

# Queer Hindi Cinema: A Study on Understanding LGBT Identities

**Pushpinder Kaur**

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication  
Punjabi University, Patiala

**Email -** pushpinder\_21@yahoo.co.in

***Abstract:** Cinema is undoubtedly the greatest thing to have happened to the queer movement in India. Sexual minority comprises of all those people who fall under the categories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender. India is one of the many countries where homosexuality is still considered a taboo. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalises homosexuality was introduced by the British in colonial India in 1861 and it still stands in the country's books. Invisibility of statutory laws makes the LGBT community victims of gender violence and other human rights abuses. Over the years the representation of LGBT community in Hindi cinema has found itself under the scanner. Hindi cinema has witnessed a steady display of LGBT characters, some for the comic effect and some, however, stayed true to reality and made an effort to treat the subject in a sensitive and realistic light. However, a lot more representation is needed in terms of cinema which can provide the much-needed platform for interaction between people who are still in the closet. This research paper aims at exploring various issues and problems related to the community depicted in the Hindi films, who are long been deprived of their true identity and representation in the social and cultural sphere of society and an active role which Hindi Cinema can play in bringing them into the mainstream discourse through their realistic and authentic screen representation. The paper urges to bring such cinema on big screen in a sensitive way so that it reaches everyone and escalates the dialogue around gender identity and empowerment of sexual minorities in the society.*

**Key Words:** Gender Identity, Homosexuality, Homophobia, LGBT, Queer Cinema, Section 377.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Human society is a complex organization of human relationships. The implication of such a structure is that the human beings act and interact with each other in accordance with the role they play. Their role in relation to each other is further conditioned by the status they occupy. The basic criterion of defining status and role for any individual in the society has been sex and gender. Hence, LGBT (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders) people are forced to lead a secluded life of their own and live in isolation. They never pose any threat to the society but always lead a threatened life on account of the derogatory attitude of the people towards them.

In the given socio-cultural gestalt of Indian society homosexuality is considered as an abnormal activity. With spoiled identity and engagement in the non-normal activities these people are assumed to be a deviant and their activities as deviant behaviour. This 'exclusion' has given them different gender roles based on their perceived unusual sexual and gender identity<sup>1</sup>. The politics of 'exclusion' has been very well described by Foucault in his 'The Order of Discourse (1981)'. LGBT people lack the 'structural support' which heterosexuals possess. The battle of the LGBT people is a battle against the entire cultural system.

While there are various issues that are becoming the basis of film making in India, the issue of LGBT community has not occupied much space in Hindi Cinema<sup>2</sup> especially in commercial films. The commercial Hindi films have showed LGBT community very often as part of a film to introduce humor content in the films. Films have failed to deal with the community problems and issues, which shows the lack of acceptability of the community in the mainstream films. Cinema is considered as the reflection of society, while gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities. The works of Social theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on identity give us more to work with when considering the role of cinema in the formation and negotiation of gender and sexual identities.

In mainstream Hindi movies, there have been very few lesbian, gay or transgender leading characters. The mainstream filmmakers are increasingly happy to have non-heterosexuals in supporting roles-often the 'gay best friend' character,

<sup>1</sup> Gender Identity refers to a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being either man or woman, or something other or in between. The gender identity is internal and personally defined; it is not visible to others.

<sup>2</sup> Hindi Cinema refers to the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, characterized by lengthy films with melodramatic plots and flamboyant musical numbers.

wise and sensitive, who can help to guide the main character towards happiness. However, there are number of 'arthouse' films with gay characters or themes, but it seems reasonable to assert that these will have had a limited impact on the general public consciousness. Few Indian <sup>3</sup>Queer Film Festivals like *Kashish: Mumbai International Queer Film Festival*; *Nigah Queer Fest, Delhi*; *Bangalore Queer Film Festival*; *Dialogues: Annual Kolkata Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Film and Video Festival* and *Lesbian and Gay Film Festival at Panjab University, Chandigarh* are playing a crucial role in taking queer cinema to queer as well as mainstream audience. Bollywood can take some credit for making the LGBT community visible on big screen atleast but it is the cinema shown at festivals that brings out the plight of LGBT community as real, credible human beings. It is here that stories are told with compassion and are meant to touch the hearts and not take them on the voyeuristic tour.

