

kind of childhood that I never managed to have. (Yes, I am scarily turning into an archetypal Indian parent).

His parents are very encouraging—they don't think that it's weird that a 24-year-old man and a 14-year-old boy would want to spend so much time together with each other. I try my best to be straight acting—but it's a small world that we move around in and eventually, they question me about the rumours they have heard about my sexuality. I deny them and they choose to believe me.

But it's hard for Manav—his friends start to tease him, first about having a gay brother and then, about being gay himself. I try to convey to him the importance of being his own person, of not being swayed by the silly jibes of other people and tell him that their comments stem out of jealousy because of his film actor status, but I know I am fighting a losing battle. He just wants to fit in and needs definition from me—maybe he has made up his mind and wants me to come out to him, so that he can take a stand on where he wants to position himself in my life. I am too chicken. My moralizing about the larger picture is not the solution, but I am scared of losing him if I do come out.

I realize that the loss is inevitable in any case. I am fed up about lying and scheming so that my gay life does not seep into our happy bubble. After breaking up with Z, I haven't had the time to date anyone seriously, and I'd like to get back to that. Manav badly wants to be accepted into the normal world of his friends—his association with me is an impediment, as is his status as an actor. He needs to lose both to succeed. First, the hugs stop, then he stops telling me he loves me and calling me bhaiya (brother). We begin to find excuses not to spend weekends with each other, go for our weekly Bollywood fix with our separate groups of friends. Eventually, we float into our own hermetic worlds as, perhaps, it was always meant to be.

QUEER INDIAN FILMS

Commercial Bollywood cinema has a long tradition of having comic sequences or songs featuring cross-dressing male stars (think Amitabh Bachchan in a sari in 1981's *Laawaris*—'The Orphan'; Rishi Kapoor in a dress in 1975's *Rafoo Chakkar*—'The Runaways') or any number of songs

featuring *hijras*. It is becoming quite trendy to read Bollywood films as 'gay' or 'queer'.¹⁷⁷ Hoshang Merchant mentions the *Andaz* ('A Matter of Style', 1949) and *Sangam* ('Confluence', 1964) love triangles where 'the real love plot is...*dosti* or *yaaarana* [friendship] between the two heroes.... The female lead is there only to lessen the homosexual sting';¹⁷⁸ Shohini Ghosh reads *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'.¹⁷⁹ R. Raj Rao, Gayathri Gopinath and Ashok Row Kavi have all queered Bollywood in a similar vein,¹⁸⁰ as have other writers for other Indian cinemas beyond Bollywood.¹⁸¹

Why, there are even now, a handful of explicitly gay-themed Bollywood films, or films which have visible LGBT characters, problematic as these might be. 1991's *Mast Kalander* ('Intoxicated') is a landmark in this context. It features Bollywood's 'first'¹⁸² out and out gay character Pinku. If Hollywood's first gay characters were either comic or villainous, Pinku was both and the critics had a field day!

Pinku [is] a new generation gangster. 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 just to make really sure that you are left in no doubt about him, 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 hai?*' ('Daddy, why is not my body as strong and muscular as yours?') When Pinku is not plotting fell murders and kidnappings, he pleads for a motorbike ('Daddy, I want to live dangerously'), or chases men.... And when all the thugs are finally rounded up in the police lock up, Pinku exults at what he sees as a heaven-sent opportunity.¹⁸³

The gay sidekick is a regular comic character in many Bollywood films from the 1990s onward, like *Hum Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke* ('Companions on the Road of Love', 1993), *Raja Hindustani* ('Indian King', 1996) and *Taal* ('Rhythm', 1999); he has been replaced in more recent films like *Page 3* (2004) and *Let's Enjoy* (2004) with the debauched, decadent gay designer, hitting on straight men with impunity for his own sexual gratification.

Very rarely, we manage to find somewhat complex gay characters in films like *Bombay Boys* (1998) and *Split Wide Open* (1999), or *sensitive hijra* portrayals in films like *Bombay* (1995), *Tamanna* ('Desire', 1997) and

Darmiyaan ('In-between', 1997). There have also been villainous *hijras* in *Sadak* ('Street', 1991) and the reality-inspired *Shabnam Mausi* ('Aunt Shabnam', 2005; the biopic of a high profile Indian *hijra* who was elected as a member of the legislative assembly in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh).¹⁸⁴ The controversy that the lesbian-themed films *Fire* (1998; two sisters-in-law neglected by their respective husbands find comfort in each others arms) and *Girlfriend* (2004; obsessive lesbian ready to do anything to win her *girlfriend* back from a man) generate on their release, is well documented.¹⁸⁵ And then, of course, there is 2003's *Kal Ho Na Ho* ('If Tomorrow Does Not Come') and its arguably funny gay subplot between the two lead actors,¹⁸⁶ along with a slew of releases in the same year with both disparagingly camp or comic (*Out of Control*, *Masti* [Mischievous], *Mango Soufflé*, *Market*) and somewhat non-stereotypical (*Rules*, *Chameli*, *Hyderabad Blues* 2) characterizations that began full fledged mainstream media chatter about gay Bollywood.¹⁸⁷

In 2006, *Quest*, a tedious and quite problematic look at the aftermath of a woman's life after she catches her husband in bed with another man, managed to slip under the radar on to urban multiplex screens, do a fairly good amount of business and slip away quietly. By 2007, there seems to be gay reference in almost every second or third Bollywood release. *The Bong Connection*, *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.*, *Marigold*, *Metro*... So much so that the Gay Bombay mailing list has begun conducting an online Gay Reference Audit for Bollywood—or GRAB!¹⁸⁸

I was in India in March 2005, when *My Brother Nikhil*, a Bollywood film dealing with the trials and tribulations of a gay champion swimmer who is found to be HIV positive (based on the real life story of Dominic D'Souza) hit the screen. My curiosity was piqued by the clever television promos, featuring a host of celebrities asking—'I care for *My Brother Nikhil*, do you?' When I went to see the film, I was blown away completely. As the *Outlook* magazine film critic wrote, the debutant director Onir had managed to tackle 'homosexuality without treating it as an ugly joke, a dirty alliance or an aberration'; in itself a cause for celebration.

