

Journal of Media Reflections and Communication Studies

Contents available at: <https://www.swamivivekanandauniversity.ac.in/jmrcs/>

Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative Of India's Historical Archive-With Special Reference To A Comparative Study Of Traditional And Modern Depictions" Films Like Taali, Haddi, Super Deluxe And Aligarh

Sujoy Goswami

Senior Technical Officer, Amity University, Kolkata.

Abstract

This write up is a brief historical overview of the Queer archive in India. The precolonial and colonial archive provides several possibilities for 'authenticating' the queer identity and claiming some of the history that modern nationalist homophobia seeks to wipe out. Identities are complex to begin with and become more complicated when relating them to the nation and sexuality. Contemporary Indian sexual identities are constructed out of the multiplicity's effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonisation and globalisation that are more often than not in conflict with each other. This article is a literature review of several contemporary queer writing in India and creates a starting point for discussions on India's queer sexuality. Indian cinema has historically reflected societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities, with early portrayals often confined to stereotypes and marginal roles. Traditional films frequently depicted queer characters as either comedic caricatures or tragic figures, reinforcing societal biases and limiting authentic representation. This study examines the evolution of queer narratives in Indian cinema, highlighting the significant shift towards more nuanced portrayals in contemporary films. Films such as *Taali* (2023) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) showcase a move towards depth and empathy, reflecting broader societal changes and greater awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. *Taali* offers an authentic portrayal of a transgender activist, while *Margarita with a Straw* provides a ground-breaking depiction of a bisexual woman with a disability. Similarly, *Aligarh* (2015) and *Super Deluxe* (2019) demonstrate a departure from superficial portrayals, focusing on the complexities of queer experiences. Despite progress, Bollywood still grapples with outdated stereotypes, underscoring the need for ongoing advocacy and reform. This study emphasizes the importance of these evolving portrayals in fostering a more inclusive cinematic landscape and contributing to societal understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences.

Keywords: Queer, India, history, Cinematography, Intersectionality, Queer Representation, Stereotypes, Thematic Shifts

Introduction

A critical moment of rupture in Indian queer sexuality occurred with the release of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* in 1996. In the film Sita, remarks to her lover Radha, 'There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other.' Whilst Mehta does not provide a clue as to which language she is referring, her intentions are explicit- to disown English as an Indian language and to show that queer sexuality is not visible within the culture of India, so much so it does not even have a name! Mehta is not alone in her views, here. Foucault claimed that sexuality-based identity categories were invented in nineteenth century Europe that prior to this invention, these did not exist (Foucault, 1990). Recent historians have challenged these views and the Indian archive has several visible examples of discourses around queer sexuality. However Indian historians and queer scholars, Vanita and Kidwai (2000) trace these discourses further back to ancient India. The history of India is quite problematic and complex. It has been the melting pot of several different cultures that have invaded the country and impinged their own cultural specificities on this land. From the earliest Vedic culture up to the colonial era, India has seen a multitude of laws and changing attitudes. Indian cinema has historically been a reflection of the nation's social, cultural, and political milieu. The portrayal of queer identities in Indian cinema has evolved significantly over time, mirroring the changing attitudes and awareness surrounding LGBTQ+ issues in society. Traditionally, queer characters in Indian films were often relegated to stereotypical or marginal roles, reflecting broader societal discomfort with non-normative sexualities and gender identities (Ganti, 2012). The portrayal of queer individuals was frequently limited to comedic caricatures or tragic figures, lacking depth and authenticity. This historical context is essential for understanding the current landscape of queer representation in Indian cinema and underscores the importance of analysing these shifts in portrayal over time. In traditional Indian cinema, queer characters were often depicted through a narrow lens, which reinforced societal prejudices and stereotypes. Early films tended to portray LGBTQ+ individuals in a manner that was either exaggeratedly comedic or patently villainous. For instance, queer characters were sometimes used as comic relief or as embodiments of societal fears about deviance from heteronormative norms. (Kaur, 2016). These portrayals were not only limited in scope but also problematic, as they contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization of LGBTQ+ communities. The emphasis was often on the perceived "otherness" of queer individuals rather than on their lived experiences and complexities. Analysing these traditional depictions provides insight into the ways in which societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities have been reflected and reinforced through cinema.

