

Bollywood and Globalization
Indian Popular Cinema,
Nation, and Diaspora

Edited by

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande



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lies in the energy with which it is able to bring such apparently dichotomous schisms into a festive flush of coincidence, making state and commerce, colonial and neo-colonial urges, and nation and empire reside on a single undifferentiated continuum of regularities. This is why the new nationalism that the film proposes does not attempt to either dialectically resolve or radically undo the long historical contentions between tradition and modernity, east and west, or self and other. Instead, bringing them into a transparent coincidence with one another, it threatens to undermine 'otherness' as the intellectual energy spawned of the gaps between these polarizations, as well as 'difference' as the rebellious pressure that had once energized anti-imperial struggles across the globe. The environment of language and images that *Rang de Basanti* conjures is one in which imperial adolescence and colonial venerability are not conceptually divided between unique national/imperial powers. Rather in this rhetorical-visual condition, it is India which is both the deeply historical land, sunken in a past replete with illustrious figures like Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad, and again India herself, which is the unstoppable and newly emerging imperial power that relies on the global-metropolitan *savoir-faire* of boys like DJ, Karan, Sukhi, and Aslam. As the rebellious figures of yesterday, these boys can as we have seen, martyr themselves in the name of the nation, while at the same time, in their incarnation as the newly awakened generation of an emergent global power, they can adventure into the world, wave upon wave, and with appetites insatiably renewing for global resources that are continually wasting away.

Chapter Seven

BETWEEN YAARS: THE QUEERING OF *DOSTI* IN CONTEMPORARY BOLLYWOOD FILMS

Dinah Holtzman

The Hindi/Urdu word *dosti* encompasses greater intensity and devotion than the comparable English term, 'friendship.' Bollywood's treatments of *dosti* entail physical intimacy and a moral code not necessarily shared in friendships between men in the West. Ruth Vanita elaborates, 'The continuum between romantic friendship and love is a slippery space where affection slides into or is coded as erotic without being overtly depicted as sexual.'¹ She draws parallels to Hollywood buddy films and remarks that Bollywood representations of *dosti* are also influenced by 'older Indian traditions of same sex love.'² Cinematic *dosti* is a fusion of Hindu mythology, Muslim *ghazals*, Sanskrit and Parisi theatre, Hollywood cinema and music video.³ India's economic liberalization in the mid 1990s led to the introduction of satellite television on the subcontinent and a subsequent increase in imported Western pop culture. The shift from *dosti* as normative homosocial relationship towards the current trend of comic acknowledgement of the homoerotic undertones of *dosti* is tied to the recent influx of Hollywood film and American television in which homosexuality is a popular theme. Post-2000 depictions of *dosti* via its coupling with gay jokes is reflective of national concerns about how economic liberalization, the burgeoning middle class, Western style consumer capitalism and diasporic populations impact Indian national and diasporic values, culture and traditions.

An examination of Bollywood *dosti* films from the 1970s through 2004 demonstrates how the newly queered homoerotic *dosti* points to a possible national move away from a hegemonic heteronormativity that enforces marriage and reproduction. Although this shift does not represent a sea change in conceptions of masculinity and sexuality it reveals ambivalence about the future of indigenous traditions like homosocial *dosti* amid an increasingly globalized

nation. Newly 'queer,' *desi* is the result of changing perceptions of gender and sexuality (on the subcontinent and in the diaspora) as well as of widespread national, cultural anxiety and ambivalence about India's integration into a global economy dominated by Western popular culture. Popular Western texts promote culturally specific ideologies that may be perceived as both alien and undesirable in other nations thus challenging indigenous value systems.

A comparative reading of three *desi* themed films – *Sholay* (Flames, 1975), *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Tomorrow May Not Come, 2003), and *Masti* (Mischief, 2004) – illustrates shifting audience and cultural perceptions of *desi*. *Sholay* is often described as a 'Curry Western,' suggesting that it is merely an Indianized version of Hollywood and Italian Spaghetti Westerns.¹ However, Bollywood indigenization of various genres of Western cinema offers a fascinating window into the cultural and ideological differences that permeate Bollywood, Hollywood and various European cinemas. Though Bollywood frequently borrows Hollywood plots, the characterizations and moral lessons are transformed to reflect Indian culture. Observing the changes made via the translation process pinpoints the arenas in which Western ideology is made more palatable to majority Hindu subcontinental and diasporic audiences. *Masti* is loosely based on an American independent film *Whipped* (2000).² Rewritten elements in the Bollywood version demonstrate how Western sexual values are transformed to appeal to audiences interpellated into Indian sexual ideologies; ideologies deeply imbricated in Hindu codes.

Sholay (Flames) centers on two outlaws intensely committed to one another and their joint pursuit of a nomadic criminal lifestyle. *Kal Ho Naa Ho* is the story of a love triangle between two men and the woman they love. The dying Aman devotes himself to uniting his friend and his love interest in marriage before his death. *Kal Ho Naa Ho* is a contradictory paean to thwarted romantic love that ultimately refines arranged marriage. However, the conclusion suggests Rohit and Naina's marriage includes three people, one of whom has died, but who lives on through their union. Aman's death, like Jai's in *Sholay*, is necessary for normative monogamous heterosexuality to thrive. *Masti* is the story of three male college buddies who reunite after marriage, bemoan the misery of marital life and agree to seek out excitement through extramarital affairs. The preservation of marital fidelity in *Masti* also results from a (fake) death. In all three films, the achievement of normative heterosexuality is intertwined with homosocial friendship, death, and homosexuality such that *desi* appears to be a casualty of heteronormativity. While audiences may root for the fulfillment of normative heterosexual coupling, the conclusions suggest that same sex friendships complicate the institutionalization of monogamous marital heterosexuality.

