

# Unseen and Unheard: Queer Representation in Indian Education

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, conversations surrounding gender identity and queer rights in India have gained increasing public and legal visibility. However, several laws such as the Transgender Persons framework claim to safeguard the rights and dignity of transgender individuals, their implementation has been criticised for reinforcing restrictive understandings of gender through increased reliance on biological, medical, and bureaucratic forms of validation, weakening the principle of self-identification. The marginalisation of queer identities is structural, sustained through gaps in awareness, understanding, and representation. Educational institutions play a central role in shaping social values and collective understanding. This study examines LGBTQIA+ representation and queer invisibility within Indian secondary education, with particular attention to NCERT English literature curricula and classroom experiences. A mixed-methods approach combined student and teacher surveys, semi-structured interviews, peer-group discussion, and content analysis of NCERT English textbooks for Classes IX to XII. The findings indicate limited explicit representation of queer identities, widespread perceptions of unsupportive classroom environments, frequent exposure to queerphobic jokes or language, and limited teacher training and institutional support. Curriculum analysis further suggests that the presence of some queer authors does not necessarily translate into meaningful classroom engagement with queer identities or experiences. Qualitative responses indicate that structured engagement with queer literature can encourage empathy, reflection, and greater awareness among students. Although the study is limited by its relatively small and context-specific sample, the findings support greater curricular contextualization, age-appropriate inclusion, teacher preparation, and explicit institutional measures addressing discrimination. The study concludes that meaningful representation can contribute to more informed and inclusive educational environments.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQIA+ education; queer representation; Indian education; NCERT curriculum; inclusive education; heteronormativity; secondary education

## 1. Introduction

### Unseen and Unheard: Queer Representation in Indian Education

In India, the educational system continues to be overwhelmingly heteronormative, with school curricula leaving out LGBTQIA+ topics, particularly within the CBSE curriculum, where literature textbooks do not adequately address queer identities or experiences (or fail to).

*"I was thirteen years old when my history class was studying Nazism and the Holocaust. During a classroom discussion on the groups targeted under Hitler's regime, students identified Jewish people, disabled individuals, and people of colour. I added queer individuals to the discussion, referencing the documented persecution of LGBTQIA+ people under Nazi rule. In response, a student stated that if Hitler had attempted to eliminate gay people, then he considered himself a supporter of Hitler. The remark was met with silence. The teacher did not intervene, challenge the statement, or acknowledge its implications in any way.*

*At the time, I was closeted, and the incident instilled a level of fear that extended far beyond the classroom discussion itself. What frightened me was not only the open expression of violent prejudice, but the realisation that it could be voiced so casually, publicly, and without consequence."*

This incident is one of several that take place regularly.

It is not unusual for slurs to be thrown around flippantly, and terms like "gay" and "lesbian" are used as insults in classrooms. For LGBTQIA+ youth, the absence of

representation and open dialogue in education often translates into feelings of isolation, unacceptance, and even fear.

According to a UNESCO study, 84% of LGBTQIA+ school students in Tamil Nadu reported facing bullying, including verbal, physical, and social harassment. Authorities often dismiss or ignore these incidents, further alienating LGBTQIA+ students and normalizing stigma.

In this paper, I aim to examine the gaps in LGBTQIA+ representation within India's educational curriculum. Through interviews with students, teachers, surveys, peer group discussions and a review of existing research, I have highlighted the neglect of queer identities, the consequences of this exclusion- including bullying, harassment, and the lack of comprehensive teacher training.

## 2. Literature Review

1) Gaye Tuchman's *Theory of Symbolic Annihilation* (1978) offers a useful framework for understanding how the absence or distortion of marginalized groups in cultural texts contributes to their social invisibility. In the context of queer representation, this theory explains how repeated exclusion from mainstream literature and curriculum does not function as a neutral omission, but as a meaningful form of erasure. When LGBTQIA+ identities are absent from texts that are treated as authoritative or educational, they are effectively positioned as peripheral, abnormal, or unworthy of inclusion. Even when queer characters do appear in mainstream literature, they are frequently represented through stereotypes, tragedy, deviance, or moral punishment rather than as complex human subjects. This pattern reflects broader

cultural discomfort with non-normative sexualities and genders, and it reinforces the idea that queerness exists outside what is considered “normal” or socially valuable.

2) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) further deepens this analysis by showing how Western cultural and literary systems are structured through rigid binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual and normal/deviant. These binaries shape what can be said, known, and represented within dominant discourse, and they help explain why queer identities remain so difficult to integrate into mainstream literary and educational spaces. Sedgwick’s argument is especially relevant to curriculum because it reveals that exclusion is not only a matter of physical absence, but also of epistemic limitation: queer identities are often made unintelligible within the very frameworks that define legitimacy and knowledge. As a result, literary canons tend to privilege texts that conform to dominant norms, while queer narratives are pushed to the margins or treated as secondary, exceptional, or unsuitable for educational use. This makes the classroom not merely a site of content delivery, but a site where social norms about sexuality are reproduced and normalized.

3) A systematic review of research on *K–12 LGBTQ+ curriculum in the United States* (2022) demonstrates that queer inclusion in schooling remains limited, uneven, and highly dependent on institutional context. The research shows that prescribed curricula continue to centre heterosexual relationships, cisgender identities, and traditional family structures, while LGBTQ+ identities remain absent or peripheral. Where inclusion does occur, it is often restricted to optional reading, individual teacher initiative, or isolated texts that function as token additions rather than as part of a sustained curricular commitment. The review also identifies recurring barriers to inclusion, including fear of backlash, self-censorship among educators, and the absence of consistent policy frameworks requiring queer-inclusive content. These findings suggest that curriculum is not simply a neutral academic structure, but a mechanism of cultural reproduction that continues to focus on and emphasise heterosexuality and cisnormativity while rendering other identities invisible.

4) The NCERT manual *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes* represents an attempt to address transgender inclusion within Indian schooling, but it has also been criticized for serious conceptual and factual limitations. The manual conflates transgender identities with intersex conditions, does not clearly distinguish between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, and omits key issues such as gender dysphoria. It has also been criticized for reproducing stigmatizing assumptions and for suggesting approaches that risk medicalizing and dehumanizing transgender bodies. Rather than providing educators with a precise and affirming framework, the manual risks deepening confusion at a moment when clarity and sensitivity are essential. This is especially significant because teacher training materials shape how identity is discussed in classrooms; when such materials are imprecise or insensitive, they can reinforce misunderstanding rather than challenge it. In this sense, the NCERT manual illustrates the limitations of inclusion efforts

that do not fully engage with the lived realities and distinctions within gender-diverse communities.

