

Representation of Homosexuality in Popular Indian Television Serials

¹Prof. Pritha Biswas, ²Atreyi Ghosh

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Professional Studies, Christ University, Bengaluru, India

²Student, Department of Professional Studies, Christ University, Bengaluru, India

Abstract

Homosexuality is not something that the Indian society accepts with open arms. Same sex relations are not a very comfortable topic to discuss in the Indian society. As a result of lack of audience, Indian television soaps and serials have very insignificant and minimal representation of homosexuality. Over the last six years, there have been a maximum of only four television soaps portraying homosexuality (only in Indian serials telecasted on popular Indian television channels). These serials that have shown homosexuality have been telecasted at very odd hours (after eleven o' clock) and not at the prime time when the Indians viewing these serials. This paper would trace the minimal representation of homosexuality in Indian popular television serials and soaps in the last six years. This is imperative to understand the impact of Indian traditions on the media (television in this case) and the reverse possible effect of the media on the mindset of Indians.

Keywords: homosexuality, television soaps, inclusive, gay, orthodox

Introduction

Indian television has a very huge impact on the Indian audience. With reference to what critic Chip Heath suggests "To make our communications more effective, we need to shift our thinking from 'What information do I need to convey?' to 'What questions do I want my audience to ask?', it can be mention that the typical Indian television soaps primarily focus on women, however; Indian television over the ages has been trying to bring about a change in the mindset of the people with the introduction of other issues. It is trying to make a larger section of the society open minded and move with the changing times.

Focusing on women, how they deal with their day to day inferiority and other physical, emotional and stress related problems, has brought some amount of awareness among the otherwise orthodox mindset of a "traditional Indian". India is a country that preaches unity in diversity; there is diversity, however there is no unity among the diverse things that exist here. We all are aware of the genders that prevail in our society. However, we give respect and importance only to the male and female genders, accept heterosexuality as the "natural" order of things and predominantly remain homophobic.

Indian society, like any other society is a melting pot of multiple political, economical and social concerns like widow remarriage, child marriage, honour killing and the list goes on. In our television serials we portray all these issues. Though the television soaps are seemingly all inclusive, unfortunately there is minimal representation or almost without the slightest portrayal of homosexuality. The whole problem lies in the fact that the Indian society has not opened up to the possibility of the existence of homosexual relationships and therefore considering the lack of possible audience, the television too has refrained from depicting same sex relations. This paper would trace the minimal representation of homosexuality in Indian popular television soaps and serials in the last six years.

In Indian television, especially television soaps there are hardly any representation of homosexuality. The portrayal of homosexuality in films does not create much impact. A film is not something that one would watch every day. However, when television soaps come into picture, they have a massive impact as the audience views it bit by bit every day. The characters become a part of their lives. Perhaps that is why, to maintain social restraint, homosexuality which is still a "taboo" in the Indian context and as the revocation of the IPC 377 suggests, is not depicted in popular Indian television series.

Representation of homosexuality in popular Indian Television

Back in 2010, Star One aired a show named *Pyaar Kii Ek Kahani*, an Ekta Kapoor production inspired by the Twilight vampire series. The serial comprised of two seasons wherein the first season shows the love story between the female and the male protagonist Piyali Jaiswal and Abhay Raichand. Piyali was the illegitimate child of Arnab Dobriyal who left her mother, Sugandh and Piyali when she was a baby. Since Sugandh's death Piyali was living in an orphanage. She comes to Dehradun on a scholarship programme to Mount Carmel College where she meets her father and his family. His family members comprised of his wife, Madhu and his two daughters, Misha and Panchi. She meets Abhay in college and something about his behaviour leads to a curiosity in her. On observing and after research she finds out that Abhay is a vampire. After going through a lot of difficulties, at the end of two seasons the two unite and get married with Abhay turning into a human after having a magic potion.

Besides this love story, there was a character named Shaurya who played a supporting role. He was portrayed as efficacious industrialist. Misha, Arnab's second daughter gets infatuated to him. However, later on it is revealed that the character

Shaurya is gay. He was in love with Shankar who was in love with Misha.