Although *desi* is appropriate for early stages of life, it must be sublimated (often via death) to maintain and propagate the nation via heterosexual

reproduction. Each film concludes with triumphant heterosexual coupling combined with a pervasive sense of grief over the loss of a *yaar*.⁶ Mourning this loss is crucial to *desi* films. In *Kal Ho Naa Ho* it is Rohit, not Naina, who last speaks with Aman before his death. In *Sholay*, Veeru, not the widow Radha, curses God for Jai's death to the sad strains of their earlier joyous duet, *Yeh Desi*. Amar, Meet, and Prem remain friends in *Masti* though with the recognition that reconciliation with their wives means an inevitable end to youthful *masti*.

Sholay exemplifies cinematic *desi* prior to economic liberalization while *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and *Masti* are illustrative of the newly queered cinematic *desi*. Using Eve Sedgwick's notion of homosocial desire as the meeting point of homosociality and homosexuality as a model, a comparative reading of the films elucidates the ways in which Bollywood treatments of *desi* have evolved.⁷

The proliferation of gay jokes in recent Bollywood films signals a departure from traditional conceptions of *desi* towards an embrace of the conflicted love/hate approach to male homosociality and homosexuality currently popular in Western media. Contemporary Hollywood comedies dealing with male friendship such as *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000), *Himml and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) and *Hot Fuzz* (2007) traffic in ironic acknowledgment of the homoeroticism of the buddy films.⁸ These films deflect queerness through comic acknowledgement and disavowal of homoeroticism by the main characters. *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and *Masti* similarly acknowledge and deny the homoerotic dimensions of traditional *desi* as represented in classic Bollywood buddy films like *Sholay*.

The newly queered *desi* films feature comic subplots involving mistaken gayness. Misperception of the protagonists' homosexuality is the result of slapstick encounters in which the two friends are seen engaged in 'innocent,' non-sexual physical behaviors that resemble oral and anal sex.⁹ What does it mean that scriptwriters assume Bollywood audiences find comic relief in gay jokes? Freud's theories of jokes provide a useful template for exploring the function of Bollywood gay jokes. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud affirms that jokes are an exposure of something 'concealed or hidden.'¹⁰ Bollywood gay humor is an exposure of desire between *yaars*. Romantic/sexual attraction to a *yaar* may be deeply repressed in the unconscious but is nevertheless present, in some form, within the psyche. Gay innuendo enables a collective release of tension by simultaneously acknowledging and disavowing desire within same sex friendship.

Freud suggests that the purpose of the obscene joke is to '[C]ompel the person who is assailed to imagine the part of the body or the procedure in question and shows her that the assailant himself is imagining it. It cannot be

doubted that the desire to see what is sexual exposed is the original motive of snuff.¹¹ The gay jokes force audiences to imagine the protagonists having sex via the characters who misperceive their relationship. But why are scriptwriters and film audiences interested in the exposure of gay sex (real or imagined) at this particular juncture?

Why Gay Jokes? Why Now?

A joke is successful only if the intended audience 'gets' it. Freud suggests that telling jokes is a social process, 'Every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of a far reaching psychological conformity.'¹² The recent proliferation of gay jokes indicates that scriptwriters presume their audiences are familiar enough with homosexual sex acts to 'get' the joke/s and are therefore part of a 'far reaching psychological conformity' with regard to male homosexuality. Implicit in those assumptions is the notion that two ostensibly heterosexual men appearing to engage in homosexual sex are comic. What makes that particular scenario funny and to whom?

In *Masti*, mistaken homosexuality works as comic incongruity because the plot is premised on the desperation of sexually frustrated straight men. Ironically, the three friends are in search of the same thing (sex) and feel closer to one another than to their wives. The explicit slapstick gay innuendo disavows the protagonists' queerness while at the same time flirting with the obvious underlying question: why don't these horny men find sexual success with one another? In *Kal Ho Naa Ho* the comic incongruity derives from the fact that Kanaben, Rohit's servant, believes the two men are in love with each other. The relationship between Aman and Rohit exemplifies Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire and the queery inflected rivalry of two men over the body of a woman: 'In any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links of either of the rivals to the beloved ... the choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved's already being the chosen of the person who has been chosen as a rival.'¹³ In both films, heterosexuality is inseparable from the threat of homosexuality. Mistaken gayness is funny because it flirts with the strong undercurrent of homoerotic attraction underlying male bonding shenanigans. The friends' (over)investment in one another's sexual impulses may be a projection of their own sublimated desire for one another displaced onto the female body.

Masti's humor revolves around the suggestion that same sex sexual activity has fewer obstacles to overcome with regard to gender coded behaviors than heterosexual sex. Within India there are myriad cultural and religious prescriptions dictating appropriate interactions between men and women,

however, there are few rules governing conduct between same sex friends. If heterosexual men are thwarted by cultural prescriptions propagating the importance of Indian women's sexual modesty and are granted permission to dabble in taboo extramarital sex, homosexual sex with similarly frustrated men represents a solution to their frustration.

