

# From Taboo to Acceptance: Tracing the Depiction of Indian Queer Sub-Culture in Bollywood

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## **Abstract**

This research article examines the representation of the Indian queer sub-culture in Bollywood films, focusing on the portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community and addressing homophobia and its stigma within the cinematic productions of the world's largest film industry. Films are multifaceted expressions that mirror and shape societal perspectives. Bollywood, the world's leading film producer, holds a significant societal position within India. Despite its extensive history, spanning nearly a century, Bollywood has provided only minimal LGBTQ+-themed content. The queer community's representation in both film and television remains notably limited. Analyzing a selection of Bollywood films from 1996 to 2022, this research delves into the depiction of the LGBTQ+ community in mainstream cinema and the manner in which issues like homophobia and stigma are confronted. A qualitative content analysis is employed to interpret the depiction of queer narratives in the context of India's diverse socio-cultural backdrop.

**Keywords:** homosexuality, LGBTQ+ culture, queer cinema, gender, gay

## **Introduction**

Films have been a part of popular culture for a long time, astonishing, entertaining, and inspiring people to exceed their expectations and imaginations on various topics. Indian films have multiple genres since they must appeal to a wide range of consumers. The themes have been in constantly shifting paradigms.<sup>1</sup> Media portrayal of LGBTQ+ issues hinges on how the media represents the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Historically, it has been seen that the portrayal of LGBTQ+ issues is quite negative. The first representation of same-sex interaction in the media was in 1895. It was William Dickson's short film, *The Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (also known as *The Gay Brothers*), this film showed two men dancing together, shocking audiences with its subversion of conventional male behavior.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1930s to 1960s, the portrayal of queer issues completely disappeared since Catholic-based moralities formed the fulcrum of society. India's first bona fide homosexual film was Riyad Wadalia's *Bomgay*, released in 1996, starring Kushal Punjabi and Rahul Bose. The film depicted the 1990's mushrooming gay

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<sup>1</sup> Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai, *The Bollywood Reader* (UK: Open University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn, Kalinak "The Dickson Experimental Sound Film, Popular Music, and the Invention of Moving Pictures", *Film History*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2019), 61-91.

community in India and questions about gay identity through six essays. The film created controversy in Bollywood at that point in time.<sup>3</sup> The current research article examines how sexual minorities are represented in mainstream Indian films and how that changes over time.

### **Films before the Scrapping of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code**

Despite the Supreme Court's scrapping of section 377 (which criminalized homosexuality) in 2018, homosexuality remains taboo in Indian society.<sup>4</sup> Several filmmakers have attempted to explore same-sex storylines in cinema over the years. At the same time, these films were initially met with significant criticism. Until the 1990s, few films in India regularly explored queer sexuality. *Fire*, a one-of-a-kind Bollywood film released in 1996, raised awareness on one of the largest taboo topics in contemporary Indian society: its subjects' sexual orientation, with a particular emphasis on women, who face enormous marginalization and oppression in a patriarchal society. *Fire* was one of the first Bollywood films that tackled the subject of homosexuality, partially based on Ismat Chughtai's 1942 short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt). The story concerns two women, Sita and Radha, played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi. It depicts a lesbian relationship between Radha and Sita in a middle-class, joint-family household. As Radha tells Sita, this type of love is unfamiliar to them, "this isn't familiar to me, this awareness of needs of desires."<sup>5</sup> The film also demonstrates how women are denied agency over their sexualities and are shunned by their families and society if they choose to explore it. Sita explains to Radha how her mother taught her that "a woman without a husband is like plain rice: bland, unappealing, and useless."<sup>6</sup> She states that she believes this is an Indian proverb referring to the status of women in Indian society.