The homophobia which we witness today in the society, manifested in beatings and murders of gay people in the West, public execution in the Middle East, violence against gay people and calls to persecute them in many countries, including India and Nepal, is a product not of the ancient or medieval past, but rather of modernity. Under colonial rule, what was a minor strain of homophobia in Indian traditions became the dominant ideology. The British introduced in India, as in most countries they colonized, a law criminalizing homosexuality. In India, this law, prohibiting sex 'against the order of nature' (Section 377, Indian Penal Code, 1860) remains in the books. It is widely used to blackmail and harass gay men and women.

The historic judgement by Delhi High Court on 2 July 2009 on de-criminalising homosexuality as a result of the petition filed by an NGO named NAZ Foundation working on HIV/AIDS and gay rights in 2001 brought cheers to the LGBT community. After eight long years of legal proceedings, it was only in 2009 that homosexuality was de-criminalized in India. But in the year 2013, the Supreme Court of India re-criminalized homosexuality which disappointed many belonging to the LGBT community. However, the Supreme Court of India on 2 February 2016, agreed to reconsider its judgement, stating it would refer petitions to abolish Section 377.

However, 2014 came as a year of relief and celebration for many belonging to Transgender community in India. In a landmark judgement on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014, the Supreme Court of India legally recognised the transgender community as 'Third Gender'. Protecting one's right to personal autonomy and self-determination under Article 21, the court observed that "*the gender to which a person belongs is to be determined by the person concerned*". The court also protected one's gender expression by invoking the freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a) and held that "*no restriction can be placed on one's personal appearance or choice of dressing, subject to the restrictions contained in Article 19 (2) of the Constitution*".

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To study Hindi queer cinema as a means to understand what being 'queer' means.
2. To study the problems and issues of the LGBT people as raised and discussed in Hindi cinema.

## Hypotheses

1. Hindi queer cinema portrays stereotyped LGBT characters
2. The issues and problems of LGBT people in Hindi cinema are always a side story and are used for comic relief to entertain audience.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

*The research methodology adopted for the research study is 'Content Analysis'. Content Analysis of the Hindi movies featuring LGBT characters is done. Before selecting the films for the research study, a small pilot study was done and all the Hindi films made on LGBT themes between (1990 and 2016) were observed and studied. As 1990s was the time period when the Hindi cinema started having LGBT representation in the films due to the culmination of the gay rights movement in the Indian society. Before this too, LGBT characters had representation in the Hindi cinema but it was majorly in the form of Transvestite/Cross dressing.*

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<sup>3</sup>Queer means 'strange' or 'peculiar'. It is an umbrella term which is used for sexual and gender minorities that are not heterosexual. This term was used pejoratively against those with same-sex desires in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term is also sometimes used by LGBT (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders) people to refer to the entire LGBT community.

<sup>4</sup> Gender refers to ways in which people act, interact, or feel about themselves, which are associated with boys/men and girls/women. While aspects of biological sex are the same across different cultures, aspects of gender may not be.

## LGBT community and Indian Society

The path-breaking event responsible for bringing LGBT rights into the public discourse in India was when two young women from a village in Madhya Pradesh in the year 1987 decided to marry in the temple of the village but were harassed by the police, who physically assaulted and threatened them. After that, when they got married, they clicked photographs of their marital rites and this caught the attention of media and brought into focus the issue of LGBT rights in the public sphere. The second significant event was when AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) took out a 'gay rights protest', and submitted their report titled '*Less than gay*', that reported police inhumane acts on homosexuals, in 1992. Another time when the issue of same-sex marriage caught attention of the public in India was when a film on lesbians, titled *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta, in 1998, was due for release. The film faced a lot of protests from various fringe groups. The fundamentalists caused a great deal of physical damage to the cinema halls screening the movie.