The humor of these gay jokes lies in the seeming incongruity of sexually unfulfilled men turning to each other for emotional and sexual satisfaction, though R Raj Rao posits that sex between men is prevalent in India: '[H]omosexuality thrives in covert yet recognized places in Indian culture...subtler forms of homosexuality are actually engendered under the auspices of normative patriarchal culture.'¹⁴ For Rao, the comic incongruity lies in the fact that homosexual activity flourishes in a culture where heterosexual marriage and reproduction are considered social obligations.¹⁵

Bollywood gay jokes are comic because they suggest the 'preposterous' notion that ostensibly heterosexual male protagonists might voluntarily choose a life of *masti* (mischievous sexual activity) with a *yaar* despite expectations that Hindu men move from *brahmanacharya* – adolescent years into *grihasthya* – the householder phase of Hindu life.¹⁶ Choosing a life of *masti*, within Hindu prescriptions, is equivalent to remaining in adolescent stasis and shirking one's adult dharmic duties to marry and reproduce. Committing to a life with a male partner bears a strong resemblance to Western homosexuality. The gay jokes function as a form of release derived from the exposure of repressed desire of adult men to choose lives of perpetual *brahmanacharya*. The unspoken possibility of homosexual relations in *Sholay* is made even more explicit in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and *Masti*. Gay jokes appeal to male audiences by allowing them to vent fantasies of rejecting cultural prescriptions regarding heterosexual marriage and reproduction in favor of a perpetual youth of homosocial (and possibly homosexual) camaraderie. Importantly, much of the filmic nostalgia for *brahmanacharya* and *masti* comes at the expense of women and marriage. In all three films, male protagonists must renounce their commitment to *brahmanacharya* in favor of maturing into *grihasthya*.

In all three films male *brahmanacharya* is equated with pre-marital heterosexual promiscuity. Veeru, Rohit, and Meeter are characterized as reformed cads who have opted out of promiscuous bachelorhood in favor of monogamous heterosexual marriage. However their alleged promiscuity is back story and sex outside of marriage is never actually physically represented in the films. In contrast, the gay jokes in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and *Masti* imply explicit gay sex acts. Despite the ban on kissing and other overly sexual behaviors in Bollywood films, audiences recognize simulations of oral and anal sex. Bollywood prudery regarding explicit representations of heterosexual sex is contradictory given the liberal approach to slapstick comedy redolent of homosexual acts. The fact

that subcontinental audiences 'get' slapstick gay jokes demonstrates that homosexual sex is not entirely foreign to Indian culture.

Simulations of sex are a form of smut, which Freud defines as '[t]he intentional bringing into prominence of sexual facts and relations by speech.'¹⁷ Freud insists that for a tendentious joke to succeed there must be three parties involved. Freud's discussion of the multiple relays involved in the telling of obscene jokes is resolutely gendered and heterosexual in motive, in part due to the time period in which he wrote *Jokes*. According to Freud, the three required joke telling participants are: the source of the joke (a man), the object of the joke (in Freud's formulation—a woman), and the receiver of the joke (also a man). The joke is act of aggression on the part of the joke teller directed against the object of the joke (the woman). The object of the joke is the joke teller's object of desire. The third party, the receiver of the joke, the other man, 'laugh[s] as though he were the spectator of an act of sexual aggression.'¹⁸ Freud contends that the teller of the joke experiences pleasure from the exposure of his own repressed libido (directed at the woman/object) and that the other man, the receiver of the joke experiences 'the effortless satisfaction of his own libido.'¹⁹ Freud ignores the possibility that the two male participants may be expressing their desire for one another via the woman/object. Although he discusses the transmission of obscene jokes in all male milieus, he suggests: '[I]f a man in a company of men enjoys telling or listening to smut, the original situation, which owing to social inhibitions cannot be realized, is at the same time imagined.'²⁰ In the absence of a female object, the joke succeeds only if one is fantasized into existence. However, in the absence of a woman, it is more likely that the 'real' object of his desire is the third party to whom he directs the joke. Consequently, the telling of obscene jokes in an all male milieu functions as a form of homoerotic flirtation thinly veiled by the presumably heterosexual content of the joke.

If we define Bollywood gay jokes as smut and attempt to use a Freudian model to explain how the relay of obscene jokes function between the characters within the filmic diegesis as well as between the film and its audience, we are left with a number of difficult questions. Who is the teller of the joke (both within and outside of the films)? Who is the object of the joke (both within and outside of the films)? Who is the receiver of the joke (within and outside of the films)? And what role does gender play in the telling and reception of the jokes?

Explicit gay innuendo is acceptable because the implied sex is not 'real.' Viewers may feel that there are no realistic circumstances in which the two protagonists might have sex with one another; this impossibility makes the mistaken gayness comic. However, the assumption that the protagonists are gay points to the fact that the 'sex' appears quite realistic to the characters

who interpret their behavior as homosexual. That the protagonists are identified as gay suggests other characters sense something queer about both men and their relationship.²¹ While the relationship between Veeru and Jai in *Sholay* has always appeared queer to me, a Western viewer, *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Masti* suggest that what was once considered strictly homosocial (*Sholay* in the 1970s) now appears queer in the twenty-first century. Mistaken gayness subplots illustrate the shifting relation of homosocial to homosexual bonds as well as changes in perceptions about masculinity and masculine friendship over the last thirty years. These changes are largely the result of India's economic liberalization and Bollywood's newfound appreciation of NRI audiences.