According to Shohini Ghosh, *Fire* was a landmark film for queer activism in India. It was also released as a standard mainstream film. One might see posters across the city where two women occupy the diegetic space meant for heterosexual couples. She argues that the film was passed without any cuts by the board of censors and ran for two weeks peacefully. Two weeks later, the film attracted enormous backlash; some groups started vandalizing the halls and attacking it. The film was then considered an insult to marriage, Hinduism, and so on. It created the first public debate on homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Gopinath noted that *Fire* allows for a slide between the homosocial and the homosexual. Here are the women doing ordinary routine chores like cooking, cleaning, and hanging clothes out to dry, which becomes erotic.<sup>8</sup> Ananya Nandan in argues that:

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<sup>3</sup> Anon, "Bomgay," *Wikipedia* (2022). At: <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bomgay&oldid=1099906178>. Accessed 30/07/2023.

<sup>4</sup> Bhaskar Lama, "Homosexuality and Indian Civil Society: Reading Mahesh Dattani after decriminalization of section-377," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2020), pp. 349-368.

<sup>5</sup> Deepa Mehta, *Fire* (Kaleidoscope Entertainment, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Mehta, *Fire* (30:29-30:42).

<sup>7</sup> Anon, "Why Was Fire a Landmark Movie for Queer Activism in India?" *The Swaddle* (2021). At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBtaI2yPPNA>. Accessed 30/07/2023.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

*Fire* asks society a few uncomfortable questions. Is the desire to love someone beyond the periphery of the heteronormative relationship a sin? Can a woman not love another woman, or a man love another man? Even in this modern age, why do certain societies step backwards and attempt to regulate the bodily desires of individuals? From whence came this law that only a man and a woman have the right to be in a sexual relationship? Who deems what is perversion, and therefore illegal? And who gave any section of society the right to declare that sexual activity should be undertaken solely for reproduction?<sup>9</sup>

Radha asks “Isn’t it strange that we are so bound by customs and traditions that somebody just has to press my button . . . and I start responding like a trained monkey.”<sup>10</sup> Here Radha raises questions about agency, societal conditioning, and the influence of customs and traditions on a woman. She highlights that a woman is product of social conditioning alluding to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion of “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”<sup>11</sup>

Judith Butler also presents a parallel view, highlighting the notion that gender is not merely a natural or innate trait but is instead a constructed and performative role that individuals take on due to societal pressures and expectations. According to Butler:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.<sup>12</sup>

The analogy to a “trained monkey” which Radha mentions portrays the individual as operating on cue, suggesting a lack of conscious thought or critical reflection when responding to societal prompts. The comparison to a “button” further emphasizes a deterministic view where actions are almost automatic or robotic, triggered by specific external stimuli. Radha comments on the power of social conditioning. Just as animals can be trained to react to certain stimuli, the quotation suggests that women, too, are “trained” by their culture. They learn to behave or react in specific ways due to the weight of societal expectations, even if those reactions do not align with their personal beliefs or desires.

Ananya Nandan further points out that there is an implicit expectation that women should only engage in sexual activity for the purpose of reproduction and not for fulfilling their own sexual desires. The female protagonists in Deepa Mehta’s work are deliberately named after religious figures associated with purity, possibly to highlight their strong commitment to family values, and loyalty to their husbands. Initially depicted as traditional women burdened with the responsibilities of caring for their families and managing household chores, they eventually

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<sup>9</sup> Ananya Nandan, “Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*,” *Journal of Indian Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 19 (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Mehta, *Fire* (1:12:37-1:13:50).

<sup>11</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (France: Librairie Gallimard, 1949), p. 281.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (United States: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.

challenge societal norms by finding love with each other. Characters named for purity norms symbolically rebel by seeking sexual satisfaction not with a man, but with another woman.<sup>13</sup>

*Aligarh* (2015) is a biographical drama film, directed by Hansal Mehta and written by Apurva Asrani. The film features Manoj Bajpayee and Rajkummar Rao in the main roles.<sup>14</sup> The story is based on true events surrounding the life of Dr Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a professor at Aligarh Muslim University. *Aligarh* delves into themes of identity, homosexuality, prejudice, and the fight for personal freedom. With its poignant storytelling and powerful performances, the film presents a thought-provoking narrative that challenges societal norms and highlights the struggles faced by marginalized individuals. The story of *Aligarh* concerns Dr Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a respected Marathi professor at Aligarh Muslim University. One fateful day, Siras is filmed in a compromising position with a rickshaw-puller in his own house, secretly captured by a group of university employees. This invasive act led to his suspension from the University on the grounds of homosexuality, as homosexuality was still considered a criminal offense in India at the time. Deeply affected by the incident and the subsequent violation of his privacy, Siras finds solace in solitude, grappling with his emotions and struggling to rebuild his shattered life.

