



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Changing/Unchanging Realities: Mapping Experiences of Same-Sex Love vis-à-vis Section 377 Indian Penal Code Through *Hostel Room 131* (2010) and *Badhaai Do* (2022)

Nikita Mittal | Ajit K. Mishra 

Department of Humanistic Studies, Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi, Varanasi, India

**Correspondence:** Ajit K. Mishra ([akmishra.hss@iitbhu.ac.in](mailto:akmishra.hss@iitbhu.ac.in))**Received:** 27 July 2024 | **Revised:** 9 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 24 February 2025**Keywords:** alternative sexualities | homosexuality | LGBTQ | queer | Section 377 IPC**ABSTRACT**

This article examines experiences of same-sex love in India from the perspective of two narratives located on either side of the historic 2018 Supreme Court of India verdict decriminalizing homosexuality. Although the verdict has led to increased visibility and acceptance of gay individuals in popular culture, this situation remains debatable. To examine the realities of this anticipated transition in the social attitude in India, this article performs a comparative analysis of R. Raj Rao's novel *Hostel Room 131* (2010) and Harshvardhan Kulkarni's film *Badhaai Do* (2022) and maps the inherent tensions between a gay subculture and homophobia temporally located in the pre- and post-2018 Indian society. Being the cultural products of their times, these two works reflect Indian social attitudes and are the best resources to understand the changing/unchanging realities concerning same-sex love in India. The analysis reveals that despite the legal recognition of same-sex love and a paradigm shift in their representations in popular culture, gay people still encounter renewed forms of the same social stigma they were subjected to before the 2018 verdict.

**1 | Introduction**

The history of sexuality in India is intricate and multifaceted. In ancient India, sexuality was characterized by a fluidity (Mubarki 2020; Menon 2011) that allowed for the coexistence of different forms of sexuality without strict categorization, where one was not inherently legitimized over the other (Vanita 2002). Additionally, although same-sex love may not have been openly celebrated, it was never dismissed or trivialized in pre-19th-century India (Vanita and Kidwai 2008). In contrast, modern India has witnessed the widespread demeaning and exclusion of same-sex relationships from civil society as “abnormal.” For more than a century, homosexuality has been seen as a “vice” imported from the West, and this transition in perception dates to the nineteenth-century British Rule in India. Contrary to the present beliefs, India's long-drawn legacy of Section 377 IPC was implemented by the British Colonialists in 1860 criminalizing

homosexuality as immoral and unnatural (Human Rights Watch (Organization) 2008; Bubb 2009; Menon 2018; Dasgupta 2011). Significantly, “Prior to the enactment of this law, queer sexuality was accommodated if not approved in India” (Dasgupta 2011, 660). However, with the introduction of colonial law, sexual binaries were established, which fed the discord between sexualities as moral/immoral, natural/unnatural in Indian society, thus leading to the normalization of social and legal oppression against same-sex love in India and finally resulting in a long-drawn history of discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ people. Moreover, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) had broadly put the homosexual community under the criminal category, which had been the biggest affront to the dignity of gays and lesbians (Gupta 2006).

Despite the stifling conditions barring the homosexual community from being included in the discursive practices concerning

sexuality, same-sex love continued to find a closeted expression in India. The conditions began to take an inclusive turn when the 2018 verdict of the Supreme Court of India read down Section 377 and placed homosexuality out of the ambit of criminal offense providing a ray of hope for the queer community against the prevalent societal discrimination. Although the verdict foregrounded an open expression as well as acceptance of same-sex love, the concomitant slippery realities have been far from being equitable. This article aims to map the experiences of gay people in pre- and post-2018 Indian society to examine the quantum of shift in personal and societal attitudes concerning same-sex love.

## 1.1 | Queer Culture in India: Representation and Reception

Gay and lesbian rights activism evolved in India around the 1980s, and it was in the 1990s that various gay publications came into being (Joseph 1996). The earliest open representation of gay subculture in India manifested through the first gay magazine *Bombay Dost*, which “was a lifeboat for many people who thought they had no one to turn to” (Merchant 2010). It created a space for the queer subculture in a predominantly heterosexist Indian society. In the 1990s, writers like Vikram Seth and Mahesh Dattani began exploring gay themes, whereas directors Riyad Vinci Wadia and Deepa Mehta brought same-sex love to Indian cinema with films like *Bomgay* (1996) and *Fire* (1998), respectively. Although these works were applauded on international platforms, Indian society was not ready to welcome same-sex love into its own culture (Merchant 2010). Nevertheless, such alternative representations in popular culture worked as an ice-breaker that encouraged various gay and lesbian groups to fight for their cause and further led to the conduct of major seminars and conferences on this subject in India (Joseph 1996). Moreover, one of the leading Indian gay rights activists, R Raj Rao, daringly talks about same-sex love in his novels *The Boyfriend* (2002) and *Hostel Room 131* (2010) depicting the struggles and marginalization that gay people face in their daily life ranging from bullying, shame, physical, and emotional abuse to their bold decisions to live on their terms.