According to India's census of 2011, that counted transgender population for the first time, India has an estimated 4.9 lakh Transgenders who identified themselves as 'third gender'. Transgenders face a number of problems in India. They are shunned by their families and society; they are denied of their basic civil rights; they have limited access to education and health facilities like HIV care; they become victims of sexual harassment and violence, they are restricted from participating in social and cultural activities; politics and decision making is out of their reach majorly and adding to their miseries is Section 377 of Indian Penal Code which criminalises homosexuality. According to a Government report submitted to Supreme Court of India. India has an estimated 25 lakh gay population and about 7% (1.75 lakh) of them have HIV. According to Naz Foundation, an NGO, working for the welfare and rehabilitation of people with the HIV, criminalising gay sex will lead to preventing gays come out in the open. This population is hidden in the society which restricts them from getting proper health care facilities.

However, 2014 came as a year of relief and celebration for many belonging to LGBT community in India. In a landmark judgement on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2014, the Supreme Court of India legally recognised the transgender community as '*Third Gender*' and observed that "The transgender community, generally known as "hijras" in this country are a section of Indian citizens who are treated by the society as "unnatural and generally as objects of mockery and even on account of superstition". In its judgement, Supreme Court passed the ruling that "In view of the constitutional guarantee, the transgender community is entitled to basic rights i.e Right to Personal Liberty, dignity, Freedom of expression, Right to Education and Empowerment, Right against violence, Discrimination and exploitation and Right to work.

### 4. QUEST FOR ACCEPTANCE:

Section 377 must be repealed. This will not end homophobia. Section 377 is an old-fashioned law and does not fit into the most beautiful idea of India: that of a liberal pluralistic inclusive culture where difference is celebrated and unity on diversity is upheld as a tradition. To believe that the government should be allowed to tell its citizens who they may love or not love sounds like something out of an Orwellian nightmare. The heart has its reasons we have been told and so does the body. The State should not choose to control that which cannot be controlled. If we laugh at King Canute who thought he could control the tides, how can we not laugh at a statue that seeks to uphold some ancient ideas about homosexuality, that seeks to control that what is natural and inherent in one-tenth of humanity?

The question here arises that how can the law demean those whose sexuality does not fit into the heterosexual framework. Section 377 must go. This will not end homophobia-the law cannot tell people what they may or may not hate any more than it can mandate love-but it will strike a blow at the narrow-mindedness that prevents people from becoming the heaven of freedom into which they wish to awake.

### 5. LGBT community and Queer Hindi Cinema-Analysis

LGBT characters in Queer Hindi cinema bear the burden of crude jokes and are generally shown as objects of ridicule. During the so-called 'Golden Era' of Hindi Cinema, i.e. the period from mid 50s to mid 60s, LGBT characters were generally shown as companions to heroines or hero. Some of the actors, would cross dress deliberately in an attempt to evoke laughter. Commercial Hindi Cinema has a long tradition of having comic sequences or songs featuring cross-dressing male stars. '*Mere Angane mein*' number from the 1981 super hit *Lawaaris*, where Amitabh Bachchan crossdressed as woman to be mistaken as a eunuch; Rishi Kapoor crossdressed in 1975's *Rafoo Chakkar*. It was the late comedian Mehmood who, for the first time, represented eunuchs in a respectable manner in his blockbuster *Kunwara Baap*.

According to Hoshang Merchant<sup>1</sup> in movies like *Andaz* ('A Matter of Style', 1949) and *Sangam* ('Confluence', 1964) where 'the real love plot is dosti or yaarana (friendship) between the two heroes and the female lead is there only to lessen the homosexual sting. According to Shohini Ghosh the film *Dosti* (1964)-dealing with 'the intense friendship between two poor and physically-disabled young men who struggle to survive in the city'-as an allegory of homosexual love expressed through the metaphor of physical disability. R.Raj Rao, Gayathri Gopinath and Ashok Row Kavi have all queered Bollywood in a similar vein.