5) *NEP 2020* repeatedly emphasizes “inclusive” and “equitable” education, its engagement with queer identities remains limited and largely implicit. The policy relies heavily on broad terminology such as “disadvantaged groups” and “inclusion” without explicitly addressing LGBTQIA+ students, homophobia, transphobia, or heteronormativity within educational spaces. There has been limited systemic implementation of queer-inclusive measures in areas such as curriculum reform, teacher training, anti-bullying protections, mental health support, and institutional accountability.

6) Leung et al. in *Social Support in Schools and Related Outcomes for LGBTQ Youth: A Scoping Review* (2022) provides a comprehensive scoping review of 94 studies examining social support systems for LGBTQ youth in educational settings. Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the authors identify seven major sources of support, including family, peers, teachers, school policies, curriculum, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), and overall school climate. The review demonstrates that LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and supportive school environments are associated with improved academic engagement, psychological well-being, school belonging, and perceptions of safety among queer students. Conversely, heteronormative curricula, inadequate teacher training, and exclusionary school cultures contribute to victimization, isolation, and poor educational outcomes. The review highlights how curriculum functions as a form of institutional support, validating LGBTQ identities and reducing feelings of invisibility.

7) Muñoz Manzaba and García Ramírez with *Homophobic Bullying in Schools Globally: A Systematic Review* (2025) conduct a systematic review of fifty international studies on homophobic bullying in schools published between 2020 and 2025. The review identifies homophobic bullying as a structural problem embedded within educational institutions, manifesting through verbal harassment, social exclusion, physical aggression, and cyberbullying. The authors argue that heteronormative curricula, inadequate teacher preparation, and the absence of inclusive school policies contribute significantly to the persistence of discrimination against LGBTQ+ students. The study further demonstrates that such experiences negatively affect students’ self-esteem, mental health, academic performance, and sense of belonging within schools. Importantly, the review highlights inclusive curricula, emotional education programs, and sustained teacher training as effective interventions for reducing prejudice and creating safer learning environments.

8) *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (Narain & Bhan, 2005) is a foundational collection of essays examining the development of queer politics within the Indian socio-cultural and legal context. The contributors argue that LGBTQIA+ experiences in India cannot be understood through sexuality alone, but must instead be analysed alongside intersecting structures such as caste, class, religion, language, gender, and regional identity. The collection critiques the tendency to universalize Western understandings of queerness, demonstrating how Indian queer experiences are shaped by distinct social, familial, and institutional

realities. It further highlights the role of educational and legal institutions in reinforcing heteronormative assumptions by privileging certain identities while marginalizing others. By emphasizing lived experience and structural inequality, the collection presents queer exclusion as a product of broader systems of power rather than individual prejudice alone.

9) Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012) provides an important framework for understanding how educational institutions participate in reproducing dominant social norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Menon argues that institutions such as schools, families, and legal systems do not merely reflect existing inequalities, but actively construct and legitimize ideas of what is considered "normal" through everyday practices, language, and knowledge production. She further demonstrates that heteronormativity cannot be understood independently of broader structures such as caste, class, patriarchy, and religion, all of which shape whose identities are recognized and whose remain marginalized. Menon situates the exclusion of queer identities within a wider system of social reproduction that privilege heterosexuality and traditional family structures.

10) The UNESCO-supported study *Experiences of Bullying in Schools: A Survey among Sexual/Gender Minority Youth in Tamil Nadu* (2018) examines the prevalence and educational consequences of bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Indian schools. Surveying 371 sexual and gender minority youth alongside interviews with students and educators, the study found that bullying was widespread across all stages of schooling, with physical violence, verbal harassment, and sexual harassment emerging as common forms of victimization. The findings demonstrate that such experiences have significant educational consequences: 70% of respondents reported anxiety or depression, 70% experienced difficulty concentrating on their studies, 63% reported a decline in academic performance, and one-third identified bullying as a major factor contributing to school dropout. The study also revealed considerable institutional shortcomings, with only 18% of students reporting incidents to school authorities. It recommends teacher training, anti-bullying policies, inclusive curricula, and accessible reporting mechanisms, reinforcing the present study's argument that meaningful institutional intervention is essential to creating safer and more inclusive educational environments.

11) Surabhi Shukla's *"Sex is Voldemort": A Qualitative Study to Understand the Experiences of Queer Students during Their School Life in India* (2017) is one of the first qualitative studies to examine the lived experiences of queer students within Indian K-12 education. Using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and grounded theory, the study argues that bullying in Indian schools is rooted less in students' actual sexual orientation than in their perceived deviation from socially accepted gender norms. Gender non-conforming students were routinely subjected to verbal, physical, sexual, and relational bullying by peers, teachers, and school administrators, regardless of how they identified. Shukla further demonstrates that Indian schools function as "sex-negative" spaces, where discussions surrounding sexuality are actively avoided, comprehensive sexuality education is absent, and institutional mechanisms to address

queerphobic bullying are largely nonexistent. Rather than viewing these experiences as isolated incidents, the study argues that heteronormativity is embedded within school culture itself, normalizing discrimination while discouraging meaningful institutional intervention. These findings closely support the present study by illustrating how curricular silence, inadequate teacher preparedness, and the absence of explicit anti-bullying policies collectively contribute to the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ students in Indian schools.

### Research Gap

While existing research on LGBTQIA+ issues in India has examined themes such as discrimination, mental health, and queer student experiences, there remains limited interdisciplinary research connecting curriculum analysis, educational policy, institutional perspectives, and lived classroom experience within Indian secondary school education. Existing studies often examine these areas in isolation, focusing either on student experiences, teacher attitudes, or policy discourse independently. The aim of this research is to explore this gap.

### Research Questions

The main question asked through this paper is about how NCERT English literature curricula and contemporary educational discourse contribute to the production and normalization of queer invisibility within Indian secondary education. This paper also questions the impact of the lack of queer inclusion among queer and non-queer students, and the impact of queer literature.

### Journey of a Researcher

Throughout school, casual homophobia was never uncommon. There were several incidents, where I had heard death threats, to either one particular queer person or the community as a whole. I remember being shocked by the violence of the statement, but not surprised by its existence. What scared me more than the statement was the silence that followed.

That silence led me to questions that extended beyond individual prejudice. Why were such remarks so rarely questioned? Why were educational spaces, which were meant to encourage empathy and critical thinking so reluctant to intervene?

As I began this research, I found myself returning to these questions repeatedly. The first step was engaging with existing scholarship. Reading research on queer representation, symbolic annihilation, school climates, and LGBTQ+ experiences helped me place my observations within a broader context.