According to Allister H. Butler The term “institutional homophobia” refers to the systemic and structural biases against LGBTQ+ individuals present within established institutions. These can range from educational establishments to workplaces, government agencies, religious entities, and other influential organizations.<sup>15</sup> In the case of *Aligarh*, the Aligarh Muslim University's immediate and severe response to the discovery of Dr Siras's sexual orientation exemplifies this form of prejudice. Rather than following a proper procedure or ensuring justice, the University was quick to suspend Dr Siras from his esteemed position. Such a precipitous decision, devoid of comprehensive inquiry or any semblance of due process, underscores the institution's deeply entrenched biases. Siras, despite being a talented professor, is forced to hide his homosexuality due to societal norms and the fear of rejection. Thus:

Invisibility occurs because of the fears and experiences of societal discrimination and homo-hatred targeted towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people. In addition, major social institutions (legal, religious, family, media, education and medical) at best render the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. At worst these institutions denigrate gay lives and attempt to make their existence illegal or immoral.<sup>16</sup>

The film portrays Dr Siras's struggle to reconcile his sexual orientation with his role in a conservative society. The film also sheds light on the prevalent homophobia and prejudice that exist within society.

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<sup>13</sup> Nandan, “Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*”.

<sup>14</sup> Hansal Mehta, *Aligarh* (Amazon Prime Videos: Eros Entertainment, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Allister H. Butler, “Navigating institutional homophobia: A challenge for South African social work with gay and lesbian youth,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2007), p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> C. Browning, “Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity issues,” *Cultural and Diversity Issues in Counseling*, vol.1 (1996), p. 2.

Siras becomes a victim of discrimination solely based on his sexual orientation, leading to his isolation and loss of professional standing. It questions the inherent biases that perpetuate discrimination and the dire consequences they have on individuals. Homophobic violence:

executes (or 'enforces') the political, social and ideological institution of heterosexism; it punishes non- heterosexual practice, and it aims to prevent future challenge to heteronormativity by employing the threat of violence to attach fear and stigma to non- heterosexual intimacy and desire.<sup>17</sup>

Sucheta M. Choudhuri claims that *Aligarh* represents a notable advancement in queer Indian cinema by addressing unexplored themes. The film focuses on an ageing queer individual whose life is impacted by class and language dynamics, diverging from conventional narratives. It breaks new ground by shedding light on these intersecting experiences, offering a fresh perspective in the realm of queer representation in Indian cinema.<sup>18</sup>

### **Films after the Scrapping of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code**

Following the Supreme Court's decision in 2018, which struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalizes homosexuality, the media has largely focused on LGBTQ issues. Panel discussions aired on television, articles appeared in magazines and newspapers, and practically all media coverage was sympathetic and sensitive to the LGBTQ cause. The depiction of queer issues in mainstream Indian cinema has recently increased. Mainstream Bollywood films such as *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (2020),<sup>19</sup> *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021),<sup>20</sup> and *Badhaai Do* (2022)<sup>21</sup> have recently raised awareness of marriage disparity, adoption rights, trans people's issues, homophobia, and so on for queer people. The films show what it is like to be gay in a heteronormative, patriarchal society through nuanced depictions of same-sex topics and the everyday problems queer people face.

*Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* is India's first Hindi rom-com to include a gay love story. While the other films addressed the community's violence and injustice, this one did so in a lighter way. It is the first time in India that a queer film aims to normalise LGBTQ+ love narratives beyond documentaries or dismal flicks. The film features a gay man and his boyfriend trying to persuade the former's parents about their relationship. Aman Tripathi and Kartik Singh are salesmen who fall in love in the capital city of Delhi, where they live in obscurity, and their relationship blossoms unnoticed. However, complications arise when the two decide to return to Allahabad and seek acceptance from Aman's orthodox parents. The film is important because it was the first film to

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<sup>17</sup> Darren Lenard Hutchinson, "Ignoring the Sexualization of Race: Heteronormativity, Critical Race Theory and Anti-Racist Politics," *Buffalo Law Review*, vol. 47 (1999), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Sucheta M. Choudhuri, "Tum Log Yeh Shabd Ke Peechhey Kyon Parh Jaate Ho?" Language, abjection and queer Masculinity in Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh*," *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2020), pp. 47-61.

<sup>19</sup> Hitesh Kewalya, *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, (Amazon Prime Videos: T-Series 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Abhishek Kapoor, *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (Netflix: T-Series, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Harshvardhan Kulkarni, *Badhaai Do* (Netflix: Junglee Pictures, 2022).

be released after section 377 of the Indian penal code was abolished. The film revolves around the romance between Kartik Singh (played by Ayushmann Khurrana) and Aman Tripathi (played by Jitendra Kumar), two young men who are deeply in love with each other. However, their path to happiness is not smooth as they face societal and family pressure due to their sexual orientation.

Kartik, a confident and extroverted man, comes from a conservative middle-class family in Allahabad. On the other hand, Aman is more reserved and belongs to a traditional family that upholds societal norms and expectations. When their families find out about their relationship, they react with shock and disapproval, unable to accept their sons' homosexuality. The film skillfully weaves together comedy and drama, using humor to address the deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes surrounding homosexuality in Indian society. It explores the struggles faced by Kartik and Aman, as they navigate societal taboos, confront their families, and fight for their love and acceptance.

There is a man who wears a metal nose ring. A triangle tattooed beneath his ear evokes the Pink Triangle, which was deployed in Nazi prison camps to identify and persecute homosexuals. He wears the LGBTQ+ flag as a cape, a symbol of heroism and overwhelming pride; he argues that parental rejection of consenting same-sex love is an illness. This film became the first commercial film to show its leading men kissing on the screen. Filmmaker Hitesh Kewalya says:

It was important to show. When we're saying everyone is the same, it is very important that the references we have of a hetero couple showing intimacy are equally applicable in a same-sex relationship. Now, of course, we have to understand the audience. The film is not about the sensuality of the kiss but a way of expressing love. The actors also come into it – how they portray the character, what expressions they should use.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, the film *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, starring Ayushmann Khurrana and Vaani Kapoor, tries to generate a conversation on humane and positive trans depiction, albeit relying on some of the same preconceptions it is attempting to dispel. Transgender people have suffered greatly due to their historically erroneous depictions as sexually deviant and predatory villains, or secondary characters who are either brutally killed off to serve poor writing, or used as comic relief. The film narrates the love story of a trans woman and a cisgender man. It also exposes the challenges of being transgender in an Indian heteronormative society.

The film *Badhaai Do*, starring Bhumi Pednekar and Rajkumar Rao, has highlighted the issues of marital inequity and same-sex adoption rights. The film portrays the essence of being gay in a heteronormative, patriarchal family with subtle descriptions of same-sex attractions and everyday challenges that queer people face. It attempts to normalize the big-screen depiction of the gay and lesbian community and their romantic relationships. The complexities of marriages,

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<sup>22</sup> Mohini Chaudhuri, "We Wanted to Avoid Every Stereotype: Hitesh Kewalya on Making a Mainstream Gay Love Story in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*," *Film Companion*, 23 January 2020. At <https://www.filmcompanion.in/interviews/we-wanted-to-avoid-every-stereotype-hitesh-kewalya-on-making-a-mainstream-gay-love-story-in-shubh-mangal-zyada-saavdhan>. Accessed 3/08/2023.

traditional middle-class families, and individuals' demands have also been shown with sensitivity and realism.

