the quotidian.

Encouraging signs of change do exist, though. Independent theatre collectives and queer performance festivals, like the Queer Ink initiatives and Nirantar Theatre in Mumbai, are building more inclusive artistic spaces. These projects not only cast non-binary performers but also place the spotlight on their stories through devised performance, site-specific installations, and community outreach. Online spaces and digital performances amidst the pandemic have also opened up access, letting performers extend their reach to more people without the geography or gatekeeper limitations.

The coming onto the scene of such artists as Alex Mathew (aka Maya the Drag Queen), Mallika Taneja, and others, who transgress normative scripts through autobiographical performance, storytelling, and satire, is changing the way gender is understood and represented on the Indian stage. These performers are not merely playing characters, they are also redoing the very grammar of performance by turning down binary strictures.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian theatre is witnessing a paradigm shift, a movement from the margins to the centre for non-binary voices. By challenging conventional narrative structures, experimenting with performative forms, and bringing deeply personal stories into public consciousness, the theatre becomes both a mirror and a weapon. It reflects society's ongoing engagement with gender while simultaneously dismantling the very scaffolding of gendered oppression.

Through works like *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Kaumudi*, *Hidden Fires*, and *Beyond Binary*, this paper has traced how non-binary identities are not merely represented but embodied, affirmed, and imagined anew. These plays do not just offer inclusion; they provoke transformation of the stage, of the audience, and of the society that frames them.

As Indian theatre continues to expand its boundaries, it holds the potential to not only tell stories of the non-binary experience but also to become a space where the gender binary is no longer the norm. In doing so, it moves closer to the utopia that queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz envisioned, a horizon of possibility where identity is unfixed, expansive, and beautifully uncontainable.

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