A considerable body of scholarly literature examines the marginalization and struggles of homosexuality in heterosexist Indian society before the 2018 verdict (Chowdhury 2017; Chatterjee 2014), along with the mental health challenges faced by those with nonnormative sexuality (Rao and Mason 2018; Chakrapani et al. 2020; Tripathi and Talwar 2022). After the decriminalization of homosexuality, various scholarly works have explored the potential impacts of the 2018 Supreme Court verdict on the lives of the LGBTQ community and the further challenges and hopes in attaining other civil rights like same-sex marriage and adoption rights (Sharma 2021; Jha and Chatterjee 2021; Gunda 2022), and the ongoing issues of awareness and acceptance of homosexuality in contemporary India (Joshi et al. 2022). On the other hand, some scholarly studies have explored the prevalence of conversion therapies in contemporary India, revealing their harmful effects on physical and mental health (Morrison et al. 2021; Ranjan 2023).

The studies discussed above have primarily focused on the effects of Section 377 on LGBTQ lives either before or following its repeal. However, there is a lack of research that offers a comparative exploration of the challenges and experiences of the LGBTQ community during both the pre- and post-2018 periods, assessing the changing/unchanging social and personal dynamics within the shifting discursive spaces of sexuality. In this context, this article presents a comparative analysis of R. Raj Rao's novel, *Hostel Room 131* (2010) and a Hindi film, *Badhaai Do* (2022), directed by Harshvardhan Kulkarni, to examine the discursive practices involving homosexuality and its bearings on an entire culture.

## 1.2 | Method and Material

To examine the Indian societal attitude to and reception of same-sex love after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, a comparative analysis of two texts belonging respectively to the pre- and post-2018 period has been conducted. The literary text, alongside the cinematic text, has been chosen for the analysis because both literature and film, as cultural artifacts of their times, are symbolic constructs that embody a range of meanings deemed possible and acceptable by a given society and reflect how society structures its meanings and shapes its relationships (Stam and Raengo 2004, 82). Also, the most striking characteristic that novels and cinema have in common is their power and propensity for narrative (Cohen 1979; Stam and Raengo 2004). Besides, film as a powerful medium expresses the values and beliefs of contemporary societies (Cloete 2017), and specifically, Hindi Cinema, in the last two decades, has become one of the most popular corpora for understanding Indian society and its various aspects (Dwyer 2014; Ahmed 1992).

Moreover, in the pre-2018 period, the cinematic representations of gay people in mainstream Bollywood (A popular name for Hindi Cinema) had been largely biased, unrealistic, and dramatic, lacking substantial focus on their lives and rendering the cinematic corpora of the period unamenable to this study. Although some parallel films like *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *I Am* (2010), and *Loev* (2015) have dealt with gay men realistically rather than demeaning them, these films have always remained closed only to a small group of people, artists, or film festivals. One of Bollywood's exceptional films *Aligarh* (2015), based on the real-life story of Professor Ramchandra Siras, does represent the social experiences of gay men in the pre-2018 period, but it only charts the journey of a gay man's postdisclosure experiences, leaving his prediscovery journey uncharted. Because it is important to examine both sides of experiences to map gay men's engagement with a heterosexist society in a more nuanced manner, the two texts *Hostel Room 131* (2010) and *Badhaai Do* (2022) have been selected as samples for the analysis. Further, the rationale for selecting *Badhaai Do* over *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* (2020), another popular film released post-2018, is that this film is placed at the transitional juncture of the verdict while *Badhaai Do* depicts the discursive practices involving alternative sexuality in the postverdict period.

*Hostel Room 131* (2010), set from 1978 to 1982 in Pune, is the love story of a gay couple Siddharth and Sudhir. Siddharth, a contractual college lecturer in Bombay, goes to the boys' hostel of an

Engineering College in Pune to meet a friend and instead meets Sudhir. Their eyes meet and they immediately fall in love with each other. Amidst their days soaked in love, the novel states the beginning of their trials and struggles being gay in Indian society at a time when homosexuality was illegal and considered a disease. In contrast, *Badhaai Do* (2022) retells the story of same-sex love in India set at a time when homosexuality was not illegal. The film talks about the same-sex love lives of a gay, Shardul Thakur, and a lesbian, Sumi Singh depicting the predicament of gay people even after the decriminalization of homosexuality.

Through a comparative analysis of the two texts, various codes signifying commonalities and differences in the social and personal attitudes toward homosexuality in India were identified and grouped under unchanging and changing realities, and are presented in the following two sections. The section “Some Realities Do Not Budge” highlights unchanging social realities concerning homosexuality such as backlash, abuse, attempts to “cure” it, and uneasy acceptance. It also addresses personal experiences like closeting, internalized stigma, and accidental coming-out. On the other hand, the section on “Shifting Paradigms: Realities in Transition” presents the shifts such as the growing acknowledgement of gay people in popular culture, and the legal shield fostering their sexual awareness and its expression in the post-verdict period.