One of the most unexpected and encouraging parts of the process emerged through peer-group discussions. Participants listened carefully to one another, reflected on their own assumptions, and often expressed surprise at how little they had previously considered issues of representation. Given the opportunity to engage openly, people often demonstrated far more compassion and willingness to understand than I had anticipated.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the research came while analysing NCERT English textbooks. I had expected to find

complete absence, but instead discovered something far more complicated. There were several authors that were queer and their texts carried themes that resonated strongly with questions of identity, marginalisation, and resistance. Yet, these were themes that were never addressed in the classroom with relation to queer identity, despite the authors being queer.

One particular example that stood out to me was Adrienne Rich, whose poem *Trees* is included in the curriculum, was a lesbian. It made me revisit the poem through a new lens, where its themes of confinement and liberation acquired deeper meanings. What struck me most was not simply that these connections existed, but that they had never been discussed in any classroom I had been part of. Even when themes of exclusion, social justice, and marginalisation were explicitly addressed, the possibility of connecting them to queer experiences remained absent.

Consequently, this study shifted my understanding of the issue from one of simple omission to one of pedagogical practice and interpretation. The research process reinforced the importance of examining not only curricular content, but also the ways in which that content is taught, contextualised, and discussed.

### 3. Method

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and curriculum analysis. The survey was conducted among students aged 13–17 years (Classes IX–XII) during the 2024–2025 academic year, along with teachers from English and Social Studies departments and members of the school administration. Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative data was gathered through interviews and peer-group discussions. In addition to survey and interview data, a content analysis of NCERT English textbooks prescribed for Classes IX–XII was conducted. All student participants were drawn from English-medium private schools located in an urban setting. The school caters primarily to students from relatively privileged socio-economic backgrounds, with access to educational resources, English-language instruction, and extracurricular opportunities that are not uniformly available across the broader Indian education system. This context is significant because it suggests that the patterns documented in this study cannot be explained solely by resource constraints or lack of educational access. Instead, they indicate that heteronormativity and the absence of meaningful queer representation persist even within comparatively privileged educational environments.

#### Participants

Four distinct participant groups were included in the study: student survey respondents, teacher survey respondents, interview participants, and focus-group participants, were included in the study, with the school's consent. The student survey received 70 anonymous responses from students in Classes IX–XII, aged 13–17 years. The teacher survey received 9 anonymous responses from teachers. The interview sample comprised five students, three girls and two boys, including both queer and non-queer participants, as well as one high-school English teacher, one supervisor

responsible for Classes IX–XII, and one principal. The focus group comprised 10 students from Classes X–XI, including four boys and six girls.

Participants were recruited through school-based invitations and voluntary participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the study before taking part and that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study. Confidentiality was protected by collecting survey responses anonymously and by removing personally identifying information from interview and focus-group data. Any names included in anecdotes or participant accounts are used with informed consent.

#### Assessments and Measures

Two structured questionnaires were administered, one to students and one to teachers. The student questionnaire consisted of 12 closed-ended questions addressing students' perceptions of LGBTQIA+ representation, classroom discussion, and school environments. The teacher questionnaire comprised 6 closed-ended and 4 open-ended questions addressing teachers' perspectives on curriculum, representation, classroom experiences, and institutional support.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students using approximately 6–7 open-ended questions. Interviews with teachers and school supervisors used approximately 8–9 open-ended questions. A focus-group discussion was conducted with 10 high-school students to facilitate discussion of queer themes in literature and students' responses to queer representation. Giovanni's Room served as the primary text discussed during the session.

#### Curriculum Analysis

Alongside the survey and interview data, a content analysis of NCERT English textbooks prescribed for Classes IX–XII was conducted. The analysis examined the presence or absence of LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences, references to sexuality and gender, and opportunities for queer perspectives to be addressed through literary texts and classroom interpretation. The analysis also considered instances in which queer authors or potentially queer themes were present without explicit engagement with queer identities or experiences.

#### Data Analysis

Quantitative survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, with responses summarised through frequencies and percentages. Open-ended survey responses, interview responses, and focus-group discussions were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns concerning representation, classroom discussion, attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ identities, experiences of queerphobic language, and institutional support. The textbook analysis was conducted thematically, identifying explicit and implicit forms of queer representation as well as significant absences or silences within the selected texts. Findings from the quantitative, qualitative, and curriculum components were considered together to identify areas of convergence and divergence across the different sources of data.

### 4. Findings of the Research

### Quantitative Data

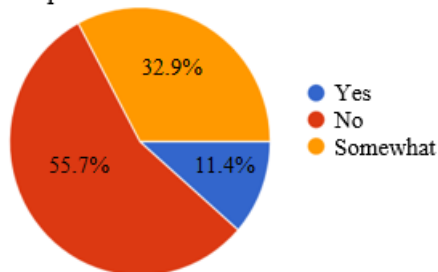
The quantitative survey aimed to examine the visibility of LGBTQIA+ identities within school literature curricula, students' perceptions of representation, classroom attitudes towards queer identities, and the potential impact of increased LGBTQIA+ inclusion within educational spaces.

The first set of questions focused on whether students were exposed to works written by queer authors and whether discussions surrounding these authors acknowledged their identities and experiences.

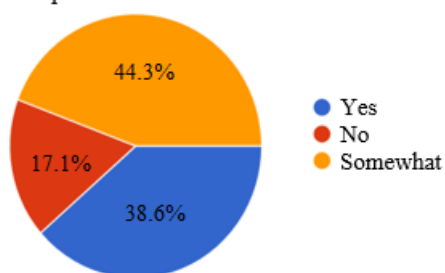
A majority of students (55.7%) reported that their schools do not discuss texts written by LGBTQIA+ authors such as Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, or Virginia Woolf. While 32.9% reported that such texts were discussed to some extent and 11.4% reported regular discussion.

At the same time, among students who reported encountering queer authors within educational settings, none stated that discussions meaningfully addressed the authors' sexuality or the discrimination they may have faced. Instead, 81.8% reported that these topics were not discussed at all, while 18.2% reported limited discussion. These findings suggest that even when queer authors are present within educational spaces, their identities are often ignored or separated from discussions of their work. As a result, representation becomes largely symbolic rather than educationally meaningful. The findings indicate that queer authors remain largely absent from classroom conversations.