Ancient and Medieval India: One of the dominant tropes of same sex love in ancient India is through friendship, often leading to a life of celibacy or the forming of some very intimate relationships. In the ancient Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, Krishna and Arjuna, frequently referred to as 'the two Krishnas' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000:3) reflect bonds of friendship which go beyond marriage and procreation. In fact 'Krishna clearly states that Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen- there can be many spouses and sons but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live' (Ibid:5). The *Mahabharata*, one of the most important epics in Hinduism has numerous other examples of same sex 'attachment' many of which have been discussed by Vanita and Kidwai (2000). However, the Krishna and Arjuna friendship remains one of the most important aspects of the epic. A famous conversation in the

epic is between Krishna and Arjuna, where Krishna reiterates their inseparability and reveals his divine form to his friend. This collected conversation between the two is the *Bhagvad Gita*, the most widely read Hindu text. When Arjuna's son is still born, Krishna revives him miraculously, 'by invoking his own acts of truth and righteousness, foremost amongst which is the perfect love between him and Arjuna' (Ibid:8). Thus same-sex friendship gives life to a new born in this case instead of heterosexual conjugality.

Bhakti Movement: During the medieval period, The Bhakti movement was gaining momentum in India. Similar to the Sufi movement in the Perso- Arabic tradition, this movement reframed the perception of god and divinity. The gods were no longer just worshipped as a superior being but were rather seen as friends, lovers, spouse and even child. This opened up fluid intimacies and 'fluidity of gendered structure' (Rishi, 2009:203) between the deity and the devotee.

Perso-Arabic tradition: Whilst ancient and early medieval Indian materials contain scant or few references to same sex love, the late medieval period with the advent of Islamic state culture in India, a huge body of literature on same sex love especially those concerning between men become available. In the latter half of the tenth century, invasions lead by Muslims rulers such as Mahmud of Ghazna (971-1030 AD) culminated in the establishment of an Islamic culture in India. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna is well celebrated in South Asian history for his military prowess in Central and South Asia, his political alliances with the Hindu Kings and for initiating Islamic rule in the Punjab area.

Sufism: In devotional Perso-Arabic mystic poetry like the Bhakti movement I described earlier uses symbols of romantic love to represent the love of god. Islamic mysticism 'allows for a more complex set of possibilities' (Wafer: 1997b, 107). It is similar to the Bhakti poems, however in which 'the love of god is represented using the imagery of romantic relationships between males' (Ibid). Love is at the centre of Sufi poetry and spiritualism. In Sufi literature this love is expressed in homoerotic metaphors, however as Kidwai asserts, 'many Sufis insisted that only same gender love could transcend sex and therefore not distract the seeker' (Vanita and Kidwai: 115). Sufism was attractive to non-Muslims as well because it 'foregrounded personal devotion as opposed to the regimen of a dogma' (Ibid: 114). Wafer also points out that it was ambiguity that was used as a device to constantly switch between the erotic and the mystical. The imagery used drew on legendary love stories like Laila- and Majnun and Mahmud and Ayaz (Wafer: 1997b). Kidwai analyses some of the works by Amir Khusro, a Sufi mystic who lived around the thirteenth century and was venerated as a saint. His poems frequently refer to Nizamuddin Chisti, a fellow mystic and saint.

Contemporary Depictions in Indian Cinema: The shift in queer representation in Indian cinema marks a transformative period, reflecting broader societal changes and an evolving understanding of LGBTQ+ identities. With the advent of contemporary filmmaking, films like *Taali* (2023) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) stand as pivotal examples of this change, offering richer, more nuanced portrayals of queer characters. These films benefit from a broader societal discourse on LGBTQ+ rights, which has made it possible for filmmakers to explore queer narratives with greater empathy and depth (Sharma, 2018).

***Taali* (2023)**, directed by Ravi Jadhav, is a notable film in this new wave of queer representation. It tells the story of a trans woman, exploring her journey with authenticity and respect. Unlike many earlier representations that often relied on stereotypes or sensationalism, *Taali* focuses on the personal and emotional aspects of the protagonist's life, portraying her struggles and triumphs in a way that resonates with the audience (Jadhav, 2023). The film's approach reflects a growing sensitivity towards trans experiences, showcasing how contemporary Indian cinema is increasingly engaging with LGBTQ+ narratives on a more personal and humane level.

In contrast to these newer films, earlier representations of queer identities in Indian cinema often relied on clichéd portrayals or were marginalized to the fringes of storytelling. However, films like ***Aligarh* (2015)** and ***Super Deluxe* (2019)** represent a shift towards more complex and empathetic narratives. *Aligarh*, directed by Hansal Mehta, is based on the real-life story of Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a professor whose sexuality led to a scandal and personal tragedy. The film delves into the professor's struggles with societal and institutional discrimination, offering a poignant exploration of the isolation and prejudice faced by LGBTQ+ individuals (Mehta, 2015). This film's critical portrayal of the systemic barriers faced by queer individuals highlights a significant departure from the more superficial or exploitative depictions of the past.

***Super Deluxe* (2019)**, directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, features a subplot involving a queer relationship that is integrated into the film's broader narrative. The film's portrayal of queer characters is marked by its naturalness and its integration into the larger fabric of the story, avoiding the sensationalism often associated with queer narratives. By presenting these characters as integral parts of the narrative rather than standalone or stereotypical figures, *Super Deluxe* demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of queer experiences (Kumararaja, 2019).