### Depiction of Homophobia in Recent Films

Homophobia is a prejudiced fear of and hatred of homosexuals that can manifest as both physical and psychological persecution of a homosexual individual. The prevailing perception that heterosexuality is the only “natural” sexual orientation obscures the ubiquity of gender nonconformity, leading to its dismissal as slanderous and aberrant. Adrienne Rich coined the term “Compulsory Heterosexuality” in her fundamental lesbian feminist work, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality is a concept that exposes the socially created nature of the concept of heterosexuality as the only form of sexuality that exists. Rich asserts that heterosexuality isn't an optional preference; instead, it's maintained through forceful means. She specifically states that society has had to forcefully manage and promote heterosexuality. The structures of society, including its laws, policies, cultural representations, and continual incidents of threats, bullying, and physical aggression, work to enforce heterosexuality and the binary perception of gender. She precisely argues that, “heterosexuality . . . has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force.”<sup>23</sup> According to this theory, heterosexuality is usually portrayed as a natural, inborn, and freely chosen kind of sexuality. It leads to a social and cultural environment in which everyone is considered heterosexual and gender inequality is accepted as the norm.<sup>24</sup> The film *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* depicts a scene where Kartik and Aman publicly share a kiss, which shocks everyone around them. Ashok refuses to marry Aman's sister because of Aman's sexuality, stating that “your boy likes boys, he is gay.”<sup>25</sup> Aman's father, Shankar, violently attacks Kartik with a stick, leaving him unconscious. In a later scene, Kartik overhears a child reciting the Jack and Jill poem at a train station and becomes frustrated with its heteronormative nature. He questions why it always has to be Jill with whom Jack climbs the hill and why Jack couldn't go with Johnny instead? Kartik recites his own version of the poem, emphasizing love and acceptance: “Jack and Johnny went up to the hill, to live in love and laughter. Jack got thrashed by his dad, and Johnny hid soon after.”<sup>26</sup> This film shows the challenges faced by non-heterosexual relationships in India's heteronormative society, and suggests that heterosexual love is not the only valid form of love.

In *Badhaai Do*, Shardul Thakur, a police officer who is closeted about his homosexuality, experiences constant torment due to his hidden identity. He confesses his fear to his wife, expressing apprehension about being a gay man in the police force. He says, “Imagine a gay man in the police. I fear the police more than criminals do. What if someone finds out?”<sup>27</sup> Shardul refers

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<sup>23</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (Trumansburg: Antelope Publications, 1982), p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, pp. 238–239.

<sup>25</sup> *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, (0:45:20-0:45:22).

<sup>26</sup> *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (0:46:19-0:47:26).

<sup>27</sup> *Badhaai Do* (1:51:28-1:51:18).

to himself as a “Homocop,”<sup>28</sup> highlighting the unique challenges and internal struggles he faces as a gay individual working in law enforcement. In the film *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, the protagonist Manu and his family have great affection for Maanvi before learning her identity as a transgender woman. However, when Maanvi discloses her truth, chaos ensues. Manu is shocked and infuriated, vowing to seek revenge on Maanvi, despising himself for having engaged in a sexual relationship with what he perceives as a man, exclaiming, “I had sex with a man.”<sup>29</sup> Overwhelmed by disgust, Manu vomits in the shower and proceeds to threaten Maanvi, stating, “You won't get away with this. I'm going to ruin your life.” Manu's sisters also mock and belittle Maanvi, reinforcing transphobic stereotypes by saying, “Did you think that a *kinnar* (eunuch) could become the Munjal's daughter-in-law? Adam in the sheets and madam on the streets.”<sup>30</sup> This portrayal depicts the negative and discriminatory reactions that unfold when Maanvi's trans identity is revealed, highlighting the challenges faced by transgender individuals in society.