**Does your school often discuss texts written by LGBTQIA+ authors (Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf etc)**  
70 responses



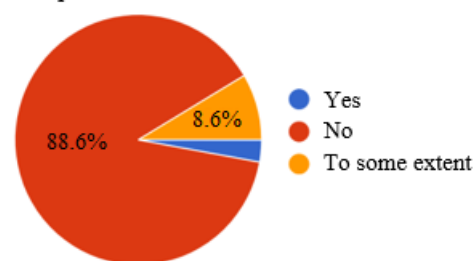
**Have you ever felt that the classroom environment wasn't supportive when discussing LGBTQIA+?**  
70 responses



An overwhelming 88.6% of students reported that the queer community is not represented within the literature curriculum, while only a small minority felt otherwise. Interestingly, this percentage is substantially higher than the percentage of students who reported never encountering queer authors. This

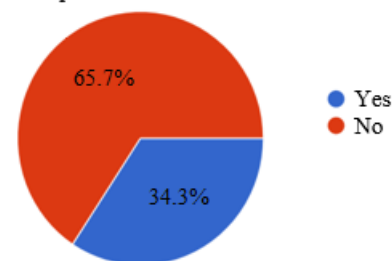
suggests that students may be unaware that some authors included within curricula identify or have been identified as queer. Consequently, representation may technically exist in certain instances but remains largely invisible due to the absence of meaningful discussion surrounding queer identities.

**Do you feel that the queer community is represented in the current literature curriculum?**  
70 responses

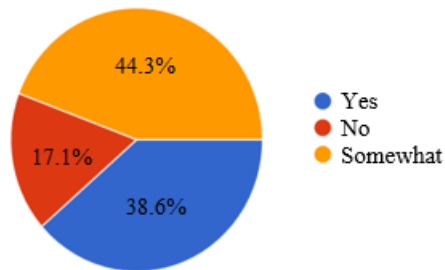


The survey also explored whether school environments were perceived as welcoming towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. A majority of students (65.7%) reported that their classroom environment was not open towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. This indicates that many students perceive school spaces as environments where queer identities remain marginalised or difficult to discuss openly. Similarly, 82.9% of students reported that classroom discussions involving LGBTQIA+ issues were either unsupportive or only somewhat supportive. This finding suggests that even when such topics arise, students often do not perceive classrooms as safe spaces for meaningful discussion. The most striking finding emerged from student observations of peer behaviour. An overwhelming 95.7% of students reported witnessing classmates make jokes or use slurs relating to LGBTQIA+ individuals. The near-universal nature of this response suggests that homophobic and transphobic language remains normalised within many school environments. While students are frequently exposed to negative portrayals of queer identities through peer interactions, they receive comparatively little educational exposure capable of challenging these stereotypes.

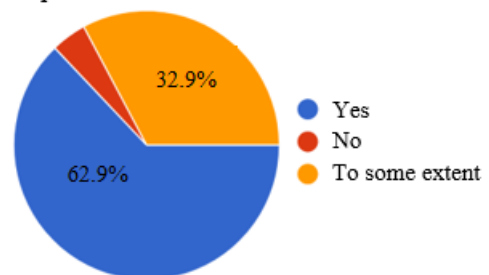
**Do you feel like your classroom environment is open to the LGBTQIA+ community?**  
70 responses



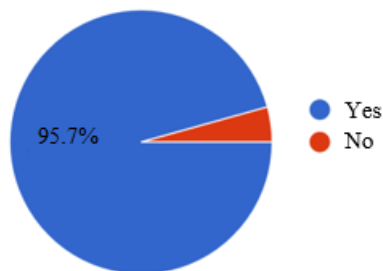
**Have you ever felt that the classroom environment wasn't supportive when discussing LGBTQIA+?**  
70 responses



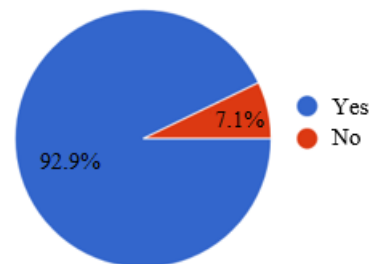
**Do you think the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ literature could create a safer school environment for you and others?**  
70 responses



**Have you noticed any classmates making jokes or using slurs related to LGBTQIA+ topics?**  
70 responses



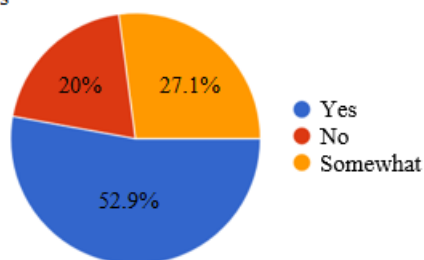
**Do you think learning about LGBTQIA+ authors and their struggles could foster empathy among your classmates?**  
70 responses



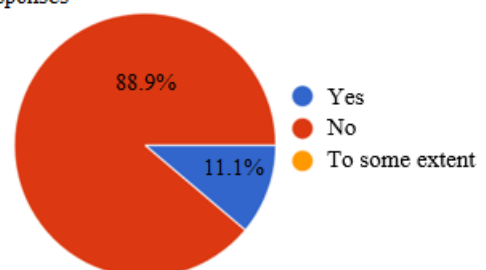
The final section of the student survey examined the perceived benefits of LGBTQIA+ representation within education. Approximately 80% of students reported that earlier exposure to LGBTQIA+ representation would have helped them understand issues relating to gender and sexuality. While this finding is particularly significant for queer students seeking representation and self-understanding, it also demonstrates the broader educational value of inclusive curricula. A substantial 95.8% of students believed that learning about LGBTQIA+ authors and their experiences could foster empathy among classmates. This suggests that students themselves recognise literature as a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes and encouraging understanding. Similarly, 92.9% of students believed that greater LGBTQIA+ representation within literature curricula could contribute to safer school environments. Taken together, these findings indicate that students view representation not merely as symbolic inclusion but as a practical means of improving school culture and reducing prejudice.

Teacher responses largely reinforced these findings. When asked whether the current curriculum adequately represented diverse identities, 88.9% of teachers responded negatively. This demonstrates a strong consensus among educators that current literature curricula fail to reflect the diversity of identities present within contemporary society. All teachers surveyed agreed that discussing the personal experiences and struggles of LGBTQIA+ authors was important to at least some extent, with 66.7% describing it as explicitly important. This suggests that educators recognise the educational value of contextualising literary works through discussions of identity and lived experience.