## 2 | Some Realities Do Not Budge

### 2.1 | Navigating Homoprejudice

Rao's *Hostel Room 131* depicts Indian society in the pre-2018 timeframe that condemned homosexuality and treated it as an aberration, a disease, a vice, or an influence of “black magic.” It also depicts the homophobic attitudes of Indian society in a stark manner when some boys in the engineering college hostel caught the protagonists of the novel, Siddharth and Sudhir, in a compromising position. They teamed up and formed an anti-Siddharth group to lash him and his “vice” out of the hostel to protect their innocent friend, Sudhir. Similarly, on knowing this reality, the patriarchs of Sudhir's family launched verbal abuse against Siddharth calling him “you chhakka, you homosexual” (143) and “not fit to be a man” (143). Because they could never imagine that “a nice boy from their family could do such things” (6), they attributed it solely to Siddharth's black magic on their innocent son Sudhir (143).

Like Siddharth and Sudhir, Shardul and Sumi in *Badhaai Do* (2022) also encounter similar homophobic attitudes in the post-2018 Indian society. When their sexual orientation gets exposed accidentally, their family members slap homophobic remarks reflecting society's views at large: “Do you know, even homeopathy has no cure for this disease” ... “she used to sleep next to me, I feel disgusting thinking of it” (2:05:56). When Sumi's sexuality is revealed, her brother remarks on her: “Pervert! What would I tell my friends that my sister is a lesbian? Sick freak!” (2:01:26). Similarly, Sumi's mother disgustingly retorts: “Just look at her. She doesn't have an ounce of shame in her eyes ... You have been cheating on your parents all your life. Why didn't you just die” (2:01:56). Moreover, when Sumi expects her father, whom she views as supportive, compassionate, and

open-minded, to understand her situation, he ironically struggles to move past his shame of discovering that his daughter is a lesbian and remarks: “why did it have to be us” (2:04:34). The grief and shame expressed by Sumi's parents highlight the profound discomfort and lack of acceptance that still permeate Indian society regarding same-sex love. Their words “disease,” “disgust,” “shame,” and “pervert” convey a disturbing societal sentiment preferring suffering and even death for people rather than embracing a nonheterosexual identity.

Homophobia oftentimes perceives homosexuality as black magic or a disease that can be cured through conversion therapies. The belief underlying conversion therapy or any form of therapy aimed at changing a person's sexuality is based on the premise that homosexuality is a disease (Bakshi 2022; Alempijevic et al. 2020). Although the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) have already placed homosexuality out of the ambit of psychological disorder, recent reports claim that these practices are still very prominent in over 60 countries, including India (Human Rights Council 2020; IRCT 2020). Although established as a futile and psychologically harmful approach (American Psychiatric Association 2000), conversion therapy to change people's sexual orientation has been a prevalent practice across the world, and the same is evident in *Hostel Room 131*. With the belief to cure their son's homosexuality, Sudhir's family took him for an exorcism to a ‘baba’ (Godman) who “used a combination of traditional and modern techniques, performing *havans* and *yagnas*, and resorting to electro-shock therapy” (Rao 144). Although the sheer agony of electric shocks left Sudhir half-dead and to him “the torture seemed to go on interminably,” his family's home prejudice and their belief in the success of conversion therapy was so stern that they let their kid go through that torture (146). *Hostel Room 131* underlines the futility of conversion therapy as Sudhir, though broken and changed by the exorcism experience, continues to be gay and exposes the hypocrisy of priests performing these therapies. The hypocrisy of these babas is unmasked in the incident when after giving the painful electric shocks as a cure to Sudhir's “disease of homosexuality,” the priest himself engaged in a homoerotic activity with the half-dead Sudhir and “entertained himself with the very thing he sought to cure his victim of perverted sex” (Rao 146). Although *Badhaai Do* carries no specific incident leading to conversion therapy, various studies conducted in India post-2018 indicate that along with medical practices, faith-based conversion therapies widely perpetrate in Indian society as the majority of people still see it as unnatural or as a disease (Morrison et al. 2021; Ranjan 2023).

### 2.2 | The Haunting Closet

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick remarks “the gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people, but for many gay people, it is still the fundamental feature of social life” (1990, 68). Similarly, despite the legal recognition of homosexuality, the closet continues to remain a fundamental feature of the lives of gay people in India. Closet, internalized stigma, and accidental coming-out continue to be the most pervasive and unchanging social and personal realities on either side of the 2018 verdict owing to the prevalent social stigma against homosexuality, gay people in both the texts under consideration choose to remain in the closet.

In *Hostel Room 131*, Sudhir and Siddharth's love story was a secret affair on the college campus, the boys' hostel, and in the city of Pune. Owing to the criminal status of homosexuality in India at that time, they had to conceal their nonnormative sexuality from people. Not once in the novel, do Siddharth and Sudhir come out voluntarily. However, they had an accidental coming-out when they were caught naked one night in a compromising position on Sudhir's hostel bed (75). It is through them that the other boys in the hostel get to know about their affair. Even to Sudhir's family, the revelation of their son's sexuality came from a friend which made Sudhir's father feel like being stabbed by his only son (128–129). The world in which Sudhir and Siddharth lived was homophobic and heterosexist to such an extent that Sudhir decided to go through a sex reassignment surgery to be with Siddharth forever. The most striking incident of internalized stigma comes up through Sudhir when he expresses his desire to go for a sex-reassignment surgery to evade the shame of being a homosexual and says: "If I am caught having sex with another man, people will call me chhakka or homo - both words of abuse... But if I am a woman, they'll accept my relationship with a man. Because it's a relationship that society understands" (204). Evidently, the closet functions as a shield against legal and social sanctions and was also a compulsion for them from which they could not break free irrespective of their passionate love for each other.