Scriptwriters' assumption of audience 'psychical conformity' regarding male homosexuality is attributable to a shared sense of nationalism and ideological topicality that transcends geography and resonates both on the subcontinent and in the diaspora. Bollywood gay jokes are directly correlated to a widespread desire within India to maintain a sense of national identity rooted in Hindu hegemony despite the nation's new status in the global economy.²² India's embrace of transnational capitalism is accompanied by anxiety that the national economic shift may lead to changing cultural values. Jyoti Puri suggests that,

Idioms of virility and strength, of 'colonial penetration,' of rape and plunder of one nation by another, and of beauteous pagans and sexual respectability routinely sexualize our language of nationalisms. We use these sexualized idioms in order to imagine and give meaning to nationalisms... [N]ationalisms such as India and Korea, have been described with words such as 'chastity' and 'modesty'... the sexualization of nationalisms is no aberration but is the way we ascribe characteristics to nations and imagine nationalisms.²³

India, a postcolonial nation, must deal with the legacy of colonialism and the ways in which nations are both gendered and sexualized via the discursive tropes of colonial ideology. Indigenous forms of homosocial bonding are in danger of re-interpretation by popular Western media. The queering of *dosti* can be construed as an effect of global Western neo-colonialism. In the West, male homosexuality is often equated with a lack of masculinity and/or behaviors thought to be 'feminine.' Positioning *dosti* as 'queer' by Western standards implies that Indian masculinity and male-male friendships are feminine by contrast. The suggestion that *dosti* masculinity is more feminine or lacking harkens back to the era of British colonialism when native 'effeminacy' was cited as justification for British 'benevolent' paternalism and the 'civilizing mission.'²⁴ Leela Gandhi suggests, 'T[he] oft cited anti-colonialist/nationalist'

endeavor to self-reform in the image of the aggressor, by recuperating a 'lost' native masculinity can be said to herald the onset of a postcolonial heteronormativity—tragically collaborationist and fraught by the pressures of a newly internalized homophobia or fear of effeminacy.²²⁵

However, the queering of *dosti* may be a positive development as it reflects increased openness to homosexuality though it may also be read as a form of homophobic reverse colonialism which identifies homosexuality as a Western phenomenon. Indeed, homosexuality is never a viable option in these films, at least not for the heterosexual heroes. That the homoerotic aspects of *dosti* have become fodder for comedy represents a departure from more fluid conceptions of masculinity and male sexuality such as the relationship between Veeru and Jai in *Sholay*.

Sholay

Sholay is commonly described as the quintessential 'angry young man' film, reflecting widespread feelings of cynicism during the contemporaneous national political climate of Indira Gandhi's Emergency.²²⁶ Though *Sholay* is structured like a Hollywood Western, the visual codes of the Bollywood *masala* film are incorporated into the filmic diegesis. The film's melodrama, song and dance numbers, intense homosocial bonds and depictions of behaviors indicative of traditional *dosti* contribute to the tendency of Western viewers to interpret *Sholay* as gay camp. Contemporary Western readings of *Sholay* as camp are likely heavily influenced by the recent mainstreaming of queer readings of Hollywood Westerns provoked by the widespread popularity of *Brokeduck Mountain*.²²⁷ Classic Hollywood Westerns featuring heroes like John Wayne, the embodiment of a rugged individualist masculinity, are now widely read as gay camp. Something similar is happening with Bollywood films. The formerly implicit homoeroticism of *dosti* films, like that of Hollywood Westerns and buddy films, is now ironically acknowledged via gay jokes.

Sholay details the relationship between two professional outlaws, Veeru and Jai. Their friendship is the template for both traditional and newly queered *dosti* which frequently reference dialogue or song lyrics from *Sholay*. For the angry young man of the 1970s, *dosti* is an attractive alternative to marriage since his business life revolves around a homosocial network of gangsters. Because he comes from a fatherless home, elder crime bosses act as surrogate fathers and represent a more potent version of his own emasculated absent father. Whereas romance was the forte of the 1950s Bollywood chocolate box hero, for the angry young man, monogamous heterosexual commitment represents an emotional trap and inevitable emasculation. His fight against a corrupt society involves rejecting cultural conformity and traditional heterosexual relationships.

Inevitably, however, the hero recognizes the sinful wages of his anti-establishment lifestyle, gives up his criminality, and commits himself to a new life as a law-abiding husband and father. His change of heart is generally due to female influences – the 'bad' Westernized woman turned 'good' Hindu and his long-suffering devoutly religious mother. Fareeduddin Kazmi suggests,

The latent aim of the narrative is to neutralize, absorb or displace any potential of genuinely deviant, subversive activity and project a totally different concept of the individual... overtly the film hero is depicted as one embodying the fiercely independent Promethean vision of the person. And yet the same hero is at every turn bogged down by fate. Our 'superman' is dominated and subservient to nature (fate), God (religion), mother and country.²²⁸

Despite the truth of Kazmi's characterization the appeal of the angry young man lies in his initial refusal to abide by convention. His inevitable renunciation of rebellious non-conformity redeems him as a hero and distances him from the villains he so closely resembles.

Jai and Veeru are prototypical angry young men as they embrace a life of crime and have no immediate family to act as moral guides. Their relocation to Thakur Singh's village provides them with a surrogate family and a renewed sense of morality. Their commitment to an individualist homosocial criminality must ultimately give way to their incorporation into a community as husbands and fathers. The intensity of their bond, prior to relocating to the Thakur's village, is obvious in the song sequence, *Yeh Dosti* (This Friendship).²²⁹ The heroes celebrate their mutual devotion while riding a motorbike and sidcar across the country. The lyrics translate as:

We vow to remain friends;
We'd rather die than sever our friendship.
Your distress I share
Just as you share my joy.
Our love is reciprocal.
Though two in body
We're one in soul—
Never shall we be separated.
We eat and drink together
We'll live and die together.³⁰

Their relationship is a marriage, complete with declarations of lifelong commitment.