**If these curriculum changes would've been implemented earlier, do you think they would've helped you understand your gender and sexual identity?**  
70 responses

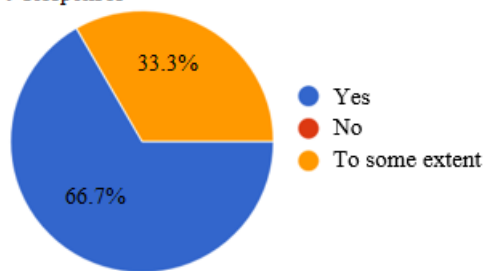


**Do you think discussing the personal struggle of LGBTQIA+ authors is important?**  
9 Responses



**Do you feel the current curriculum adequately represents diverse identities, including LGBTQIA+ voices**

9 Responses

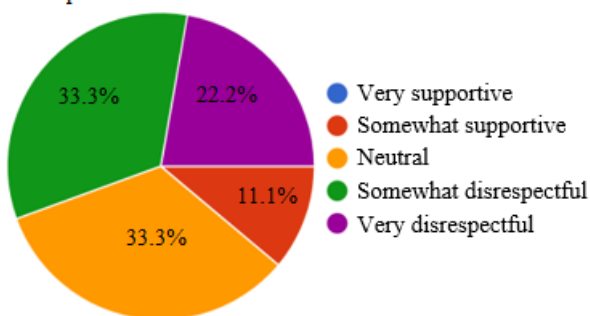


The survey also examined how students generally respond to LGBTQIA+ topics within classrooms. Only 11.1% of teachers described student responses as somewhat supportive. The majority characterised student responses as neutral, somewhat disrespectful, or very disrespectful. These findings indicate that prejudice and discomfort surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities remain common among students.

Supporting this conclusion, 100% of teachers reported witnessing students express prejudice or make jokes relating to LGBTQIA+ individuals. This closely aligns with student survey findings and reinforces concerns regarding the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes within schools.

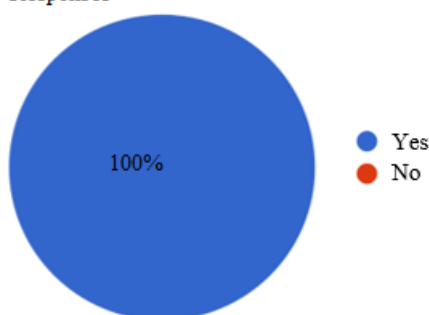
**How do students generally respond to LGBTQIA+ topics in literature?**

9 Responses



**Have you noticed any instances where students expressed prejudice or made jokes about LGBTQIA+ individuals**

9 Responses

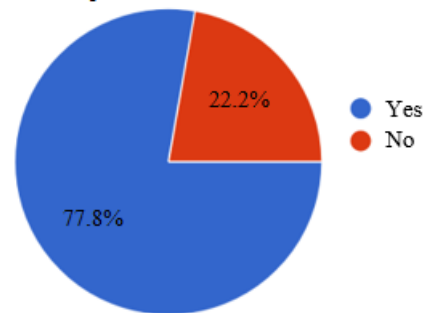


The survey further explored barriers that teachers face when attempting to discuss LGBTQIA+ issues in educational settings. A substantial 77.8% of teachers reported facing resistance from parents or school administrators. This finding highlights the institutional pressures that often discourage open discussions of queer identities within schools.

Additionally, 66.7% of teachers reported receiving no training or resources relating to LGBTQIA+ representation, while the remaining teachers reported receiving only limited support. This lack of preparation may contribute to uncertainty and self-censorship when addressing queer topics in classrooms.

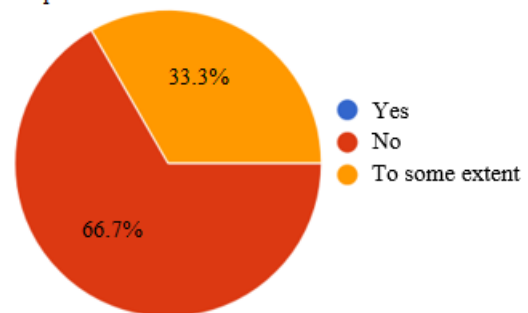
**Have you faced resistance from parents or administrators when discussing LGBTQIA+ topics in class?**

9 Responses



**Are you provided with any training or resources to handle sensitive topics like LGBTQIA+ representation**

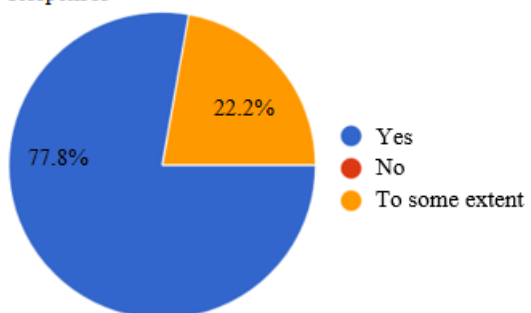
9 Responses



Despite these challenges, all teachers agreed, either fully or to some extent, that LGBTQIA+ representation within the curriculum could contribute to a more inclusive school environment. Teachers frequently cited increased empathy, reduced stereotyping, and greater acceptance of diversity as potential benefits of representation.

**Do you think LGBTQIA+ represents in the curriculum could help create a more inclusive school environment**

9 Responses



A content analysis of the NCERT English curriculum for Classes IX–XII further reinforced the findings of both the student and teacher surveys. Out of 101 distinct authors included across the prescribed textbooks, only 6 were identified as confirmed queer authors, while a total of 9 could

be categorised as either confirmed or speculated queer authors. This means that less than 10% of all authors represented within the curriculum can be connected to queer identities. Furthermore, none of the texts included within the curriculum explicitly engage with queer themes, relationships, or experiences.

The distribution of queer authors was also uneven across grade levels. Most notably, no queer authors were identified within the Class IX curriculum, meaning that students encounter no identifiable LGBTQIA+ voices during the beginning of secondary education. Even in Classes X, XI, and XII, where a small number of queer authors were present, their sexuality was rarely discussed within classroom contexts.

The curriculum therefore demonstrates a form of symbolic inclusion rather than meaningful representation. While authors such as Walt Whitman, Adrienne Rich, W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster, Selma Lagerlöf, and Kamala Das appear within prescribed textbooks, their identities and experiences remain disconnected from classroom discussions. As a result, students may read works produced by queer writers without ever recognising that they are engaging with queer voices. This contributes to a broader culture of invisibility in which LGBTQIA+ individuals remain largely absent from students' understanding of literature, history, and society.

#### *Qualitative Data*

Through qualitative responses gathered from peer-group discussions and interviews, the study was able to gain deeper insight into both the impact of queer invisibility within education and the effect that even limited exposure to queer literature can have on students.

During interviews with two administrative members, two major barriers to discussing LGBTQIA+ topics within educational settings became evident: a lack of teacher training and institutional pressure from school administration. These findings also aligned closely with the quantitative survey data collected during the research.