The 1990s was an important period for the Hindi film industry as it began to witness a transition from timeless and repetitive stories on love, friendship to contemporary and darker films. The restlessness, discomfort and anxieties created by films were expressed in debates. Certain kinds of images were accused of being erotic and vulgar and censured for degrading Indian culture and tradition. Despite public anxieties, representations of sex and sexuality continued to find space in different forms of media, which went against conventional family values and at times hetero-normativity. Queer images rarely found significant space in commercial ventures but whenever they did, it was in the form of comic relief which could be found in large number of Hindi films. Gay representations have been made in different ways in Hindi films. The first in the form of *hijra*, the second is in the form of *humour*, the third is in the form of *mental sickness* and lastly, is in the way in which it shows the *complexities of the lives gay people lead*.

Third gender played a significant role in Hindi cinema. Films like '*Tamanna*', '*Shabnam Mausi*', '*Daayra*', '*Darmiyan*', '*Welcome to Sajjanpur*' attempted to take a serious take on third gender. For the first time in the history of Hindi cinema, filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt casted actor Sadashiv Amrapurkar as 'Maharani', a eunuch who was the lead villain of the movie *Sadak*. The actor's performance fetched him a Filmfare award but the role did little to improve the image of eunuchs in the society. The movie depicted her as an evil brothel owner who tortures and traffics young women. In a film where the trans character got so much screentime, there was a constant reiteration of the harmful myths associated with the trans community, ultimately creating a stereotype in Indian mainstream culture.

After *Sadak*, Mahesh Bhatt again showed courage and made *Tamanna*, based on the actual life of a eunuch, 'Tiku'. The film had a complex portrayal of a transwoman, who finds an abandoned girl child and raises her as her own. The movie made an attempt to tackle both transgender issues (such as discrimination, violence, misgendering) as well as female infanticide. The role was brilliantly performed by the versatile actor Paresh Rawal. *Daayra* is another film which dealt with gender-fluidity in an interesting manner. It depicted a transsexual character who formed a close relationship with a young girl who took on a male identity. Movies like *Shabnam Mausi* and *Welcome to Sajjanpur* were landmark films which showed eunuchs as clean politicians by showcasing real life incidents of eunuchs winning elections. *Queens! Destiny of Dance*, is a movie that portrayed various shades of the hijra community without resorting to cheap gimmickry which is generally portrayed in mainstream hindi films. Unfortunately, these films barely got any mainstream attention. Barring few examples, the scenario has not changed much, be it Govinda in *Aunty No 1* or Ajay Devgan, Tushar Kapoor etc in *Golmaal Returns*.

Mostly trans characters are given horrific treatment. They are often seen to be preying on the hero sexually (almost always, without their consent) or turned into exaggerated 'effeminate' caricatures who are there to elicit laughs. Films like '*Kya Kool Hain Hum*', '*Partner*', '*Style*', and many more featured such horrific stereotypes of trans women as sexually predatory. The film '*Masti*' (2004) probably had the worst kind of portrayal. Hindi cinema must be guilty of portraying LGBT characters in a highly demeaning manner. Movies like such may be entertaining to watch but are they giving fair screen representation to the LGBT community, remains a daunting question. The year 2016 got to see some positive LGBT representation in Hindi cinema, through films like '*Aligarh*' and '*Kapoor and Sons*'.

