

The LGBTQ+ Community and its Representation in Bollywood: A Summary

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Cinema is a huge part of all of our lives, without us even knowing that, no matter if you watch movies or not, you love cinema or not, it impacts our lives and thus it has some responsibility over its shoulders. While it can provide you solace by taking you to a different universe altogether with larger than life heroes on the screen, it can also act as a mirror of the society we live in and reflect the ills that pertain around us, giving us something to think about.

Since cinema is universal, it transcends the boundaries of language, cultures, ethnicities, religions and politics. It is for everyone and thus, proper representation in cinema means reaching people all over the world and telling the stories in the way they need to be told. The Indian cinema tarried in representing the LGBTQIA+ community appropriately for quite some time, and to top that, it actually misrepresented them to an extent that it became hard for the people of LGBTQIA+ community to pave their way in this society.

LGBTQIA, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (one's sexual or gender identity), intersex, and asexual or aromantic or agender. The abbreviation is commonly shortened to LGBTQ+ and LGBT+. The LGBTQIA Community includes non-heterosexual and/or non-cis-gendered individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer or questioning, intersex or asexual or agender or aromantic. The term 'pride', or 'LGBT pride' or 'gay pride' is used to define the community's identity in response to the violence and discrimination faced by it (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Using the word Pride, which is also the opposite of shame, restores the community's identity from being something abnormal and dishonorable. The same ideology has been applied by Queer Nation's (an LGBTQ+ activist organization established in the March of 1990) famous chant "We're here! We're Queer! Get used to it!". LGBTQ+ activism essentially fights against hate and prejudice against the members of the community, such as homophobia, transphobia, biphobia etc. It also includes advocating for LGBTQ+ civil rights such as same-sex marriage.

Indian media, namely Bollywood are not alien to the LGBTQ+ community which is treated asexual minority in the country. The concept of homosexuality has not been explored in Bollywood with sensitivity except for in indie films and recent mainstream movies. The progress can be analyzed by using Clark's (1969) four stages of minority representation and the three periods of Afro-American media representation postulated by Berry (1980) on the basis of black representation in media as done by Raley and Lucas (2006) in their content analysis of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) representation in prime-time network television airing in the fall of the year 2001 titled "Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television's Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters". The stages are non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect, and the periods are the stereotypic age, the new awareness age, and stabilization. Older Mainstream Bollywood fails to present the community in lead roles, which results in no discussion about their specific problems.

We usually see the LGBTQ+ community as secondary characters that are included for humor – which is the second stage of Clark's theory, wherein the minority is ridiculed for the purpose of adding comedy to the movie or show. As per Berry's theory, older Bollywood showcases the community in the stereotypic age, wherein they only portray the stereotypes related to a minority. Media shapes the ideas of the audience, so when there is a stereotypical exaggerated representation of a particular minority, the audience is prone to think of that as the reality. Stereotypes about homosexuality are byproducts of media. The media has influence over which groups are to be perceived negatively or positively by the society, it would have influenced their attitudes in one way or the other. The Medias portrayal of gays and lesbians has an impact on the way people view the homosexual community ('Pooja & Rekha',2018). Members of the LGBTQ+ community are often portrayed in a prejudiced light in films – gay men are shown as overly-feminized sexual predators - especially in cultures such as India that find it difficult to accept the phenomenon. One such example of bad representation is 'Dostana' (2008) by Tarun Mansukhani. 'Dostana' is a story of two men – Sam and Kunal – who pretend to be gay to get an apartment. The movie includes many problematic instances – the major one being the stereotypical representation of the overly-feminized gay man and the handsome hunk gay man. The movie gained 87.1 crore INR in the halls in 2008 which is valued to 224.16 crore INR in 2022. The problematic portrayal of the gay community in a movie gains its ethos because influential actors like Priyanka Chopra Jonas, John Abraham, and

Abhishek Bachchan – consequently influencing public opinion. The film’s director Onir states that – “I am happily surprised that the multiplexes went houseful with *Dostana*.” With a whole lot of Bollywoodism and a little gay humor, the film was made for perfect family viewing. He also mentions how the acceptance of homosexuality in Indian films will happen only when the characters are portrayed without fussing over them, which is ironic because of how gay relationships were shown as a mockery in *Dostana*.

It is to be noted that during this time period, homosexuality was still criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code introduced in 1861, under the British colonial rule. Sexual activities which were “against the order of nature” were banned and same-sex intercourse was perceived as unnatural and heterosexual intercourse as the norm by the British. With a negative public opinion about the community, the Bollywood industry did not take responsibility of advocating for them but used the community and the stereotypes related to it to fulfill their responsibility of providing entertainment. Media plays a crucial role in the portrayal of homosexuality as society is more exposed to what is portrayed in the media, and they take it as it is without questioning. This makes it necessary that media should treat the subject in a sensible and non-prejudiced manner *Pooja & Rekha*, (2018).