Although *Badhaai Do* is temporally situated in post-2018 India, it depicts a social reality similar to that in *Hostel Room 131*. In the world of Shardul and Sumi, internalized stigma and closet still persist as a compulsion despite the decriminalization of homosexuality. Throughout the film, Shardul chooses to remain in the closet until his situational coming-out. He tries hard to conceal his sexual preference as he becomes highly anxious at the slightest possibility of being heard or seen as gay (0:24:58). For instance, on their way back from a romantic Goa trip, Shardul nervously drops off Kabir at college, avoiding eye contact while saying goodbye to prevent the driver from suspecting anything. Although Indian society is highly homosocial (Vanita and Kidwai 2008; Menon 2018), Shardul remains cautious with his male partners in public in an attempt to evade any suspicious glance. His cautious behavior is not only a reflection of society's prejudice against homosexuality but also the result of his internalized stigma. This internalization of stigma can be seen throughout the film where he remains uncomfortable with his sexuality in public and seems uneasy to even utter the word "gay." Even in the post-2018 verdict India, Shardul is one of those many gay people for whom there is no significant increase in their confidence, thus resulting in "a fear of judgment which stops them from coming out to people" (Joshi et al. 2022).

### 2.3 | Homosocial Masking

In Indian society, same-sex bonding of men and women is widely acknowledged and socially accepted. It is noteworthy that two men or two women sharing beds are socially acceptable in Indian culture (Khan 1994; Asthana and Oostvogels 2001; Kole 2007; Vanita and Kidwai 2008), and it is heterosexuality that "is closely monitored because that is where people assume sex takes place" (Menon 2018, 12–13). Thus, friendship has been "one of the dominant tropes of same-sex love in ancient India" (Dasgupta 2011, 652).

The analysis reveals that the theme of friendship is frequently employed as a strategy by gay people in both periods to hide their sexual preferences. This widespread and socially accepted form of homosocial bonding acts as a guise for gay individuals in India, enabling them to present themselves as friends in public, thus avoiding any suspicion regarding their sexual orientation. In *Hostel Room 131*, Siddharth and Sudhir introduce each other as "friends" only whether it is in the boys' hostel in Pune, in a meeting with their Parents, among peer groups, or with a stranger on the street. When Siddharth visits Sudhir's family in Belgaum for the first time, he is introduced by Sudhir as his "friend." In Raikar's house, Siddharth receives too much attention, love, and reverence from Sudhir's father as testified by Dr. Raikar's remark: "I am very happy that you are Sudhir's best friend" (105). A testimony to the unfettered acceptance of the deep-rooted homosocial culture can be glossed from Dr. Raikar's attitude. Despite being already intimated about the unusual friendship between Siddharth and Sudhir through a letter along with a "dirty" picture of the two by one of Sudhir's batchmates from the college, his insistence on the word "best friend" reveals that he sees the two as friends only; sharing a deep bond and nothing else. Rather than making serious inquiries into the matter, Dr. Raikar discusses the letter with Siddharth on his visit to Raikar House and consoles him to "not worry" and further states that "Ravi Humbe must have written this letter out of jealousy" (105).

Moreover, Dr. Raikar gets so fond of Siddharth that he calls him "son" every time he meets him, indicating how same-sex friends in Indian families are accepted almost like their own son or daughter and that is why the deep intimacy between same-sex people is least suspected among all other relationships. Even on Sudhir and Siddharth's visit to Belgaum, Sudhir's mother arranges their sleeping beds in the same room which is impossible to imagine if Siddharth had been a girl. They spent their seven nights in that house and bedroom just being with each other in the presence of all without fetching anyone's doubts even for once, until their sexuality is out in the public later. Once Siddharth himself remarks: "[T]o the whole world, we're just close friends. Yaars. Men, after all, can only be close friends of other men" (152). His words point toward the prevalence of a twofold reality concerning homosexuality in India in the pre-2018 period; one being an alien concept foreclosing any reading into the relationship between two men beyond friendship, and the other being a blessing for gay people in a country where same-sex love is highly discriminated against. The same trope of friendship helps Shardul's relationship with Kabir and later with Narayan Guru in the post-2018 Indian society to evade society's suspicion and homophobic remarks. In one of the prominent scenes when Shardul's mother unexpectedly meets Narayan at the railway station, Shardul abruptly introduces him as "his friend" (1:57:27). In the subsequent scene, Narayan defines their friendship to Shardul's mother through a comparison to a married couple, emphasizing the warmth and closeness they share: "You see, I'm a lawyer, he's a cop. It is a love-fight relationship just like husband and wife" (1:57:49). It is ironic that Narayan subtly reveals the reality of their relationship by likening it to a married couple, yet Shardul's mother only recognizes and appreciates it as a friendship. He even calls Shardul's mother "mummy," which is another testimony to the fact that same-sex friends in Indian families are seen as equivalent to their son/daughter.