Beyond the Surface: Unpacking Queer Stereotypes in Bollywood Cinema: Bollywood, India's dominant film industry, has long grappled with representing queer identities in its narratives. Traditionally, queer characters in Bollywood have been subjected to a range of stereotypes, from comedic relief to tragic figures, reflecting both societal attitudes and cinematic conventions. Historically, queer characters in Bollywood were often portrayed through exaggerated and one-dimensional stereotypes. Films like *Hum* (1991) and *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996) exemplify this trend. In *Hum*, the character of the effeminate, comic villain epitomizes the use of queer stereotypes for humour (Chakraborty, 2019). Similarly, *Kama Sutra* depicts queer identities in a sensationalized manner, focusing more on exoticism than on authentic representation (Saxena, 2020). The comedic portrayal of queer characters has been prevalent in Bollywood. *Biwi-O-Biwi* (2009) and *Double Dhamaal* (2011) often rely on exaggerated mannerisms and situations for humour. These films perpetuate the stereotype that queer individuals are inherently humorous or absurd, reducing their identities to mere punchlines rather than exploring their complexities (Ghosh, 2020). This trend has reinforced societal biases, positioning queer identities as something to be laughed at rather than understood.

However, recent Bollywood films have started to challenge these stereotypes. *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Aligarh* (2015) represent significant shifts in this regard. *Margarita with a Straw* portrays a bisexual protagonist, Laila, with depth and nuance, exploring her complex identity and experiences (Goswami, 2021). Similarly, *Aligarh* presents the story of a gay professor, focusing on his personal

struggles and societal rejection without resorting to sensationalism (Singh, 2022). These films mark a departure from traditional stereotypes, offering more authentic and empathetic portrayals. Another example is *Taali* (2023), which portrays the life of a transgender woman in a manner that seeks to humanize and normalize her experiences rather than sensationalize them. The film's approach contrasts with earlier Bollywood depictions, providing a more nuanced perspective on transgender issues (Verma, 2024).

Research Objectives:

- To Identify Stereotypes in Traditional Depictions
- To Determine Changes in Contemporary Representations

Methodology :

Four movies which are related to queer representation from the year 2014 -20223 namely “**Taali**”, “**Haddi**”, “**Super Deluxe**”, and “**Aligarh**” Based on these five films, visual content analysis method is applied to the study and data from secondary sources such as movie reviews, articles on films, books and film theories to understand the Examines the portrayal of queer characters and themes through visual elements such as cinematography, mise-en-scene, and character portrayal in the selected films.

Case Study:

- I. **Taali (2023)**: tells the story of a transgender woman, Gauri Sawant, who fights for acceptance and respect in a society that often marginalizes her. The film explores her struggles and triumphs as she battles for her rights and strives to live authentically. Through her journey, Taali sheds light on the they must overcome to gain recognition and dignity.



Fig-1

Dir-Ravi Jadhav

Language-Hindi

Release Date-15th Aug 2023

Source- <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt22531848/>

- II. **Haddi (2023):** In Haddi, a transgender person seeks revenge while dealing with societal bias and discrimination. The film focuses on the protagonist's quest for justice and their struggle to be accepted in a world that often views them with prejudice. As they confront various challenges, Haddi explores themes of identity, resilience, and the fight against systemic oppression.

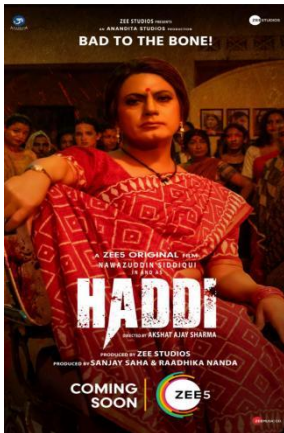


Fig-2

Dir-Akshat Ajay Sharma

Lan-Hindi

Release Date-7th Sep 2023

Source- <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt22188452/>

- III. **Super Deluxe(2019) :** Intertwines several stories set in a small town, including one about a queer character. The film presents a rich tapestry of lives intersecting, each dealing with societal expectations and personal dilemmas. Through its multiple narratives, Super Deluxe offers a look at the complexities of human relationships and the societal norms that shape them.