The question here arises as to why; there are a handful of explicitly gay-themed films which have visible LGBT characters. In almost every Hindi film, either the trans person is portrayed as a horrifying villain or in a comic way with offensive transphobic humour directed at them. There is other extreme where the trans person is seen as outside the bounds of 'normal'-as a sexual predator, a child molester, or someone who is out to prey on (cis) hero or heroine. 1991's *Mast Kalandar* is a landmark movie. It was the Bollywood's first movie to have openly featured first gay character Pinku. (*Pinku in his flaming yellow or pink suits, Pinku is both pansy and comic rolled into one. A gay little tune strikes up whenever he enters and to make it really sure that one is left in no doubt about film, Pinku in his opening scene runs his fingers over his father's brawny body and asks 'Daddy hamara body aapke jaise strong aur muscular kyon nahin hain?'*) The lesbian-themed films like *Fire* (1998) where two sisters-in-law neglected by their respective husbands find comfort in each other arms and *Girlfriend* (2004) where an obsessive lesbian ready to do anything to win her girlfriend back from a man created lot of controversy at the time of release of the movie. Shifting to non-commercial Riyad Wadia's *BOMgay* (1996) is acknowledged as India's first gay film while Gulabi Aaina (2003) has the distinction of being India's First Kothi film. However, these films have only been screened privately or

at film festivals (they were either denied a censor certificate or did not bother applying) thus limiting their audience reach, despite the favourable publicity they received.

Unfortunately, mainstream Hindi cinema couldn't do much justice to the queer identities. Madhur Bhandarkar's 'Page 3'. Anurag Basu's 'Life in a ...Metro', Reema Kagti's 'Honeymoon Travels', Karan Razdan's 'Girlfriend', 'Hum Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke', 'Raja Hindustani', 'Taal', 'Kal Ho Na Ho', propagated same gay stereotypes which should have been avoided. There are host of alternate Hindi films that made an effort to understand the queer movement. Few amongst those are 'My Brother...Nikhil', 'IAM', 'Yours Emotionally', 'Water', 'I Can't Think straight', 'Luck by Chance', '68 Pages', 'The Pink Mirror', and so on. The contributions of gay rights activists and filmmakers like Sridhar Rangayan, Onir and Rituparno Ghosh to this genre have been remarkable.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

Times are changing and with that sexual minorities are slowly finding a place in Hindi cinema. Gay characters are slowly finding space in the movies and discussions of the rights of marginalized groups have also surfaced within popular culture. Mainstream Hindi cinema has begun to talk openly about the subject, though not always with a great degree of sensitivity. The question is not here of what some people think and believe but of justice and equal treatment. The gay sidekick is a regular comic character in many Hindi films from the 1990s. It would be wrong to judge and discriminate people who may be different from the stereotype which is again man made. Portrayal of life stories and issues faced by lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, hijras and others who identified as 'queer' in films in a positive manner has acted as a balm for the community. The social acceptance of the community will only happen when the LGBT characters in films are given fair treatment. The mainstream Hindi cinema failed to portray vividly the plight of LGBT characters and their interpersonal relations in comparison to alternate Hindi cinema. When a majority of filmmakers can make films on heterosexual relations then why can't few filmmakers make films on LGBT issues and problems. Though few directors have tried their hands on making movies on LGBT people and their issues but there still remain so many things unexplored. Many people in India today follow alternate sexualities but they refuse to talk about it openly because of the fear of discrimination by the mainstream society. A lot more representation is needed in terms of Hindi cinema which can provide the much-needed platform for interaction between people who are still in the closet

At times the censor board put a spanner and often government machinery is found to be not in sync with the changing times and ethos and then there are fringe groups that creates controversy. The commercial failure of LGBT films also raises a big question-whether the attitude of the people towards the LGBT community is changed or changing or has changed or yet to change? The question here arises whether the gender discourse has accommodated them or not remains a daunting question. It is what the holistic representation in the films that the community is waiting for. It is important to recognize and highlight these new challenges that our society has to encounter. The engagement of the LGBT community be it with the political class, be it art or films- needs to be proactive. Why is there this silence when we talk about sexuality? Why do one have to hide his/her sexual orientation? One doesn't have to hide if one is a heterosexual, they why does one have to hide if one is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This is something which is primary to human existence, to leading one's life with dignity. This silence is not going to help the community and has to end. Being out matters!

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