This highlights that in both narratives, the theme of friendship serves as a crucial tool for individuals to conceal their nonnormative sexual orientation from society, regardless of the evolving legal status of homosexuality in India. It underscores the persistent influence of social prejudices against homosexuality in Indian society, leading many gay individuals to hide their sexual identities to avoid the risk of social stigma and isolation.

### 3 | Shifting Paradigms: Realities in Transition

#### 3.1 | Legal Shield and Sexual Empowerment

The 2018 verdict decriminalizing homosexuality, along with the Indian Psychiatric Society's recognition of homosexuality as "not a mental illness" (IPS 2020), has rendered the expression of one's nonnormative sexuality in Indian society a less challenging reality than before. In the pre-2018 society, Indian gay people had to mostly depend on Western literature to be aware of their identity and rights. This practice could be accessed through Gaurav and Vivek, the other gay couple in the subplot in *Hostel Room 131*, whose "room was full of gay literature and magazines, all of it imported from the U. S...." (78). Additionally, Gaurav and Vivek had remarkable connections with gay men abroad and were influenced by them "Homophobia was on the top of their list of prejudices to be tackled..." (112). Conversely, in post-2018 India, legal support, a developing corpus of queer literature, and increasing media visibility altogether are changing this reality. Although advocating homosexuality as "normal" at a point in *Badhaai Do* (2022), Shardul reproves his brother-in-law saying: "You're a doctor, brother-in-law. You should at least know this isn't a disease. It's perfectly natural. No one asks you to decide and choose between men and women. The feeling comes from within. Homosexuals are as human as all of you" (2:06:14). Here, while contesting the belief of his brother-in-law who is a doctor himself, Shardul expresses himself in a heart-wrenching manner defending his sexual orientation as "natural" especially taking a cue from the medical discourses in India concerning homosexuality. The way Shardul confronts society's prejudiced belief here, although only after the accidental coming-out, Siddharth and Sudhir never had this possibility in hand nor the space owing to the criminal categorization of homosexuality. In the pre-2018 period, the legal restrictions had no space for altering discourses concerning homosexuality thus preventing people from even mustering the courage to speak the way it is possible today.

With the verdict decriminalizing homosexuality, gay people have also got the legal shield that promises to curtail the legal harassment against them in post-2018 India, which was very distinctly there in the pre-2018 society (ICJ 2017). The legal ordeal that one had to go through for their nonheterosexual identity in pre-2018 India is partly manifested in *Hostel Room 131* as well when Gaurav and Vivek were taken into custody by the police on the charge of hoarding gay magazines in their hostel room. When Siddharth went to bail them out, they were warned by the policeman: "If, ever again, I am finding dirty sexy magazines in your room, I'm issuing a non-bailable warrant against all you three persons, including you Mr. Professor (Siddharth). I am not caring even if you are bade baap ka beta (*son of a powerful man*)" (117). In another incident in the text, after being thrown away

from Raikar's house, when the traumatized Siddharth went to the police station with the hope of rescuing his partner from the trials of his family, he could not state the facts clearly in front of policemen as homosexuality was a crime back then and he could have been legally arrested for that. Resultantly, to sustain their love, Siddharth and Sudhir had to flee from India as they had no hope of living a just and equal life here. In contrast, with the legal recognition of homosexuality, the situation is different in the post-2018 society. Unlike Siddharth-Sudhir and their likes in the pre-2018 society, Shardul, Kabir, Guru Narayan, or Sumi are not exploited legally for their nonnormative sexuality.

#### 3.2 | Media Visibility and the Shifting Discourse

In the post-2018 society, media visibility of gay people is considerably increasing in contrast to a small number of representations in pre-2018 India, that too a biased one. Cinematic representations of gay men had been very stereotypical and insensitive in the past. They were always confined to sidekick roles and were either used as a laughing stock, as villains, or as a scapegoat for society's ridicule (Bhugra et al. 2015; Mukherjee 2017). Popular cinematic texts like *Partner* (2007), *Dostana* (2008), *Fashion* (2008), *Bol Bachchan* (2012), and *Student of the Year* (2012) starring big actors, have represented gay characters along these lines only. However, with the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bollywood's representation of gay men shifted a bit with films like *Aligarh* (2015) and *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) which sensitively focused on the emotional turmoil that gay men feel, still these representations were very limited and their public reception was also problematic. Where *Kapoor & Sons* just makes a passing reference to the topic only toward the end, *Aligarh* was a commercial failure at the box office and even faced a state ban despite critical acclaim worldwide. It is with the legal verdict of 2018 decriminalizing homosexuality that a sudden increase in the visibility of queer community in mainstream cinema could be seen, that too in a very realistic manner. Bollywood's new commercial films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* and *Badhaai Do* which represent gay characters most unconventionally are the perfect examples of this change and the commercial success of these films is the testimony of the increased recognition that gay people are receiving in post-2018 society.