Fig-3

Dir-Thiagarajan Kumararaja

Lan-Tamil

Release Date-29th March 2019

Source- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Deluxe_%28film%29

IV Aligarh (2015): Is based on the true story of a gay professor who faces discrimination and harassment due to his sexual orientation. The film depicts his struggle for dignity and acceptance in a conservative society. Aligarh address's themes of social prejudice and the quest for personal and professional respect amidst adversity



Fig-4

Dir-Hansal Mehta

Lan-Hindi

Release Date-26th Feb 2016

Source- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aligarh_%28film%29

Conclusion: In analyzing queer narratives in Indian cinema, Taali, Haddi, *Super Deluxe*, Margarita with a Straw, and Aligarh present diverse approaches to portraying queer identities, reflecting shifts from traditional to contemporary depictions. Taali stands out for its transformative representation of transgender identities, centered around the real-life figure Gauri Sawant. Unlike earlier portrayals, such as in *Aligarh*, which often emphasize victimization, Taali presents Gauri as a resilient leader and activist. The series highlights her pivotal role in legal reforms and activism, reflecting a broader societal shift towards recognizing transgender rights. The celebratory tone and focus on empowerment mark a significant departure from the tragic narratives of traditional cinema, offering a hopeful vision of progress. In contrast, Haddi provides a contemporary yet stark portrayal of a transgender woman, played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui. The film explores themes of violence, revenge, and resilience, depicting Haddi's journey from victimization to empowerment within a criminal underworld. This narrative reflects a departure from earlier queer films like Aligarh, which emphasize passive suffering. Haddi presents its protagonist with considerable agency, challenging traditional stereotypes and offering a nuanced view of transgender life in a hostile environment.

Super Deluxe offers a sophisticated portrayal of a transgender character through Vijay Sethupathi's performance. The film balances themes of personal struggle and societal acceptance, integrating its queer narrative into a multi-layered storyline. It contrasts with the passive suffering depicted in older films by using visual symbolism and sensitive dialogue to contribute to its respectful and progressive representation of queer. Margarita with a Straw portrays queer identity through the lens of a young woman with cerebral palsy, navigating her sexuality and disability. The film highlights personal liberation and self-discovery, offering a contemporary perspective that diverges from traditional narratives. It emphasizes the

protagonist's agency and personal growth, reflecting a broader trend in queer cinema towards inclusive and empowering portrayals.

Aligarh, on the other hand, presents a more traditional and tragic view of queer life through the character of Professor Siras. The film focuses on societal rejection and institutionalized homophobia, offering a poignant depiction of the struggles faced by gay individuals in a conservative society. The somber tone and emphasis on victimization reflect the earlier cinematic approach, contrasting with the more empowered and complex portrayals seen in contemporary films. Overall, the comparison reveals a shift in Indian cinema from traditional, often tragic portrayals of queer identities towards more nuanced, empowered, and diverse representations. Films like *Taali* and *Haddi* illustrate a move towards depicting queer characters with agency and resilience, while *Aligarh* and *Margarita with a Straw* highlight the evolution of queer narratives from victimization to self-empowerment. This shift reflects broader cultural changes and an increasing recognition of queer lives and struggles in Indian cinema.

References:

1. Bose, S. (Director). (2014). *Margarita with a Straw*. India: Laila Films.
2. Chakraborty, R. (2019). *Representation of Queer Characters in Bollywood: A Critical Analysis*. South Asian Popular Culture, 17(2), 115-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2019.1611712>.
3. Dey, S. (2022). *Queer Narratives in Indian Cinema: Challenges and Opportunities*. Journal of South Asian Cinema, 13(1), 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409190.2022.2073452>.
4. Ganti, T. (2012). *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. Routledge.
5. Ghosh, A. (2020). *Humor and Queerness: The Role of Stereotypes in Bollywood Films*. Media, Culture & Society, 42(3), 411-426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719891213>.
6. Goswami, M. (2021). *Evolving Queer Representation in Contemporary Indian Cinema*. Feminist Media Studies, 21(4), 598-615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917264>.
7. Gupta, R. (2018). *Tragic Queerness: The 'Doomed' Queer Trope in Bollywood*. South Asian Cinema Review, 12(3), 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21507716.2018.1467339>.
8. Jadhav, R. (Director). (2023). *Taali*. India: ZEE Studios.
9. Kumar, R. (2019). *The Politics of Sexuality in Indian Cinema*. SAGE Publications.
10. Kumararaja, T. (Director). (2019). *Super Deluxe*. India: Arun Vaidyanathan Productions.
11. Kaur, R. (2016). *Queer Cinema in Contemporary India: A Study of Sexuality and Gender Representation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Basham, A.L (1959), *The Wonder That was India*, New York: Grove Press
Burton, R (1994), *The Kama Sutra*, London: Penguin
13. Bhaskaran, S (2002), 'The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 and the Indian Penal Code,' in Ruth Vanita (ed) *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in*

Indian Culture and Society, London: Routledge, pp. 15-29

14. Bose, B and Bhattacharya, S (2007) *The Phobic and the Erotic: The politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, Kolkata: Seagull

15. Chatterjee, I (2002), 'Alienation, Intimacy and Gender: Problems for a history of love in South Asia,' in Ruth Vanita (ed) *Queering India: Same Sex Love and*