### Homosexuality as Abnormality and Disease

Michel Foucault's work, specifically his *History of Sexuality*, argues that sexuality is deeply intertwined with power structures and discourses. He asserts that certain forms of sexuality are stigmatized and deemed as abnormal, leading to the surveillance and regulation of individuals who adhere to these sexualities. Foucault examines the sexualized body as a site of power struggles, where various institutions such as law and medicine create classifications and maps of the body before exerting control over it. Foucault's perspective shifts the focus of sexuality from solely a bodily experience to being shaped by social discourses and cultural norms. According to him, society establishes its own sense of normality and safety by designating certain individuals as "deviant" or criminal. This process of labeling serves as a mechanism of social control, assuming that some individuals are inherently deviant.<sup>31</sup> Foucault argues that power dynamics determine what is considered natural or abnormal, evident in examples like Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code classifying homosexuality as an unnatural offense. This entire legal framework is based on societal notions of what is considered natural or unnatural in terms of sexuality. He argues that:

Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire--and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Badhaai Do* (1:51:09).

<sup>29</sup> *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (1:12:11-1:12:10).

<sup>30</sup> *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (39:36-39:29).

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976).

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 59.



In the film *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, Aman's uncle asks Kartik when he made the decision to be gay.<sup>33</sup> Kartik responds with a counter-question, asking when his uncle decided not to be gay.<sup>34</sup> Kartik's response highlights the idea that being gay is not a choice but an inherent part of a person's identity, just like being heterosexual. In *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, Manu angrily expresses his desire for a "normal" sexual relationship with a cisgender woman, rejecting any involvement with a trans woman. He states, "I don't want to get caught up in this trans homo crap. I want everything normal. Normal sex, normal life. I'm a normal guy."<sup>35</sup> Manu's statement reflects his insistence on conforming to societal expectations and his limited understanding of gender and sexual diversity. Similarly, In the film *Badhaai Do*, Sumi, who identifies as a lesbian, is granted the opportunity to adopt a baby. Sumi and Shardul initially considered getting a divorce, but changed their plans when they discovered that their adoption request had been approved. They decided to adopt a child together instead. They acknowledge the challenges they face as a same-sex couple, noting that while single women are allowed to adopt, Sumi's lesbian status puts her in a different legal position. They discuss how the country's adoption laws only recognize "normal" married couples as eligible to adopt. They express the desire to be seen as equally normal and struggle with the question of how to convince others of their normalcy.<sup>36</sup>

In the late twentieth century, homosexuality was viewed as a standard form of human sexuality instead of sin, criminality, or illness. The American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization recognised it as a valid sexual identity in 1973.<sup>37</sup> According to one Hindu article, the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) has stated that it is time to stop looking at homosexuality as a mental disorder, claiming no scientific evidence that any treatment can change sexual orientation. It cautioned that any attempt like this might result in low self-esteem and stigmatization. IPS issued a statement on homosexuality as: "Homosexuality is not a psychiatric disorder, and we recognise same-sex sexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality much like heterosexuality and bisexuality."<sup>38</sup> Amans's mother in *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* tells him, "We will get you treated. There is nothing medical science can't do nowadays. You will be fine."<sup>39</sup> And Kartik defines homophobia as a disease when he claims that Aman's father, Shankar Tripathy, has homophobia. He claims:

Shankar Tripathy is suffering from a very bad disease, and that disease is called homophobia, and there is no cure for this disease. This disease is not contagious. This

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<sup>33</sup> *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, (0:43:43-0:43:45).

<sup>34</sup> *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, (0:43:55-0:44:02).

<sup>35</sup> *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, (1:02:09-1:02:12)

<sup>36</sup> *Badhaai Do* (10:12-09:53).

<sup>37</sup> Jack Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality", *Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2015), pp. 565-575.

<sup>38</sup> Special Correspondent, "Homosexuality not an illness: Indian Psychiatric Society", *The Hindu*, 12 July (2018). At <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/homosexuality-not-an-illness-indian-psychiatric-society/article61515009.ece>. Accessed 4/07/2023.

<sup>39</sup> *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (0:51:48-0:51:55).

affects the mind. Unfortunately, this is not a killer disease. The diseased person becomes a killer.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in *Badhaai Do*, Shardul's brother-in-law, a medical professional, claims that there is no cure for the disease called same-sex. "Even homoeopathy has no cure for this disease."<sup>41</sup> These statements highlight the persistence of misguided beliefs about homosexuality as a disease and the need to challenge such ideas and assert that homosexuality is not a condition in need of treatment.