The gay relationship here is not designed to shock the audience or make them feel queasy but is so 'normal' that the two lovers seem just like any other couple—intimate yet jealous and insecure, happy but quarrelling, sharing and facing up to an imminent loss. It is the love and faith that matters, whether it is man-woman, man-man or woman-woman.¹⁸⁹

Most of the mainstream English press was similarly deferential in the way they treated the film's gay theme.¹⁹⁰ There were also no angry protests from the cultural police and no theatre vandalism.¹⁹¹ But more than the press reactions and the absence of a voluble public outcry, what struck me most as I watched the film in a houseful multiplex in South Bombay, was the reaction of the audience. They really seemed to *get* it—there were no hoots, no uncomfortable coughing when the couple was together. I was accompanied by a bunch of straight friends for *My Brother Nikhil*—and while they had been uncomfortable discussing my homosexuality before, now they had a context to ask me all the questions that they had wanted to. As I walked out of the film screening, I could see and hear animated conversations being carried out among the other viewers about different aspects of the story and the homosexuality of the protagonist... it was an extraordinary feeling.

I am also heartened to observe *Rules* director Parvati Balagopalan assert—

The gay couple was part of our script from the beginning. The movie spoke about various aspects of love and homosexuality is one of them. The movie was a discourse on love and we wanted to treat all kinds of love equally. There was no criticism, because there was no sensationalism at all. It was treated the way any other normal relationship would be.¹⁹²

Shifting to non-commercial cinema, Riyad Wadia's *BOMgAY* (1996) is acknowledged as India's first gay film while *Gulabi Aaina* ('The Pink Mirror', 2003) has the distinction of being India's first *kothi* film.¹⁹³ They have been followed by a succession of diverse works

1. Tirthankar Guha Thakurta's *Piku Bhalo Achhey* from Calcutta ('Piku is Fine', 2004; a partly-fictional Bengali self-acceptance narrative)
2. Ligy J. Pullappally's *Sancharam* from Kerala ('The Journey', 2004; a lesbian love story set in the south Indian state of Kerala)
3. T. Jayshree's *Many People, Many Desires* from Bangalore (2004; a documentary about the LGBT community in Bangalore)
4. Santosh Sivan's *Navrasa* (2004; a look at the South Indian transsexual Araavani community)
5. Shohini Ghosh's *Tale of the Night Faries* (2005; a debate over decriminalization of sex work, explored through the narratives of five sex workers from Calcutta)

6. Sridhar Rangayan's *Yours Emotionally!* (2005; a cross-cultural 'gay' love story this time)
7. Ashish Sawhney's *Happy Hookers* (2006; a documentary about male commercial same-sex workers in Bombay)
8. Sridhar Rangayan's *68 Pages* (2007; a HIV-themed drama, produced by the Humsafar Trust)¹⁹⁴

However, these films have only been screened privately or at festivals (they were either denied a censor certificate or did not bother applying), thus limiting their audience reach, despite the favourable publicity they received.

NOTES

1. There have been recent attempts at beginning this archival process online, through blogs such as *Queer Media Watch* (<http://qmediawatch.wordpress.com/about/>)
2. In addition, for an examination of 'queered' Indian advertising, I recommend Ruth Vanita's excellent essay 'Homophobic Fiction/Homoerotic Advertising: The Pleasures and Perils of Twentieth Century Indianness' in *Queering India: Same-sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 127–148.
3. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 63–64.
4. Ruth Vanita, 'The New Homophobia: Ugra's *Chocolate*', in Vanita Ruth and Saleem Kidwai (Eds), *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 248.
5. Saleem Kidwai, 'Introduction to Ismat Chughtai: *Tehri Lakeer*', in Vanita and Kidwai (2001), op. cit., p. 289.
6. Ashok Row Kavi, 'Homosexuals Meet', *Times of India* (Bombay), 18 December 1981.
7. 'Legalize Homosexuality', *Onlooker*, 15–31 August 1977.
8. Mario D'Penha, Comments on 'Legalize Homosexuality', *Historiqueer*, 13 August 2004. <http://historiqueer.blogspot.com/>
9. Ibid.
10. Mukund Padmanabhan, 'The Love that Dare not Speak its Name: A Journey through the Secret World of the Indian Homosexual', *Sunday Magazine*, 13 July–6 August 1988.
11. Mira Savara, 'Who Needs Men?', *Debonair*, April 1988.
12. Shridhar Raghavan, 'Gay: Everything You Wanted to Know about Homosexuality but were Afraid to Find Out', *Gentleman*, August 1991.
13. Anusha Srinivasan, 'I Want My Sex', *Mid-day* (Bombay), 30 June 1993.
14. Madhumita Ghosh, 'Homosexuality: A Thorny Issue', *Sunday Mail Magazine*, 1 September 1991.
15. For example—
 - (a) Soraya Khan, 'Homosexuals—Should They Be Damned?', *Deccan Chronicle* (Hyderabad), 14 August 1993.