

# Impact of Social Media in Changing Queer Discourse: Evolution of Bollywood LGBTQA Characters

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## Abstract

Literature has always shared a close connection with media. Media, let it be television, newspaper, social media is essentially nothing but methods of communication that provide information to the public. Social media plays a key role in today's world when it comes to shaping view, perceptions, and overall understanding of the surrounding world. Over the years, social media has been used to draw attention to various issues - sometimes receiving positive as well as negative response. LGBTQ movement that started with the Stonewall riots of 1969 is still going strong and social media has played a huge role in making the struggles of Queer community mainstream. Digital platforms have been a powerful tool for minority communities for channelling their voice. Digitization has made communication beyond borders easier thus activism has also become boundaryless. Therefore, social media has played an important role in changing the Queer Discourse in the mainstream media. The following research has used different secondary information sources and different theories to examine how Queer Community is represented in Bollywood films. The research focuses on how social media impacts the popular media that leads to proper representation that further leads to a shift in long-held beliefs and stereotypes. The following research has chosen a handful of Bollywood characters over different eras to show how the shift in representation has been healthy and inclusive. The research will focus how wide representation of Queer community on social media has impacted the treatment of Queer characters in movies. The research will follow how the trajectory has changed from misrepresentation to the right representation in Bollywood.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Bollywood, Queer, LGBTQA, Representation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide 3.2 billion people use social media, making it 42% of the global population (Mohsin). Social media, as a part of the digital revolution has made communication very easy across countries. Digitalization has changed the world drastically, improving and replacing the way individuals used to communicate and express themselves. Roughly 4.5 billion people use the internet and it showcases how digital media has become an essential part of daily life (University Canada West). India as a country is a huge consumer of social media and the number is going higher by the day. In India, it is often used as means of communication, entertainment, and community building.

With a predominantly heteronormative Indian culture, the LGBTQA population has struggled long for social acceptance. With Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code being annulled in 2018, finally the queer community got their much-needed freedom to practice their choice of sexuality (TOI-Online). In the international context, sexual rights and equality legislation are considered as two parameters to measure democratic advancement of a nation. Against this global scenario, the acceptance and popularization of LGBTQA rights in India highlight the growing consciousness of the country. The conversation of Queer Rights has become mainstream due to digital activism bringing a significant change to the popular discourse (Paur 45). Social media is often used by Queer Activists as a medium to create connections, showcase sexual identity and interact with a wider audience. The LGBTQA activists have rightfully taken over social media to make the population more aware of queer rights and representation.

Cinema is not just entertainment but a mirror of the society. Over the years, cinema has been responsible for bringing social change and impacting the collective consciousness of the people. The following study aims to unravel how social media as a vehicle of public conscience and minority representation which has impacted Bollywood's treatment of its LGBTQA characters. The following study will examine and interpret the influenced change in queer representation from several movies, such as "*Sangharsh (1999)*", "*Sadak (1991)*", "*Dostana (2008)*", "*Shubh Managal Zada Savdhan (2020)*" and others. The study will capture how Bollywood, much like Indian society, has been influenced by the digital activism practiced on various social media platforms to change its heteronormative narrative to present LGBTQA characters in a more positive light.

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study follows secondary qualitative research in the form of literature review to analyze how social media has impacted the change in queer discourse in Bollywood. The research has gathered information from different secondary sources, such as research journals, online newspaper articles, websites, digital libraries, and others. The study has collected data from a number of sources to make the research inclusive and factually correct. The research has collected the data and then analyzed them based on themes. The themes have been placed according to the conceptual framework to create a better understanding of the research. The method of data analysis is expected to provide a thorough understanding of how social media has impacted the queer discourse in India mainly focusing on the evolution of LGBTQA characters in Bollywood films.

## 3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Cinema is an important part of one's life. It is not just a means of entertainment but a mirror which reflects the society. The Hindi movie industry, popularly known as Bollywood is considered as a major cultural force in India, often influencing and creating societal perceptions. The decade long cultural shifts that have happened in India owe much of its influence on Bollywood. Indian cinema over the years has determined the thoughts and lifestyle of the country's population (Balabantaray and Samal). Over the years, Bollywood's treatment of its LGBTQA characters have been nothing but poor and negative, further giving into societal stigmas. While some films did justice to the characters, the number of films which further reinforced the horrible stereotypes are more.