*Badhaai Do* reflects an altering reality of gay men's representation in media and Bollywood in particular. In the past gay men were always placed in contrast to the mainstream heterosexual protagonists to confirm the protagonist's masculine superiority, but here, Shardul is a police officer in the film- a profession that has been conventionally regarded as masculine and commands high respect. Unlike his gay counterparts previously, Shardul's character is given centrality in the film, his issues are depicted sensitively and characters have been given a voice of their own against social prejudice, challenging the heteropatriarchal discourse prevalent in India. Shardul does fall victim to the social prejudice within the text depicting social reality, but not to the media depiction of him as demeaning or inferior. He is represented in a genuine manner devoid of any flamboyant clothing, limp wrist, or effeminate body language and behavior. Within the film itself, there are also various other occasions rendering visibility to the gay community, for instance; the projection of a wedding procession of two men where people are dancing on

the road celebrating the marital union of same-sex love (1:45:00), and large LGBTQ+ parades occurring in the city (2:13:00). The wedding procession scene in the film showcases three distinct attitudes simultaneously: those of society, the law, and the individual. Where a group of people objects to this marriage depicting society at large, police (law) give protection to this wedding procession while also pacifying the agitated viewers by stating “This marriage is not legal in court so let them enjoy.” The latter scenario shows the legal support that gay people have received post-2018 while also pointing to the prohibition of marriage rights that the gay community is still fighting for. Further, at an individual level, it reflects that while a group of individuals participating in the wedding procession and parades are expressing their nonnormative sexuality unbothered by social and moral obligations, Shardul remains closeted in public showing the other side of the changing reality. This scene depicts multiple realities concerning homosexuality in India in one place. Thus, this film makes it possible to understand different nuances concerning homosexuality in contemporary times and the film also ends on a futuristic note pointing toward the marriage and adoption rights for the gay community.

Along with the 2018 verdict, the credit for this shift in the media visibility of gay men also lies with the advent of OTT platforms in India as these platforms have not been subjected to any content-related sanctions and State regulations. Now we see almost every new web content intrinsically dealing with homosexual plots either as the main or sub-plot of the text. These new representations incorporate them as equal subjects without any discrimination which they were subjected to in pre-2018 society. Hence, these changing media representations are shifting the discourse concerning homosexuality in Indian society and are making a progressive step toward breaking the stigma and prejudice around the gay community.

#### 4 | Coda: Negotiating Awkward Realities

The analysis reveals that with the rolling back of Section 377, some developments can be measured in the legal and media sphere, however, on the social front these legal developments have failed to bring any significant change in societal attitudes. The “commonalities” section emphasizes social and personal attitudes, revealing that in both timeframes, Closet, Social Stigma, Internalized Stigma, Concealment Strategies, and Conversion Therapies consistently represent the shared experiences within Indian society. On the social front, the “closeted” condition of gay people continues to be the same although less stringent than before. They still find ways to hide their true identity, as illustrated by Shardul and Sumi in the film.

Various scholarly studies examining sexual minority's mental health and disclosure dilemmas have implied that social acceptance plays an important role in breaking off internalized stigma among sexual minority adults (Meyer 1995; Herek et al. 2009; Achar and Gopal 2021). Since 2018, there has not been much change in Indian society's attitude toward homosexuality, as it is still perceived as an aberration. Thus, despite being provided with a legal shield, the majority of gay people do not come out voluntarily. It was also found that gay people come forward to assert their nonnormative sexuality as “normal” only when they

are ripped off all their masks and pretensions that they were using to hide their sexual identity. Noticing the fact in *Badhaai Do*, When Sumi is caught in bed with her same-sex partner, Shardul becomes so fearful of his own identity being exposed that he requests her to “not tell her parents about him” and their marriage of convenience (2:00:55). It is a situation where Sumi is yet to face the wrath of her parents, but Shardul is more concerned about himself than Sumi, his wife from lavender marriage. This scene powerfully reveals the amount of fear that engulfs one with the mere thought of disclosure of one's nonnormative sexuality even in the post-2018 society, and it is this fear that turns Shardul into a self-centered man for a moment.

The analysis also reveals the ordeal gay people have to go through in post-2018 society before getting any acceptance within the family fold itself, let alone acceptance in broader society. In both the texts/timeframes acceptance is not wholehearted; rather, it is an uncomfortable acceptance if it comes at all. The ending scene of *Badhaai Do* where Shardul and Sumi adopt a baby as a heterosexual couple is reminiscent of the trope of lavender marriage that gay people in India have been using for decades in pre-2018 India. Even though their family accepts their sexuality, the discomfort among the family members sustains even in the ending scene. Also, to the larger society, Shardul-Sumi continues to pose as a heterosexual couple only despite attaining legal support. Therefore, the commonalities section states that, although being historic in one sense, the 2018 verdict has not brought many changes in the social attitude.