One of them appeared noticeably hesitant while discussing the question of queer representation within school education and prescribed literature. Although she repeatedly stated that educational boards such as CBSE had likely already included queer authors or perspectives within the curriculum, she was unable to identify or name a single queer author, text, or example when asked directly. She further suggested that the inclusion of queer identities within school education was "difficult" and "not always practically possible," particularly within the constraints of what would need to be excluded in order to make space for such representation.

The interaction suggested how administrative attitudes may shape the broader culture of silence surrounding queer issues within schools. Even in the absence of overt discrimination, institutional hesitation and avoidance can create an environment in which teachers may feel discouraged from openly engaging with queer themes, identities, or discussions in classrooms.

This institutional hesitation was reflected further in the response provided by one of the teachers interviewed during the study. The teacher stated: *"Teachers often face a lack of formal training and clear curricular support, making them unsure about how to approach the topic sensitively. There is also fear of backlash from parents or school authorities, along with students' preconceived biases and immaturity. Additionally, rigid syllabus structures leave little room for open discussions, leading to self-censorship."*

The consequences of this lack of representation and institutional silence were particularly visible in student experiences. Adhiraj during an interview recalled his experience of being outed without his consent during senior secondary classes. According to the participant, rumors regarding his sexuality spread rapidly among students, following which he became the target of persistent bullying, mocking, and social isolation within the school environment. It was mentioned that derogatory comments and jokes became common in classrooms and corridors. The participant further stated that several students were aware of the harassment, and that the matter had reportedly been brought to the attention of school authorities on multiple occasions. However, little meaningful action appeared to have been taken to address the bullying or ensure the student's wellbeing. Instead, there was said to be a general sense of avoidance and discomfort surrounding the issue, with many students and teachers allegedly choosing not to openly acknowledge the harassment taking place.

This pattern is reflected in existing research on school climate. A 2021 review by Hall (2021) found that teachers are less likely to intervene in response to homophobic remarks than to racist or sexist remarks. The review also reported that only 26% of teachers felt able to support LGBTQ students without barriers, while the majority cited obstacles such as insufficient training, administrative pressure, and fear of parental backlash. In fact, UNESCO's study on school bullying in Tamil Nadu found that only 18% of students experiencing bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity reported these incidents to school authorities. Among those who did report, 47% reported that nothing was done.

In striking contrast to this silence and avoidance, the peer-group discussion conducted as part of the research demonstrated how open engagement with queer literature could create more empathetic and reflective conversations among students.

Aanya Dhawan reflected on her experience during the discussion of Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin, stating: *"Considering the fact that queer literature is something we seldom discuss in an academic setting, the book discussion held on Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin with a group of my own school peers was a unique experience for me. We drew parallels, connecting the themes to the book with what we witness in our own surroundings with regards to people's perception of the queer community. We closed the session with a discussion on how exposure to queer literature and characters may help weaken these biases that often exist within individuals, and how meaningful representation may help to create systemic change. During the book discussion, the group talked about how things such as internalised*

homophobia, shame, and repression can have such a deep and lasting impact on a person's psyche. It was not that I was not aware of these issues before, but I think that forums like this are incredibly important because they lead you to exposing yourself to different opinions and perspectives, and it truly helps one to broaden their own worldview."

Similarly, Tripta Singh says, "Reading about internalised homophobia from the perspective of a queer character confronted me with the complexity of intense feelings of rejection and social alienation that we otherwise dismiss when it comes to the queer community. I think the themes explored would force readers to face the fact that simply 'respecting' the queer community and 'supporting' it from afar is not enough when the suffering is so deep rooted, the entrenched stereotypes so rampant and the systemic bias so cruel."

Ganeev Kaur says, "Reading *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin was a deeply emotional experience for me.. Reading queer experiences made me feel validated, resilient, and emotionally understood in a way mainstream literature often does not. As someone who once held homophobic views shaped by society, queer literature helped me develop empathy and understanding. In India, queerness is still often dismissed as "just a phase," and representation in literature can help normalize LGBTQIA+ identities and foster acceptance among students."

The students raised an important point about how there needs to be some kind of introduction in prior classes before the direct introduction of literature in high school.

Riona notes, "Reading the book was an emotional and thought-provoking experience. Through David's struggles, I gained insight into the fear, confusion, and isolation that many queer individuals experience when trying to reconcile their identity with society's expectations. I felt frustrated by David's choices, yet I sympathized with the pressure and shame that influenced them. What affected me most was the tragic loss of a genuine relationship because of his inability to accept himself. The novel made me reflect on the importance of living authentically and the consequences of denying one's true feelings. It also helped me understand the mentality of closeted queer people and the surroundings that could lead one to turn out that way."

Nyesha, while not having participated in the book discussion, was a vital part of several discussions related to the topic, she says "During a conversation about the importance of queer representation in school and with Udhbhavi, I became more aware of how everyday language can either include or exclude people. One point that particularly stayed with me was the use of gender-neutral pronouns such as "they" instead of automatically defaulting to "he" or "she" when a person's gender is unknown or when referring to people in a general sense. Following that discussion, I became more conscious of the language I use in interactions, daily conversations and even in my written work."

## 5. Limitations of the Study

The present study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research was conducted within a single English-medium private school serving students from relatively privileged socio-economic backgrounds. While this context demonstrates that heteronormativity and queer exclusion persist even in comparatively well-resourced educational environments, the findings cannot be generalised to all Indian schools, particularly those in rural or government settings.

Second, participation in Giovanni's Room was voluntary. As a result, students who chose to participate were generally more open to engaging with discussions surrounding gender, sexuality, and queer representation. Individuals holding strongly homophobic or exclusionary views were less likely to participate, meaning that the discussions may not fully reflect the range of attitudes present within the broader student population. Consequently, the impact of queer literature on students who are resistant to or opposed to LGBTQIA+ inclusion could not be adequately assessed.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported experiences collected through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. Such methods are subject to recall bias and social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitivity of topics related to sexuality, identity, and discrimination. Participants may have unintentionally omitted experiences or modified their responses in ways they perceived to be socially acceptable.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that queer invisibility within Indian secondary education is not an accidental gap but a patterned outcome of curriculum design, classroom practice, and institutional culture. The evidence from surveys, interviews, focus-group discussions, and curriculum analysis points to three interconnected findings: (1) queer identities are largely absent or depoliticized within the curriculum; (2) school environments remain socially unsafe for many LGBTQIA+ students; and (3) meaningful engagement with queer literature can foster empathy, reflection, and more inclusive attitudes among students.