However, the movies that have been released in the last five years or so have portrayed a noteworthy change when it comes to the depiction of queer characters which point towards the shift of societal attitude. Social media has now made representation easier for marginalized communities and is often used as a tool for digital activism (McKenzie 19). Different queer activists and individuals have come on to social media to share their struggles and journey with the world, making it easier for them to communicate with the public. The following review will attempt to examine the existing literature on how the queer representation in Bollywood has changed over the years and what part social media played in the whole process. By looking at the older studies, the research aims to identify the existing gaps in the literature and create a framework which helps in understanding the connection between media, representation, and societal norms.

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### A. *Queer Identity in the Indian Context*

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In the cultural context, for many years sexual minorities were not accepted by society. Thus, they fell under the acronym “LGBTI” which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex - denoting the ones whose sexual preferences were different from the heteronormative practice of the society (Chowdhury 183). Only in recent years, certain progressive nations have legalized homosexuality and the rest of the world still has a long way to go. Many Indians over the years have frowned upon the concept of “homosexuality” claiming that it is something invented by the West. However, that is far from the reality, mentions of homosexuality can be found in Hindu mythology. Old Hindu texts such as “*Kamasutra*,” “*Puranas*,” “*Upanishads*” and others have instances of homosexuality mentioned in them (Parasar 4). As a matter of fact, ancient India was much tolerant to the practice of homosexuality. Homophobia came to India at the hands of the British, when they chose Hindu scripture “*Manusmriti*” as the authoritarian voice which was one of the only Hindu scriptures that had a conservative take on homosexuality, denouncing it but not criminalizing.

Furthermore, in 1860 the British introduced section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized the practice of homosexuality. While Foucault claimed that sexuality-based identities were a European concept that emerged in the nineteenth century, he could not have been more wrong (Dasgupta 651). The concept of queer identity has been celebrated in India for centuries. In Ancient India, heterosexual love was depicted through platonic friendship - in the Hindu epic “*Mahabharata*” the bond between Krishna and Arjuna is rightly portrayed so (Burkhart). Krishna revives Arujuna’s stillborn son calling upon his own deeds of truth and kindness, the love and bond he shares with Arjuna being one of the strongest reasons in the matter. In Hindu scriptures, same sex love has been justified by using rebirth. In “*Kathasaritsagara*” princess Kalingasena and Samaprabha fall in love and the latter claims that they must have been bosom friends in their previous birth. In the ancient text “*Kamasutra*” different sexual practices are mentioned which do not lead to procreational sex but are practiced for enjoyment. Then came the “Bhakti movement” which changed the older view of the relationship of deity and his devotees (Rishi 203).

Additionally, the movement transformed how one saw God previously - now God was not a superior being but a friend, a child, a lover. This led to the practice of “gender fluidity” in the songs and poems of the time. Male writers like Tulsidas, Surdas wrote songs as Krishna devotees which can be interpreted as their praise to a male lover. The poets often saw themselves as the “bride of Gods” (Vanita 98). Then in the tenth century, with Muslim invasion, Islamic culture was established in India. The Muslim conqueror Sultan Mahmoud was known for his military

expertise, his political alliances, his rule over Punjab but often a part of his life which is looked over is his relationship with his male slave Ayaz (Kugle 30). In “*Mathnawi-yi Zulali*” Zulali Khanswari talks about Ayaz and Mahmoud’s passionate love affair where Ayaz is described as the perfect lover everyone searches for.

Then in the eighteenth century came the British invaders with their Victorian purity notions. Under the guidance of the British, poets Hali and Hussain participated in “*ethical cleansing*” and portrayed the relationship of Ayaz-Mahmud as a brotherly one stripping them of any homoerotic imagery (Bhaskaran 16). In 1860, “the Anti-Sodomy Law” was introduced in Britain and in the same year the Section 377 of Indian Penal Code was established criminalizing queer relationships. The prejudice against non-normative sex practices was instigated by the British which later became an inseparable part of the Indian psyche. The Hindu nationalists were afraid of the queer past of their religion thus attempts were made to erase and reiterate the Indian history of homosexuality.