During the duet, the sidecar comes detached, sending Veeru flying while Jai continues to steer. Although the scene is comic, the separation of the two via the broken motorbike foreshadows their ultimate separation at the conclusion of the film. Veeru magically reappears behind Jai on the motorbike, arms wrapped around his waist. Reunited, the friends leap up and down in joy.

The song *Jai Dosti* appears immediately prior to their planned incarceration and subsequent escape from jail. The jail sequence is a comic episode involving a warden 'since the days of the British' who fancies himself a small scale Hitler. A fellow prisoner, coded as gay via his eye makeup and feminine hairstyle, befriends Veeru and Jai and helps them to escape. Intriguingly, the two protagonists never appear uncomfortable with the effeminate character's desire to befriend them although his solicitation suggests that he senses an element of queerness in the heroes' relationship. The 'sissy' prisoner also provides a foil for the heroes' machismo. Despite their physical intimacy and obvious love for one another, the film indicates that 'real' homosexuals are effeminate. If homosexuals can be easily identified by their make up and hairstyles, the macho protagonists are not homosexual. Defining who is and is not homosexual is largely determined by gender presentation.

Same Sex Sexuality in India

Although the word homosexuality is used within English speaking India, critics remark the concept does not translate widely. Ashok Row Kavi foregrounds some of the problems involved in transposing Western gay identity to an Indian context:

The gay Anglo-American sexual fantasy/ideal of two men going off together to make a life for themselves does not exist in India. This idea, which became the cornerstone of much Western 'gay' thought is counter to Indian culture.³¹

Jai Dosti is a paeon to such a fantasy/ideal though it is ultimately compromised by Veeru's desire for heterosexual marriage. Only after Jai recognizes Veeru's movement towards *gairhasthya* (post-puberty familial stage) does he too decide to marry, suggesting that for Jai, *gairhasthya* is a consolation prize for a failed attempt at same sex marriage.

According to Indian public health literature, few men who have sex with men define themselves as homosexual, gay or bisexual since many do not speak English. For many men who have sex with men, self-identification involves terms like *kothi*, *panthi*, *ginya* or *jigger* *dost* which refer to gendered behaviors and

specific sexual acts rather than to communities united around shared political or ideological identities.³² In this regard, sexual identity labels are inextricably intertwined with notions of normative gender roles. Men who exhibit visual signifiers of normative masculinity and are not sexually 'submissive' are presumably heterosexual. Many men do not identify themselves with any of these labels and consider the sex they have with other men *masi*, a natural part of pre-marital (if not post-marital) life for 'heterosexual' men.³³

For the Western observer, it is tempting to ascribe homosexuality or bisexuality to men who engage in such behaviors.³⁴ However such a designation would be anathema to Indian conceptions of sexuality. Shivananda Khan suggests, 'The debate on sexualities, may even at times be perceived as a form of neo-colonialism whereby Western sexual ideologies have 'invaded' Indian discourses in sexuality and identity...whereby indigenous histories and cultures become invisible.'³⁵ For Khan, as for Ashok Row Kavi, the desire to categorize Indian sexuality according to Western sexological terminology is mired in neo-colonialist assumptions of universality.

Kal Ho Naa Ho and the Western Diaspora

Contemporary Bollywood cinema models gender roles, expressions of sexuality, patriotic nationalism, and consumerist lifestyles reflective of India's current geo-political status as a rising economic superpower. A number of recent films reveal changing attitudes towards Indians who have relocated in the West. In these films, representations of the nation's economic liberalization and newfound embrace of diasporic Indians display some of the tensions inherent in navigating globalization while maintaining a strong national identity grounded in the celebration and retention of cultural and religious (primarily Hindu) values and traditions. In the mid 1990s the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) encouraged non-resident Indians to invest in the homeland and offered incentives such as the Overseas Citizenship of India Act, making it possible for diasporic Indians to live abroad while maintaining national, familial and economic ties to the subcontinent.³⁶

One effect of national economic liberalization has been governmental championing of diasporic populations as an integral (though satellite) part of the nation and nationalist sentiment. Government courtship of NRI investment is motivated by a desire to continue to build the national infrastructure at a pace fast enough to keep up with national economic growth. In 1998, recognizing the popularity of Bollywood cinema and its role as a national ideological tool, the Bharatiya Janata Party officially recognized the commercial film sector as a business industry entitled to tax protections. In response to government recognition, Bollywood film producers began to

craft features reflective of the Bharatya Janata Party's Hinducentric political mandates and desire to woo NRI investors. Myriad post-1994 films feature NRI characters and are set in metropolitan diasporic cities such as New York and London.

The courtship and glamorization of NRIs via popular media poses a striking contrast to 1960s and 1970s Bollywood representations of NRIs. During that era, NRI characters were portrayed as national traitors, tainted by time spent in the West; their only hope for salvation lay in the hands of the patriotic protagonist who teach them the error of Western ways and convince them to return to the homeland.³⁷ Contemporary NRI characters are represented as traditional and nationalistic, often more so than their subcontinental counterparts.