My interpretation is that these findings reveal a structural problem rather than a series of isolated incidents. The curriculum does not simply fail to include queer perspectives; it actively constructs heterosexuality and cisgender identity as the unmarked educational norm. Queer identities become visible only sporadically, often without context, discussion, or acknowledgment. This aligns closely with Tuchman's theory of symbolic annihilation, which argues that marginalized groups are erased not only through outright exclusion but also through forms of representation that render them socially invisible.

The curriculum analysis provides the clearest evidence of this process. Out of 101 distinct authors identified across the NCERT English textbooks for Classes IX–XII, only 6 were confirmed queer authors, and none of the prescribed texts explicitly engaged with queer relationships, identities, or

experiences. The absence was particularly striking in Class IX, where no queer authors were identified at all. These findings indicate that queer inclusion is neither systematic nor pedagogically intentional.

More importantly, representation cannot be measured simply by counting authors. The surveys showed that 55.7% of students reported that their schools do not discuss texts written by LGBTQIA+ authors, and among students who had encountered such authors, 81.8% said that the author's sexuality or experiences of discrimination were not discussed. In practice, queer authors are often taught as though their identities are irrelevant to literary interpretation.

This is one of the most important findings of the study. A curriculum can appear diverse on paper while remaining heteronormative in practice. When a writer such as Adrienne Rich is taught only as a poet of freedom or gender, without acknowledging her lesbian identity and its influence on her work, students are denied a fuller understanding of both the text and the social conditions that shaped it. This is not neutral teaching; it is a selective form of interpretation that normalizes heterosexuality as the default framework for reading literature.

The second major finding concerns school climate. 65.7% of students reported that their classroom environment was not open to the LGBTQIA+ community, while 95.7% reported witnessing classmates make jokes or use slurs related to queer identities. Teachers confirmed this pattern: 100% reported observing prejudice or jokes about LGBTQIA+ individuals.

These numbers are significant because they show that educational silence does not produce neutrality. In the absence of structured discussion, students learn about queerness primarily through peer culture, stereotypes, and stigma. Homophobic and transphobic language becomes normalized because there are few institutional mechanisms challenging it.

This is where the connection between representation and violence becomes most visible. Violence should not be understood only as physical assault. The interviews revealed forms of verbal harassment, social exclusion, public ridicule, and institutional neglect. The account of the student who was outed without consent and subsequently subjected to bullying demonstrates how educational invisibility can intensify vulnerability. School authorities were reportedly aware of the harassment, yet meaningful intervention was absent. This mirrors the pattern identified in Muñoz Manzaba and García Ramírez's systematic review of homophobic bullying, which found that heteronormative curricula, inadequate teacher preparation, and weak institutional responses contribute directly to ongoing victimization of LGBTQ+ students.

Therefore, I would argue that the lack of representation is not merely a symbolic problem. It has material consequences. When queer identities are absent from legitimate educational discourse, discriminatory behaviour is more easily framed as harmless joking rather than recognized as prejudice. The curriculum helps define what is considered worthy of respect; exclusion communicates that queer lives are outside that circle of legitimacy.

The teacher interviews add another layer to this analysis. Educators generally recognized the value of discussing LGBTQIA+ authors and experiences, yet many felt constrained by institutional pressures. 77.8% of teachers reported resistance from parents or administrators, and 66.7% reported receiving no training or resources related to LGBTQIA+ representation.

Similarly, Sharma and Sharma (2022), studying teachers across government and private schools in India, found substantial gaps in preparedness to support LGBTQ+ students; notably, 11.8% of participants were unfamiliar with the term "homosexuality."

This suggests that the problem cannot be reduced to individual prejudice. Many teachers are willing to engage with queer themes but lack institutional support, clear curricular guidance, and protection from backlash. The result is self-censorship: educators avoid discussions not necessarily because they oppose inclusion, but because queer topics are constructed as professionally risky.

This reflects the dynamic described by Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. Queerness is treated as something that may exist privately but should remain outside the boundaries of normal educational discourse. The classroom becomes a space where certain identities can be acknowledged openly, while others remain unspeakable.

The most hopeful finding emerged from the peer-group discussion on Giovanni's Room. Students did not react with confusion or hostility. Instead, they engaged seriously with themes of shame, repression, loneliness, identity, and social pressure. Several participants explicitly stated that the discussion broadened their understanding of queer experiences and challenged stereotypes they had previously accepted.

This is important because it directly addresses the question raised in your feedback: Can literature foster sympathy and empathy? The evidence from this study suggests that it can. Students repeatedly described how reading queer narratives helped them understand emotional experiences that are often invisible in mainstream conversations. One participant reflected that queer literature moved them from abstract "support" toward a deeper recognition of how systemic prejudice shapes people's lives.

The potential of queer representation to influence attitudes was also reflected in participants' personal experiences outside formal classroom settings. One participant described how a conversation about queer representation led them to become more conscious of the language they used in everyday interactions. Specifically, they began adopting gender-neutral pronouns such as "they" when referring to individuals whose gender was unknown or when speaking about people in general. While seemingly minor, this shift illustrates how exposure to discussions surrounding gender and sexuality can encourage greater awareness of inclusion in everyday communication. Such changes suggest that the impact of representation extends beyond literary understanding or empathy alone; it can influence social

behaviour and promote more inclusive ways of interacting with others.

These qualitative responses are also supported by the survey data: 95.8% of students believed that learning about LGBTQIA+ authors and their experiences could foster empathy among classmates, and 92.9% believed that greater LGBTQIA+ representation could contribute to safer school environments. The consistency between the qualitative and quantitative findings strengthens the argument that literature is not merely decorative representation; it is a pedagogical tool that can influence attitudes, reduce prejudice, and expand students' understanding of social diversity.

These findings correspond with the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2019), which found that students in schools with LGBTQ-inclusive curricula reported significantly greater school belonging, lower rates of victimization, better mental health, and higher educational aspirations than students in schools where such representation was absent. They were also more likely to report teacher intervention against homophobic language and the presence of trusted adults within the school. These outcomes reinforce the present study's finding that meaningful engagement with queer literature extends beyond representation alone, fostering empathy, critical reflection, and a school climate in which LGBTQIA+ students feel more visible, supported, and academically engaged.

Based on these findings, I believe the debate should not be framed as whether schools should "add politics" to literature. Queer lives are also part of human experience. Excluding them is itself a political choice, one that communicates which identities are considered normal, discussable, and academically legitimate.

I do not argue that every chapter must be replaced with queer literature. The evidence instead supports a combination of meaningful contextualization, supplementary inclusion, teacher training, and age-appropriate discussion across grade levels. The goal is not tokenism. A single queer author inserted into the syllabus without discussion changes little. What matters is whether students are given the language, historical context, and interpretive tools needed to understand queer experiences as part of society rather than as exceptions to it.