### **B. History of LGBTQA Characters in Bollywood**

The rise of feminist movement in the 1970s brought a more diverse representation of different minority groups in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and others. The global society started changing, sexual identity became a signifying aspect in one's overall identity. The queer or the LGBTQA community which originated in the West came to different nations with their “*Anti-AIDS and Discrimination*” campaign making the Queer discourse more mainstream (Ramesh 16). It brought a significant change in the societal attitude which soon was in the queer depiction of world cinema. However, Indian cinema was far from ready or interested in exploring different sexual identities on silver screen. They found their own way to depict queer characters - further reinforcing the shrewd, stereotypical perception society had of the queer community. The characters were showcased as cross-dressing effeminate men often used as comedic relief. The characters often wrongly portrayed as eunuchs or as people who had some kind of mental illness.

Since the 90s, the representation saw a slight change but only pivoting towards something worse. In the film “*Saadak (1991)*” the trans character *Maharani* is depicted as an evil villain, who is a brothel owner, involved in sex trafficking and tortures young women. Films like these further solidify the decades long prejudices (Chowdhury 192). Another film “*Sangharsh (1999)*” had the character Lajja Shankar Pandey played by Ashutosh Rana, who was a cannibal Kali worshiper who killed children as human sacrifice for his deity. The depiction of transgender

characters in Bollywood was either completely demonized or the character was there for comic elements.

However, certain movies have portrayed queer characters in a nuanced way when the popular media was showcasing typical stereotypes. Deepa Mehta directed "*Fire (1996)*" is one of the cultural milestones when it comes to queer depiction in Indian cinema. The film with its initial release faced a lot of backlash and controversy which then led to its ban in Indian metropolitans. The film follows the story of two sisters-in-law Radha and Sita, who are not happy and sexually satisfied in their respective marriages. Then they find solace within themselves as they develop a love affair and fall in love with each other. Then they are inevitably caught by Radha's husband where Radha confesses her love and desire to be with Sita. Mehta should be given applause for being brave enough to introduce lesbianism in a patriarchal Indian society. Mehta showcases how the get together of these two unhappy women is a direct result of Indian middle-class patriarchy (Bose).

While the 2000s cinema still used the idea of same-sex relationship as a comedic interlude. In the movie "*Kal Ho Na Ho (2003)*" the friendship between the characters Rohit and Aman is mistaken by the housemaid as a romantic one and she is thoroughly repulsed by the idea of it. Her exaggerated reaction towards them makes for comedic moments in the film which further contribute to homophobic humor in the popular culture. The movie "*My Brother Nikhil*" released around the same time and it can be called a breakthrough movie in terms of changing or vitalizing the queer discourse (Chowdhury 191). The movie focuses on AIDS awareness while not overly sexualizing its gay protagonist. Later, even some other films depicted same sex relationships or transgender characters but only to get it very wrong.

### **C. Social Media as a Tool for Queer Representation**

In India, over the years queer representation has changed in the popular media. In some cases, queer people received sympathy and acceptance from one section while in other cases influenced by jingoism certain nationalists refused to accept the non-normative sexual identity of the queer people. The popularization of Internet has brought a massive change in the global social and cultural landscapes. A huge variety of cultural content is shared on internet every day and most of these contents increase their chances of wide distribution if they generate an intense emotional reaction from the users. Thus, different social media content like short videos, tweets, pictures which go viral often hold a deeper cultural consequence than given credit to. Social media oftentimes has served as a forum where different real-life events from worldwide protests to local

festivals have been shared. The shift towards “User-Generated Content” has brought the concept of entrainment content which solely focuses on social media, creating job roles like “*social media influencer*” and “*content creator*” (Merced 1283). Now, these influencers who carry a significant influence have the power to cultural psyche through diverse representation.