Cinematic recognition of the potentially queer dimensions of *desi* is closely connected to Bollywood's aggressive courtship of NRI audiences. Second generation NRIs are more likely to view representations of traditional *desi* as homoerotic, since their understanding of gender and sexuality is formed outside the subcontinent. Diasporic audiences, savvy to the current hipness of all things gay in the West, may interpret physical displays of affection between men as queer precisely because that is the sort of reading encouraged through the lens of Western binaristic delineations of 'normative' heterosexual versus queer sexual behaviors. The introduction of gay jokes in contemporary Bollywood films suggests that Bollywood *desi* is increasingly read as queer in ways that *Sholay* was not. *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, set in New York City, is a Bollywood film calculated to appeal to NRI audiences. The comic element of the film deals with the liminal space where homosexuality and homoeroticism overlap—notably, not in India but in the Western diaspora.

As with many classic *desi* films, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* revolves around the plot device of two friends in love with the same woman. The *desi* love triangle exemplifies Eve Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire and the queery inflected rivalry of two men over the body of a woman. Although Aman and Rohit meet via Naina, there is a strong element of *desi* in their relationship. Only when Aman appears does Rohit realize his feelings for Naina are more than platonic. Although Aman and Naina are in love, Aman essentially offers her to Rohit as a gift. He stubbornly adheres to his mission to see Rohit and Naina marry despite Naina lack of interest in Rohit. In the absence of a father figure for Naina, Aman hands her to Rohit during the wedding ceremony. Rather than moving from her father's home to that of her new husband, Naina is passed from her would be lover to his handpicked stand-in.

Cinematic *desi* demands that one of the two friends concede the woman out of homosocial love in order to facilitate monogamous heterosexual union. In *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, Aman both gives up Naina and proceeds to die after his role as

matchmaker is fulfilled. The gay jokes surface once Rohit's servant, Kanaben, becomes convinced that Aman and Rohit are a couple. Her mistaken assumption is meant to be farcical. However, her confusion acknowledges the repressed element of homoerotic desire often sublimated in homosocial relationships. Faced with Kanaben's visceral homophobia, neither protagonist suffers homosexual panic. Aman recognizes her reaction as homophobic and aggressively challenges her by pretending that Rohit is his lover. Aman's antics are represented not as an anti-homophobic intervention but as boyish pranks. In some diegetically inexplicable instances, he continues his queer theatrics though Kanaben is nowhere to be found, at one point agreeing to marry Rohit. Rohit is not bothered by his servant's assumption that he is gay or by Aman's delight in playing the part. He plays the 'straight man' to Aman's 'queer' comedian.

Rohit's father brings him to a strip club (the dancers are white women) for a confrontation about his sexuality. Neither father nor son appears distraught over his 'gayness.' His father is relieved that he is heterosexual, but there is no hysterical threat of familial ex-communication. Rohit does not violently disavow the possibility that he is gay. However, after his heterosexuality is confirmed father and son punch fists and speak in gruffer tones. That both men attempt to act more 'manly' after their conversation implies that the mere mention of homosexuality undermines their masculinity.

Although homosexuality functions as a joke in *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, there is a song and dance sequence that complicates the representation of homosexuality as exclusively comic. Rohit and Naina dance and sing their way through Manhattan, bonding with various couples including two white gay men. This carefully placed shot celebrates the existence of homosexuals in the metropolitan West. Inclusion of the gay couple shifts the film's initial treatment of male homosexuality as comic by celebrating white Western homosexuality, while simultaneously disavowing the queerness of the *desi* protagonists. The only other queer character is a guest at Rohit and Naina's engagement party. Like the jaihind of *Sholay*, the mystery party guest wears makeup, apparently a visual signifier of Indian male homosexuality. Kanaben, the homophobic servant, vents her hostility towards gays by violently shoving the effeminate man after he applauds Rohit and Aman's dance. Later during a particularly energetic song and dance sequence, Kanaben happily dances (hand in hand!) with the same effeminate man she assaulted earlier. Perhaps her witnessing of Rohit and Naina's vows helped her to overcome her fear that Rohit is gay, therefore permitting her to befriend a non-familial gay man. Her acceptance of non-familial homosexuality resembles the overall message of the film: homosexuality is fine for white Westerners and perhaps for South Asians to whom one is not related.

The fact that Kantaben mistakenly assumes Aman and Rohit are lovers in New York City, reinforces the nativist idea propounded by right wing Hindu fundamentalist groups that *desi* homosexuality is catalyzed by time spent in the licentious West. In the West, homosexuality is associated with coming out narratives – public and familial self-identification as gay or bisexual. In India, individual sexuality is not commonly discussed with family members. The discussion between Rohit and his father is comic because of the incongruity of two Indian men attempting to enact a stereotypical Western coming out scenario. Prior to confirmation of Rohit's heterosexuality his father remarks, 'This is America. Anything is possible. Look at my face, I asked for a daughter-in-law and I am blessed with a son-in-law.' His comment suggests that a gay son is something possible only in the West.

However, the relative calmness with which various characters react to mistaken gayness suggests that the revelation of Indian homosexuality within the metropolitan Western diaspora will not necessarily result in the inevitable dissolution of the traditional Indian family. That Rohit's father would not have disowned him if he were gay suggests the destruction wrecked on Naina's family by the patriarch's adulterous union and subsequent suicide is a far greater tragedy than having a gay son in the diaspora. While this is not a ringing endorsement of diasporic homosexuality, it offers significant possibilities for a wider range of sexual practices.