## The Shift

In India, the film medium has also played a key role in shaping and raising public awareness regarding LGBTQ identities and concerns. Portrayals of queer individuals in the media have shifted over time. While certain media elements have been supportive of LGBTQ+ people, others have castigated and presented queer people in a derogatory way, fueled by nationalistic rhetoric. The journey of Indian film and the topic of queer love narratives has been long and winding, with many ups and downs. With films like *Fire* (1996), *Aligarh* (2015), and *My Brother... Nikhil*, (2005),<sup>42</sup> India has seen cinematic genius, gross generalization, and biases when portraying a homosexual character. When it comes to welcoming queers, Indian audiences have come a long way. Previously, films depicted homosexual characters as sissy characters who brought no sense to the plot and were just present to provide inappropriate amusement.<sup>43</sup> However, the audiences have evolved, and we now see homosexual characters who are integral to the plot of a film or television series. The most recent example is *Made in Heaven* (2019),<sup>44</sup> which is an Amazon Prime exclusive web series that depicts a homosexual character and his daily struggles. From *Fire* in 1996 to *Badhaai Do* in 2022, the gay representation of characters in Indian films has shifted dramatically, from men and women having to stay in the closet and rarely revealing their actual selves to now being able to come out of the closet and display their genuine selves. Previously, even the release of such films was fraught with danger.

*Fire* sparked political unrest and controversy due to its portrayal of same-sex relationships. However, the success of recent films such as *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, and *Badhaai Do* at the box office suggests a shift in audience acceptance and openness toward diverse sexualities. The commercial success of these films indicates that the current generation is more receptive to LGBTQ+ narratives and is willing to engage with stories that explore different sexual orientations. These films resonated with audiences, reflecting the changing attitudes and desires of viewers for authentic and inclusive representation. By featuring LGBTQ+ characters and addressing queer issues, these films contribute to the ongoing dialogue and

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<sup>40</sup> *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (1:09:56-1:10:53).

<sup>41</sup> *Badhaai Do* (21:45-21:47).

<sup>42</sup> Onir, *My Brother... Nikhil* (Amazon Prime Videos: Yash Raj Films, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Sumona Bose, "Popular Indian Cinema's Complicated Relationship with LGBTQIA+ Representation", *Elle India*, 24 June (2022). At: <https://elle.in/lgbtqia-representation-in-popular-indian-cinema-2/>. Accessed 5/07/2023.

<sup>44</sup> Nitya Mehra et. al, *Made in Heaven* (Amazon Prime Video: Excel Entertainment, 2019).

normalization of diverse sexualities in Indian cinema. They not only entertain but also educate and challenge societal norms, creating a space for acceptance and understanding. The commercial success of these films highlights the potential for more inclusive storytelling in Hindi cinema and encourages filmmakers to continue exploring diverse narratives. It signifies a positive trend toward greater representation and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in mainstream Indian cinema.

## **Conclusion**

Indian cinema is plagued by compulsory heteronormativity, and the LGBTQ+ community is marginalized and disregarded as something outside of and strange to mainstream culture. The list is enormous, but Hindi cinema is getting closer to the happy ending that queer people deserve. Filmmakers and other media platforms are recognizing the problems the queer community is facing and are taking action to address them. Recently, there has been a steady surge of LGBTQ+-oriented films that positively portray being queer in India. These works focus on community struggles, family lives, and relationship complexities and cast gay people as lovable and human characters rather than mere props on television for the sake of pleasure. Films like *Aligarh*, *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, *Badhaai Do*, and *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* highlight the changing moments of a profound social transformation. It can be concluded that sexual minorities are finding space in Hindi cinema over time. Discussions on gay issues, rights, and queer culture are paving their way into mainstream Indian settings. Despite severe criticism, Indian cinema has started talking about queer issues openly. More representation in Hindi cinema and other regional industries is needed to make this issue more socially acceptable.