Where the commonalities section affirms the “unchanging” reality part, the differences section, i.e., “realities in transition” provides insight into the “changing” reality through its focus on law and media discourses. It is found that despite grappling with social prejudices, gay people now have legal backing to express their sexual desires and live with their same-sex partners in India without the fear of legal repercussions—a liberty not afforded in pre-2018 society. Moreover, the media visibility of the gay community is considerably increasing, making it a new space of expression and empowerment for them. Popular cultural forms such as advertisements, cinema, and OTT content are adopting a more inclusive and rightful approach in their representation of nonnormative sexualities and gender which often had been a site of repression and subordination in the pre-2018 society. Being one of the world's largest and most popular film industries, Bollywood's experimentation with films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Badhaai Do* hails a big change in itself. The inclusion of gay and lesbian characters in mainstream cinema is a progressive step underlining cinema's ability to shape public consciousness (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2013) and reaffirm its potential to change people's reservations against same-sex love. This article highlights that despite the fears many gay individuals have about coming out, both the law and the media are playing a significant role in empowering them by fostering more understanding and positive narratives regarding homosexuality.

In conclusion, this article examines the quantum of shift in the Indian societal attitude toward same-sex love vis-à-vis Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The analysis of the two periods located on either side of the 2018 verdict presents a dual reality: while changes have taken place in the cultural and legal

aspects of homosexuality, social attitudes, especially in smaller cities and towns across India, have remained largely unchanged. Indian society still has its reservations against same-sex love, with the idea of heterosexuality deeply rooted in the culture. As a result, despite legal recognition, homosexuality still lacks wider social acceptance. However, the significant shift from the pre-2018 to the post-2018 period can be discerned in the legal as well as the media sphere. With the legal acceptance of homosexuality, same-sex relationships are no longer criminalized. Additionally, their presence is increasingly becoming more prominent in mainstream culture, helping to foster a greater acceptance of diverse sexualities within Indian society.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Because of the nature of this work, no additional data were collected except those available in the personal accounts.

### References

- Achar, M., and B. Gopal. 2021. "Coming out of the Desi Closet: Disclosure of Same-Sex Sexuality in Metropolitan-India." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 20, no. 1: 160–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1958121>.
- Ahmed, A. S. 1992. "Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics." *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 2: 289–320. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00009793>.
- Alempijevic, D., R. Beriashvili, J. Beynon, et al. 2020. "Statement on Conversion Therapy." *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 72: 101930. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jflm.2020.101930>.
- APA. Commission on Psychotherapy by Psychiatrists. 2000. "Position Statement on Therapies Focused on Attempts to Change Sexual Orientation (Reparative or Conversion Therapies)." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 157, no. 10: 1719–1721.
- Asthana, S., and R. Oostvogels. 2001. "The Social Construction of Male "Homosexuality" in India: Implications for HIV Transmission and Prevention." *Social Science and Medicine* 52: 707–721. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(00\)00167-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(00)00167-2).
- Badhaai Do. 2022. *Dir. Harshavardhan Kulkarni*. Netflix, Film.
- Bakshi, G. K. 2022. "National Medical Commission Declares Conversion Therapy as Professional Misconduct, but It Is Not Enough." *THE LEAFLET*. <https://theleaflet.in/national-medical-commission-declares-conversion-therapy-as-professional-misconduct-but-it-is-not-enough/>.
- Bhugra, D., G. Kalra, and A. Ventriglio. 2015. "Portrayal of Gay Characters in Bollywood Cinema." *International Review of Psychiatry* 27, no. 5: 455–459. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1086320>.
- Bubb, A. 2009 "Blustering Sahibs and Section 377". <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/>.
- Chakrapani, V., P. A. Newman, and M. Shunmugam. 2020. "Stigma Toward and Mental Health of Hijras/Trans Women and Self-Identified Men Who Have Sex With Men in India." In *LGBTQ Mental Health: International Perspectives and Experiences (APA)*, 103–119. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000159-008>.
- Chatterjee, S. 2014. "Problems Faced by LGBT People in the Mainstream Society: Some Recommendations." *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)* 1, no. 5: 317–331. [https://www.ijims.com/uploads/cae8049d138e24ed7f5azppd\\_597.pdf](https://www.ijims.com/uploads/cae8049d138e24ed7f5azppd_597.pdf).