Masti

Masti is the first Bollywood film to point to the behaviors associated with *dosti* as borderline homoerotic on the subcontinent. As with the Hollywood buddy films mentioned earlier, the protagonists of *Masti* joke endlessly about homosexuality. However, the film ultimately demonstrates that effeminate men, *hijras* and transsexuals are the 'real' queers.³⁹ The heterosexual hijinks planned by the protagonists are formulated only after a drunken Amar begins to sing *Mei Dosti* to his similarly inebriated friends, Prem and Meet. Amar's performance indicates their nostalgia for the carefree days of bachelorhood and alleged heterosexual promiscuity – *brilliantaryuk*. The invocation of Veeru and Jai's musical paean to homosocial love also points to the ways in which traditional *dosti* has become queer(ed).

In an early scene, Dr. Kapadia, who suffers from homosexual panic and an intense curiosity about homosexual sex, witnesses the joyous and physically affectionate reunion of Amar and Prem. Although their physical display of affection is similar to that of Veeru and Jai in *Sholay*, Dr. Kapadia assumes the two are lovers. *Masti* differs from *Kal Ho Na Ho* in that Amar and Prem are mistaken for lovers in New Delhi, suggesting that behaviors associated with

dosti are increasingly interpreted as 'queer' not only in the Western diaspora, but in metropolitan India as well. Just as Aman appears to revel in Kantaben's mistaken assumption, Amar and Prem deliberately encourage Dr. Kapadia's misinterpretation.

Masti also involves the exchange of a woman's body between male friends. However, in *Masti*, one woman is 'shared' by three men. *Masti* begins with the premise that heterosexual marriage is at best unsatisfying and at worst a veritable prison. Amar hallucinates being shackled and whipped by his wife who is clad in a Nazi uniform. Another fantasy sequence features Amar dressed in a woman's nightgown serving breakfast to his wife who is clad in a male business suit. Both his wife and mother in law frequently mock his lack of manly brawn. Meet's wife is pathologically obsessed with him and uses techniques for spousal control commonly associated with abusive husbands. For example, she 'forces' Meet to wear dowdy clothes and a nerdy hairstyle to insure that other women will not find him attractive. She also physically tracks his movements via cell phone. Prem's wife is a devout Hindu, perpetually praying and fasting for his well-being. Intriguingly, when Geeta cites the *Law of Manu* to him as a sign of her marital devotion, 'a woman's heaven lies at her husband's feet.' Prem responds 'It's a little bit higher.'⁴⁰ He suggests her heaven resides in his groin, but Geeta coyly misinterprets his statement to mean her heaven lies in his heart. Their relationship undermines idealized conceptions of the perfect traditional Hindu wife. Prem desires a wife who is sexual rather than submissive and adoring. Amar, Meet and Prem's attempts at adultery are motivated by the desire to regain some sense of masculine power and privilege. Reclaiming their masculinity is literally about exercising their phalluses.

During a reunion the three friends confess their marital woes and decide to seek out extra-marital affairs. None of them actually bed Monica, the woman they 'share.' Amar participates in extramarital sexual activity only to discover that he has made out with a transsexual man. Immediately after their kiss, Amar vomits and obsessively tries to clean his 'tainted' mouth. In *Masti*, homosexuality is alternately a punishment for potentially cheating husbands or a sight gag. Ultimately the men are made to see that they should appreciate their wives' loyalty instead of pursuing other sexual partners.

Prior to the revelation of the heroes' bad behavior all three couples are shown visiting temples. This interlude appears to inspire feelings of guilt and regret in the three men. Their presence in a Hindu religious space affects their collective change of heart against committing adultery, suggesting that the maintenance of monogamous marriage is morally correct because it is ordained by Hinduism. Ultimately, the film reaffirms the stereotypical role of the chaste, modest and devoted Hindu wife and teaches viewers that extramarital sex is not the answer to marital problems or a means to avoid emasculation. The gay joke

subplot in *Masti* suggests the suppressed possibility that the real *masti* in the film is sexual activity between male friends. Though *masti* translates into English as both 'fun' and 'mischief,' according to *BentGAItiz Times* the word 'is often used to describe sexual tensions between young men.'¹⁰ The film's title is a double entendre pointing to the possibility of sex between men.

Conclusion

The proliferation of gay jokes in recent Bollywood films reflect culturally variant perceptions of gendered and sexualized behaviors. Physical expressions of affection and friendship between men are perceived as non-sexual by Indians, but may be interpreted by Westerners as indicative of homosexuality. Homosexual panic has permeated many Western cultures to such a degree that any sort of physical demonstrativeness between men is reason to suspect homosexuality. This is not the case in India where it is quite common to see men holding hands. Although they may be lovers, neither can we assume that they are not lovers. On the subcontinent, boundaries between sexual and non-sexual physical behaviors between same-sex friends leave greater room for ambiguity than in Western cultures.

India has long absorbed foreign cultural practices. Bollywood cinema was born of western film technology combined with an indigenization of foreign film genres allowing for the maintenance of Hindu moral/cultural ideologies. Jawaharlal Nehru remarks in *The Discovery of India* that,

Ancient India... was a world in itself, a culture and civilization which gave shape to all things. Foreign influences poured in and often influenced that culture and were absorbed. Disruptive tendencies gave rise immediately to an attempt to find a synthesis. Some kind of dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization of beliefs. It was something deeper, and within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.¹¹

For Nehru the ability to negotiate and absorb foreign influences is one of the nation's preeminent talents. Bollywood gay jokes may be just such an attempt to negotiate and potentially indigenize western forms of homosexuality. The national desire to emulate Western capitalism necessitates a confrontation with foreign cultural values and practices that may appear at odds with Hinduism.¹²

Within India, homosexuality until very recent times has been widely perceived as a Western phenomenon. Bollywood gay jokes acknowledge fears

that Indians may adopt Western style homosexuality as a result of prolonged exposure to media reflective of Western cultural practices or time spent in the West. The jokes have been a reflection of the nation's attempts to navigate Western style capitalism without being ideologically colonized by Western culture and values. The recent films do not vilify homosexuals; however, they project ambivalence about the possibility that Indians may begin to identify with Western forms of queerness.