Additionally, these people often use their social media to engage with a huge number of audiences which later shape their views and mindset about certain societal norms (Rétvári, Kovács, and Kárpáti 176). Different social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and others give the minorities a safe place to showcase their cultural or sexual identity and it helps in challenging the preconceived stereotypes that have been there. Social media over the years has become a safe place for minorities which helps to bridge the cultural gap and connect with people facing the same issues. It provides them to the opportunity to create a digital community that provides a sense of belonging. In India, there are several queer influencers who have used to social media to raise awareness among the masses. Dr Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju is a very popular queer influencer who uses her Instagram and YouTube account to educate people about the queer struggles.

Another queer influencer, Priyanka Paul who identifies as a bisexual, gender fluid, Dalit activist uses her social media to talk about queer identity, sexuality, patriarchy, and other heavy topics in the form of illustrated art (Kumari). Another digital queer activist Durga Gawde, who is an artist and Drag King, uses her media presence to talk about gender fluidity and non-binary identity. Now, these different influencers have used their social media influencer in a positive way to raise awareness about different non-normative sexual identity along with making internet a more inclusive place for all gender identities. This gives the queer youth the power and tools to redefine their sexual identity in terms of activism, social acceptance, politics, relationship, and others - these in terms make their “coming out” journey easier than their forebears (Cooper 90).

#### ***D. Impact of Social Media on Changing the Queer Discourse of Bollywood***

Bollywood for a large number of years has showcased LGBTQA characters in a rather regressive manner, however in recent years movie like “*Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga (2019)*”, “*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020)*”, “*Badhai Do*”, “*Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021)*” and others have portrayed LGBTQA characters under a better light. Previously, only a few independent movies dealt with the queer narrative carefully while mainstream movies often used queer characters either as comic reliefs or ferocious villains. Recently a shift has taken place where mainstream movies are portraying queer stories and LGBTQA narratives have become quite a common topic in movies and OTT shows such as “*Made in Heaven*”, “*Kohrra*” and others. Now

the question lies, why suddenly this has happened which was unimaginable even a decade back. After the Indian Supreme Court revoked the Section 377, Bollywood started making more queer movies giving LGBTQA stories their due recognition. Now, social media worked as a catalyst in the matter as the activists took different digital platforms to channel their voices. Different digital media platforms were used to share the stories, struggles, opinions, and experiences of Queer people. It brought a significant change to societal norms as the queer people finally had a platform to present their identity and be visible in every sense. This further led to the change of queer discourse demanding more just representation in popular media which changed how Bollywood portrayed queer people. With the annulment of Section 377, queer people found their new victory that changed their identity to the world. LGBTQA celebrations such as “Pride Month”, “Azadi March” and others helped the queer community to create solidarity (Li 465). Different Bollywood actors acted as LGBTQA ally later which further helped the LGBTQA people gain recognizing.

While movies like “*Saadak (1991)*”, “*Sangharsh (1999)*”, “*Murder 2 (2011)*” portrayed trans character as an evil one, “*Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021)*” portrayed a trans character as the main romantic lead of the movie who gets love and acceptance in the end from a cis gender heterosexual man normalizing the sexuality of a trans person. While the older movies like “*Kal Ho Na Ho (2003)*” and “*Dostana (2008)*” had heterosexual men acting as gay for a few laughs, movies like “*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020)*” and “*Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga (2019)*” celebrated same-sex love stories while showcasing the struggles queer couple have to go through on a daily basis.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Indian culture had been tolerant or rather accepting of sexual practices that defy the heteronormative structure. The old Hindu mythology and scriptures are evident of the celebratory nature of Hindu culture when it comes to same sex relationships. While colonization of India brought certain changes in positive aspects, it also brought a Victorian purity mindset which introduced Indians to homophobia. After the independence, as India fought to decolonize herself, the acceptance of queer community was one of the last issues that got attention. Evolution brought the Internet in the view, which connected the world population soon becoming one of the most sought-after methods of communication. The queer activists took social media by storm and that helped change the queer discourse in every domain. Cinema is a large part of India's identity as Bollywood is one of most celebrated movie industries across the globe. Digital activism helped in making queer discourse mainstream which further forced Bollywood to change its ways and do justice to its queer characters. While social media and the movie industry have come a long way

to channel the experiences and struggles of queer people, the popular culture is still dominated by heteronormative mindset.

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