In practical terms, this means that representation should begin gradually in earlier classes through discussions of diverse families, individuality, empathy, and respect, and then expand in later grades into more explicit engagement with sexuality, gender identity, discrimination, and social stigma. The students in the focus group themselves emphasized that the problem was not exposure to queer themes, but the abruptness created by years of prior silence.

Ultimately, the findings show that queer invisibility in Indian secondary education is produced through interconnected curricular, institutional, and social processes. The curriculum largely excludes queer experiences; classrooms normalize heteronormativity; teachers lack support and training; and students encounter prejudice more frequently than informed discussion.

The consequences extend beyond representation alone. They affect bullying, school safety, belonging, mental well-being, and students' broader understanding of whose lives are considered legitimate. Conversely, the study also demonstrates that when students are given opportunities to engage with queer literature in a structured and reflective setting, they are capable of responding with empathy, intellectual curiosity, and critical thought.

My central argument is therefore that queer inclusion is not simply about visibility. It is about reducing the conditions that allow stigma, harassment, and silence to flourish. Literature cannot eliminate prejudice on its own, but it can provide students with narratives that humanize experiences they may otherwise encounter only through stereotypes. In that sense, queer representation in education is not an optional gesture of diversity; it is a necessary component of building safer, more informed, and more equitable school environments.

## 7. Conclusion

This study indicates that queer invisibility in the examined secondary-school context operates through the interaction of curriculum, classroom practice, peer culture, and institutional constraints. Survey, interview, discussion, and curriculum-analysis findings consistently suggest that the presence of a small number of queer authors does not by itself constitute meaningful representation when identity and relevant social contexts remain unaddressed. The findings also indicate substantial concerns regarding discriminatory language, limited teacher preparation, and perceived barriers to classroom discussion. At the same time, the peer-group engagement with queer literature suggests that structured and age-appropriate discussion can encourage empathy and critical reflection. Given the study's limited and context-specific sample, these findings should not be generalized to all Indian schools. They nevertheless support further research and carefully designed curricular, pedagogical, and institutional approaches to improving inclusion and informed engagement within secondary education.

## 8. Recommendations

Through this paper, I would like to give you the following recommendations-

I) Direct Thematic Replacement: The first approach involves the replacement of an existing chapter with an alternative queer text that closely parallels its central themes, learning objectives, and literary concerns. This method is used in cases where queer literature can fulfill the same pedagogical function as the original text while simultaneously expanding representation. Examples include replacing *Mother's Day* with excerpts from Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* due to their shared engagement with domestic structures and gender expectations, or replacing *Bholi* with *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* because both texts talk about dignity, empowerment, and social exclusion.

II) Supplementary Inclusion: The second approach recommends supplementary inclusion rather than replacement. Certain chapters address themes that are not meaningfully connected to identity, gender, or social

exclusion, such as travel, science, ecology, humour, or adventure. In such cases, replacing the text entirely may appear forced or academically unnecessary. Instead, queer literature may be introduced as an additional reading, comparative text, classroom discussion, project material, or optional component alongside the prescribed chapter. This allows representation to be broadened without removing the original material from the curriculum. For example, chapters such as *Tea from Assam* or *The Black Aeroplane* may remain unchanged while students are simultaneously exposed to supplementary queer narratives through reading lists, assignments, or parallel literary discussions. This approach emphasizes inclusion through expansion rather than substitution.

III) Retention of Existing Queer-Authored Texts: The third approach involves retaining texts already written by queer authors that are presently included within the curriculum. Several existing chapters are authored by writers identified as queer, bisexual, lesbian, or gay, including Adrienne Rich, Vikram Seth, W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster, and Selma Lagerlöf. However, in most cases, their queer identities are neither acknowledged nor pedagogically contextualized within classroom discourse. As a result, representation remains largely invisible despite the technical inclusion of queer authors. This approach therefore argues not for replacement, but for recognition and contextual engagement. Teachers, textbooks, and curricular notes may acknowledge the author's identity and its relationship to broader literary themes where relevant.

IV) School Specific Recommendations: Beyond curricular reform, schools themselves must adopt institutional measures that create safer and more inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ students. One significant recommendation is the implementation of gender-sensitivity training for school counsellors. Schools must also establish clear institutional norms against discriminatory language, bullying, and homophobic or transphobic slurs. Anti-bullying policies should explicitly address gender identity and sexuality. Parental awareness programs may further contribute toward building a supportive ecosystem inside and outside of the classroom. Resistance toward queer inclusion often emerges from misinformation, cultural stigma, or lack of awareness among parents and guardians. Finally, schools should organize regular workshops, seminars, and interactive sessions conducted by trained experts, activists, psychologists, or educators specializing in gender and sexuality studies. Age-appropriate conversations must be introduced gradually across all educational levels in order to normalize diversity and reduce prejudice from an early age. At younger levels of education, such discussions need not explicitly focus on sexuality. Rather, they may involve simple conversations surrounding diverse families, self-expression, individuality, empathy, and respect for differences.

V) Teacher Training: Teachers require comprehensive and structured training on LGBTQIA+ identities, gender sensitivity, inclusive language, and methods of facilitating sensitive discussions in educational spaces. Such training should move beyond basic awareness and instead equip educators with practical strategies for addressing discriminatory behaviour, responding to student concerns,

and fostering respectful classroom environments. Teacher training programs should also encourage educators to critically examine heteronormative assumptions embedded within traditional teaching methods and curricular interpretations. In many cases, queer themes are ignored, erased, or deliberately avoided despite being present within literary texts. Sensitized educators would be better equipped to engage with such themes in nuanced and age-appropriate ways.

VI) Additions to NEP: Future revisions of the NEP and related educational frameworks should explicitly recognize LGBTQIA+ students as a group requiring institutional support and protection. Policy measures should include clear guidelines for queer-inclusive curriculum development, teacher training, anti-bullying mechanisms, mental health support services, and the creation of safe and affirming school environments. Educational boards should also be encouraged to incorporate diverse gender identities, sexualities, and family structures within curricular materials in age-appropriate ways.

VII) Recommended texts include-

- a) On a Muggy Night in Mumbai by Mahesh Dattani
- b) Funny Boy by Shyam Selvadurai
- c) A litany of survival by Audre Lorde
- d) Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri
- e) Kari by Amruta Patil
- f) Seeing Like a Feminist by Nivedita Menon
- g) Shikhandi and other stories by Devdutt Patnaik
- h) No Outlaws in the Gender Galaxy by Chayanika Shah

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The annexure can be found at:  
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