Homosexuality is an especially potent symbol of a 'non-traditional' lifestyle and is facile shorthand for the West and perceptions of Western 'disregard' for the sanctity of monogamous heterosexual marriage and reproduction e.g. high divorce rates, adultery, pre-marital sex and same-sex partnering. Gayness is a surefire indicator of traditional heteronormative values gone awry as well as a convenient trope for the national struggle to navigate Hindu tradition vs. secular modern capitalism.

The gay jokes also reveal anxieties that heterosexual marriage and reproduction may become compromised as national, cultural, and social priorities as the nation's economic growth continues unabated. The jokes are a counter-phobic response to the threat that increased exposure to Western capitalist culture may lead to an epidemic of non-heteronormative and non-reproductive sexual behaviors among its citizens – particularly among men. The films discussed here affirm the existence of homosexuality both on the subcontinent and abroad. They go so far as to suggest that there are *desi* homosexuals; however, they are easily recognized as *lylms*, transgendered/transsexual, or obviously effeminate. 'Real' Indian men, as represented via film hero stand-ins, can only be comically mistaken for homosexual. And while the comedy is rooted in incongruity, the explicit acting out of 'accidental' homoerotic behaviors only underscores the possibility of homosexuality while attempting to disavow it.

Each film ultimately reifies the importance of heterosexual marriage and reproduction over and above the *masti* of homosocial *dasti*. *Shaloy* and *Masti* in particular demonstrate that homosocial *dasti* is the highlight of men's lives. The conclusions suggest that men's natural exuberance, playfulness and spirit will be crushed through monogamous marriage. The names of the protagonists in *Masti* translate as immortal/eternal (Anar), friend (Meel) and love (Prem). The combination of the characters' names function as a synopsis of the film's moral lesson: homosocial friendships should be cherished through not at the expense of one's marriage. The film foregrounds the cultural prescription that a man's destiny is to be a (sexually) faithful husband to an appropriately devoted and deferential Hindu wife. The *masti* of the trio is presented with a nudge and a wink as typical 'boys will be boys' and 'men behaving badly' fare. However the triumph of heterosexual marriage in the

films' conclusions does not necessarily negate any of the queerness of the *masti* that preceded it or the mourning of its loss. Muraleedharan T. suggests that, '[queer subtexts] may be dismissed by some as comic interludes or seen as disciplined by the heterosexist conclusions of the films. But the question I would like to raise is whether such conclusions – that is the eventual union of the male hero with a woman—necessarily undermine the queerness of such films?'⁴³ He goes on to cite Alexander Dory's strategies for privileging queer readings of mass culture:

The queerness some readers or viewers may attribute to mass culture texts is not in any way less real than the straightness others would claim for these same texts. There is a queerness *of* and *in* straight culture. The so called hegemonic straight culture in India can be seen to have many queer traits, and examination of this 'queerness within the straight' can provide us with a better understanding of sexual subjectivities in this region.⁴⁴

Although these comic gay subplots do not function as a straightforward celebration of *deft* queerness, they acknowledge that queerness exists in India and the diaspora. Moreover, these films affirm the 'queer' connotations of the homosocial continuum in patriarchal and homophobic societies both Indian and Western. The birth of the comic gay subplot suggests that Bollywood audiences are beginning to recognize queer possibilities in evolving cultural traditions.

Chapter Eight

IMAGINED SUBJECTS: LAW, GENDER AND CITIZENSHIP IN INDIAN CINEMA

Nandini Bhattacharya

'Integral to heteronormative commercial cinema's creation of desire...women offer a heuristic means to comprehend a film's labored production of a secular, modern society in relation to its internal differences'¹

'[T]he people embed their present in the past'²

I would like to offer some reflections on imagining a violent history of nation-making in India's cinematic 'present.' How do structures of feeling, belief and conflict affect graphing and 'remembering' history in Indian cinema? What is the status of the legal, civic or violent 'event' – such as the Indian partition of 1947 or the communal riots of increasing frequency since the eighties – in films? What is Indian cinema's imaginary relationship with historiography, and what does it mean to represent an 'event' within available 'structures' of historic narrative in this cinema frequently described as 'national'?³ In discussing the 'veiled problem of the relation between structure and event,'⁴ and in calling 'structure' – the symbolic relations of cultural order...an historical object,⁵ Marshall Sahlins invokes the essential structural backdrop of historical 'events,' wherein 'an event is not simply a phenomenal happening... An event becomes such as it is interpreted. Only as it is appropriated in and through the cultural scheme does it acquire an historical *significance*... The event is a relation between a happening and a structure (or structures)....'⁶ What emerges in Sahlins' comment as an entwining of an 'anthropological' mode – the search for structure – and a 'historical' mode – the narration of an event – can be seen in Indian cinema as a perpetual disjunctive dialectic between discourses of the structure of national identity and discourses of eventual citizen-formation. In my larger project of which this essay is a part I focus longer on the yield of