Not only filmmakers, but the certification board also plays a role in the lack of LGBTQ+-friendly media in the Hindi Film Industry. This is another reason for the ample and correct representation of the community in independent and alternative media, such as *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta – one of the first Hindi films to openly portray homosexuality. The story is of two sisters-in-laws, both never feeling passion or love for their husbands and burdened with traditional household duties, falling in love. The movie received fourteen international awards and international acclaim, but faced a massive disregard from the Indian population, so much so that the leading actresses Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi faced death threats. *Fire* was then banned in the country by the Censor Board. In recent years if a movie with homosexual protagonists is to pass the Censor Board, it can be banned before releasing due to public dissent *Manjunathana*, (2019).

Margarita With a Straw (2014), by Shonali Bose is another alternative media release which includes lesbian protagonists and showcases disability – cerebral palsy and blindness – in a sensitive and correct manner. A girl with cerebral palsy, Laila, falls in love with a blind girl, Khanum, in New York City while enrolled in a creative writing programme at New York University. The movie also shows a parent’s reaction to their child’s sexuality, which in the context of LGBTQ+ community is an important topic of discussion. In the movie when Laila confesses to her mother that she is bisexual, she is responded by silence – which is worse than words. In *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw* we see non-stereotypical and true representation of the community and addressal of the problems the community faces which is different than those battled by the cis-gendered heterosexual community.

An increase of LGBTQ+ identifying protagonists has been seen in recent years in mainstream Bollywood, most of it is the contribution of the ruling of Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India which legalized homosexuality in India in the year 2018. With the scrapping of Section 377, mainstream filmmakers and directors have begun exploring the community in their movies, for example *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, (2020) by Hitash Kewalya is story of two gay men – Kartik and Aman – falling in love and ending up in a marriage albeit the dissent faced by Aman’s family. They do achieve the blessings of Aman’s family before tying the knot in an extravagant North-Indian style wedding. The movie starring Ayushmann Khurrana and Jitendra Kumar raised a whopping 84 crores INR in the box office whereas *Margarita with a Straw* managed to make 7.4 crores INR. This trend also shows that public opinion regarding the community has become more positive with time. The World Values Survey (WVS) works to gather data of the values and beliefs of the population of 100 countries. According to WVS survey of 2014, 24% of the Indian population deems homosexuality to be justifiable as opposed to the 89% in 1990 who believed that homosexuality is unjustifiable (S., 2018).

More movies in mainstream media starring mainstream Bollywood actors as the protagonist have been coming up – such as *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga* (2019) by Shelly Chopra Dhar starring Sonam Kapoor, *Badhaai Do* (2022) by Harshvardhan Kulkarni starring Rajkumar Rao and Bhumi Pednekar, and *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqu*, (2021) by Abhishek Kapoor starring Ayushmann Khurrana and Vaani Kapoor. The movies do not nail LGBTQ+ representation but they have shifted Indian media from being on Clark’s second stage of ridicule to largely being in-between of the third

and fourth stage of regulation and respect – wherein the community is shown in respectable roles even if the characters are secondary to the storyline.

Based upon on Berry's theory, currently Bollywood is in the second - New Awareness Age – wherein the media moves from a lazy representation of a minority community to one where their primary issues are discussed. The new challenge of Bollywood is to include members of the LGBTQ+ community to play their sexualities in movies instead of casting cis-gendered heterosexual famous actors. It is to be noted that stereotypical and ridiculous representation of the community still exists in mainstream Bollywood and the impact of older problematic Bollywood movies is still ingrained in the minds of the audience. But Indian media in the last two decades have effectively presented the LGBTQ+ community and its problems on the silver and big screen to the Indian audiences and have been able to bring the tabooed theme to be discussed in society. As noted by Kaur (2017), in a country like India where cinema has the potential to shape the perception of majority of the population, realistic films about the LGBT community will definitely have a massive positive impact on the mindsets of the people.

The Bollywood industry should assume responsibility towards the community and release mainstream media which is LGBTQ+-friendly and caters to their community. Only with the change in public opinion will the LGBTQIA community find acceptance in India. This lack of concern for the community in the mainstream Indian cinema lead to the lack of concern and sympathy for them in the real world and this is where the question for the need of correct representation induces. Appropriate representation of LGBTQIA+ community in the mainstream media can actually help in making the society more accepting and inclusive of them. However, we still have a long way to go to repair the damages done by misrepresenting an entire community for our mere entertainment. The cinema holds the power to mould beliefs, shift perspectives and normalize. There is a need for the people of LGBTQIA+ community to come and tell their stories through their lens and we are all here for it.

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