- Chowdhury, M. 2017. "LGBT, Marginalisation and Human Rights in India." *International Journal of Current Humanities and Social Science Researches (IJCHSSR)* 1, no. 4: 21. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:149633286>.
- Cloete, A. 2017. "Film as Medium for Meaning Making: A Practical Theological Reflection." *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4: 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4753>.
- Cohen, K. 1979. *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange*. Yale University Press.
- Dasgupta, R. K. 2011. "Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3, no. 4: 651–670. <http://rupkatha.com/v3n4.php>.
- Dwyer, R. 2014. *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India*. Reaktion Books Ltd.
- Gokulsing, K., and W. Dissanayake, eds. 2013. *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*. Routledge.
- Gunda, N. 2022. "India's LGBTQ Rights, Legal Obstructions to Society and Cyberbullying." *Jus Corpus Law Journal* 2, no. 3: 164–174. <https://www.juscorpus.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/39.-Nivas-Gunda.pdf>.
- Gupta, A. 2006. "Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals." *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 46: 4815–4823. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418926>.
- Herek, G. M., J. Gillis, and J. Cogan. 2009. "Internalized Stigma Among Sexual Minority Adults: Insights From a Social Psychological Perspective." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 56, no. 1: 32–43. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014672>.
- Human Rights Council. 2020. *Practices of So-Called "Conversion Therapy"*. United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3870697?ln=en>.
- Human Rights Watch. 2008. *This Alien Legacy: The Origins of "Sodomy" Laws in British Colonialism*. Human Rights Watch.
- ICJ (International Commission of Jurists). 2017. "Unnatural Offences" Obstacles to Justice in India Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/India-SOGI-report-Publications-Reports-Thematic-report-2017-ENG.pdf>.
- IPS (Indian Psychiatric Society). 2020. "Position Statement of Indian Psychiatric Society Regarding LGBTQ." Gurgaon, India. <https://indianpsychiatricsociety.org/ips-position-statement-regarding-lgbtq/>.
- IRCT (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims). 2020. *It's Torture Not Therapy: A Global Overview of Conversion Therapy: Practices, Perpetrators, and the Role of States*. Copenhagen: Denmark. [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/SexualOrientation/IESOGI/CSOAJ/IRCT\\_research\\_on\\_conversion\\_therapy.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/SexualOrientation/IESOGI/CSOAJ/IRCT_research_on_conversion_therapy.pdf).
- Jha, P., and T. Chatterjee. 2021. "LGBTQ Rights in India: An Insight Into the Provisions of Marriage, Adoptions & Challenges." *International Journal of Law Management and Humanities* 4, no. 3: 2921–2929. <https://doi.org/10.10000/IJLMH.11823>.
- Joseph, S. 1996. "Gay and Lesbian Movement in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 33: 2228–2233. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4404520>.
- Joshi, A., M. Madan, K. Narang, and M. Aggarwal. 2022. "Legal but Are They Accepted? The Psycho-Social Impact of Section 377 on the Lgbtqia+ Community: Pre and Post Abolishment in Delhi NCR, India." *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 5, no. 1: 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v5-i1-21>.
- Khan, S. 1994. "Cultural Contexts of Sexual Behaviours and Identities and Their Impact Upon HIV Prevention Models: An Overview of South Asian Men Who Have Sex With Men." *Indian Journal of Social Work* 55, no. 4: 633–646.

- Kole, S. K. 2007. "Globalizing Queer? AIDS, Homophobia and the Politics of Sexual Identity in India." *Globalization and Health* 3, no. 1: 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1744-8603-3-8>.
- Menon, M. 2018. *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*. Speaking Tiger.
- Menon, N. 2011. "The Disappearing Body and Feminist Thought." KAFILA - Collective Explorations Since 2006, February 21, 2011. <https://kafila.online/2011/02/18/the-disappearing-body-and-feminist-thought/>.
- Merchant, H., ed. 2010. *Yaraana: Gay Writing From South Asia*. Penguin Books India.
- Meyer, I. H. 1995. "Minority Stress and Mental Health in Gay Men." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 36, no. 1: 38–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137286>.
- Morrison, B., S. Vashishtha, and B. Singh. 2021. "A Critical Medico-Legal Analysis of Conversion Therapy in India." *Fertility and Sterility* 116, no. 3: e260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2021.07.696>.
- Mubarki, M. A. 2020. "Body, Masculinity and the Male Hero in Hindi Cinema." *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 2: 225–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1547497>.
- Mukherjee, K. 2017. "Exploring the Subversive Indian: Sexual Dissidence and the "Queer" in Indian Popular Culture." *Journal of Gender and Power* 8, no. 2: 87–99. [http://gender-power.amu.edu.pl/JGP\\_Vol\\_8\\_No\\_2\\_G.pdf](http://gender-power.amu.edu.pl/JGP_Vol_8_No_2_G.pdf).
- Ranjan, R. 2023. "Inhuman Practice of Conversion Therapy in India and Abroad." *Jus Corpus Law Journal* 3, no. 2: 706–716. <https://www.juscorpus.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/137.-Rahul-Ranjan.pdf>.
- Rao, R. R. 2010. *Hostel Room 131*. Penguin Books.
- Rao, S., and C. D. Mason. 2018. "Minority Stress and Well-Being Under Anti-Sodomy Legislation in India." *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 5, no. 4: 432–444. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000291>.
- Sedgwick, E. K. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.
- Sharma, R. 2021. "Rights of LGBTQ in India and the Struggle for Societal Acceptance." *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities* 4, no. 3: 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1732/IJLMH.26695>.
- Stam, R., and A. Raengo. 2004. *A Companion to Literature and Film*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Tripathi, A., and T. Talwar. 2022. "Parental Acceptance and Challenges Faced by LGBTQ Youth in India and Their Mental Health." In *Gender Equity: Challenges and Opportunities*, 23–35. Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0460-8\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0460-8_3).
- Vanita, R., ed. 2002. *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*. Routledge.
- Vanita, R., and S. Kidwai, eds. 2008. *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*. 2nd ed. Penguin Books India.