This however is just a small representation not revealing the different issues of exclusion that they as individuals face in the society. This character had no importance; later on the character leaves the scene on a happy note. This character was accrued just to bring in a new twist, a momentary flavour to the story and had minimal impact on the plot.

MTV is a channel that focuses on the youth as their target audience and portrays the various issues that teenagers and young adults between the ages twenty to thirty go through. One of the shows *The Big F*, talks about the first exciting or extemporaneous things that a young woman or man has done. It shows the things that a person thinks of something that cannot be achieved or a fantasy- from something that gives them the courage to do what they want to without thinking about what the other person thinks. This show telecasted one episode named "I kissed a girl". In the Indian society, a relationship between two people of the same sex is considered a taboo. *The Big F* very boldly put forward this point and brings out a lesbian or homosexual relationship in this episode. The story revolves around the protagonist Sharmistha, who is a fashion designing student. She meets Madhurima who was introduced to her by her best friend. Eventually, the episode shows Sharmistha's affection towards Madhurima and how she feels for her. The two open out to their emotions and realise that they are completely in love with each other.

The Big F has taken a gallant step by representing a lesbian relationship so openly. However the concern is that it hasn't reached a wider audience. It has been viewed by that sector of the society, the youth, who have accepted this in today's world.

The most viewed channels in India are Star Plus, Colours and Sony. These channels very competently bring out issues like Child Remarriage (*Balika Vadhu* on Colours), Caste discrimination (*Uttaran* on Colours), and girl child issues (*Udaan* and *Naa Aana iss Des Meri Lado* on Colours), parenting habits(*Parvarish* on Sony) and Crime Patrol on Sony which brings out the various problems that an Indian citizen witnesses every alternate day in the society. However, homosexuality is yet to find its inclusive and acceptable representation at the prime time zones of these channels.

Star Plus however created a slight exception and aired the show *Maryaada...Lekin Kab Tak* back in 2010. This television serial is remembered for its tumultuous plot with an underlying reference to the presence of a gay character as the son of the protagonist. The story revolved around the lives of four women, Devyani, Priya, Uttara and Vidya. The themes that are brought out in this serial are homosexuality, honour killing, a whiff of domestic violence, extra marital affairs and an ostentatious abuse of political power.

Devyani was the wife of Brahmanand Jhakkhar, the Deputy Inspector General of Police. He was known to be a womaniser and a corrupt official too. He was having an affair with Uttara, his sister in law. She killed her husband after going through a lot of moral and physical oppression. Devyani's family accepts her and consoles, however she betrays her sister by having a physical relationship with Brahmanand. Brahmanand has also raped Priya even before he knew her. But Priya enters the Jhakkhar family as Aditya's wife, his younger son.

She keeps quiet as she knows that Aditya had a lot of respect for his father and she had no proof to prove her point. The elder son, Gaurav Jhakkhar was married to Vidya. Vidya was passionately in love with him unaware of the fact that her husband is gay. The serial not only portrayed the issues that a woman in the Indian society goes through but also what it is to be a homosexual in this orthodox society. His parents were well aware of the fact that he is gay and has no interest in women. He shuns Vidya from his life by telling her about his homosexuality. He first tells her that he is in love with his college classmate Aarti, but that person turns out to be his friend Karan.

They both have to fight for their relationship because both of them have a political family background. Both the families were concerned about the reputation in the society. As a result of which they had to keep their identities undisclosed. But getting past all hurdles, in the end, just to keep them safe, Karan's mother, who was a politician, sends them out of the country.

In *The Hindu*, December 6, 2015 Sunday issue, an article titled 'The queer everyday' was published. This article was an interview of the makers of the documentary 'In the Mood for Love'. This documentary talks about the reality of the LGBT community that they have to face on a daily basis.

The most astonishing thing about the documentary was that it was presented by a government agency, Door darshan.

"Television and all that encompasses it now implicates popular culture, social, political practices. It is this mature medium that can now reshape Indian popular Culture." (Saxsena) and as Shannon L Alder depicts, "One of the greatest regrets in life is being what others would want you to be, rather than being yourself." Current Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Mr Prakash Javadekar supported the decriminalisation of homosexuality as reported in *The Hindu* dated 6 December 2015. He also becomes a representative or the voice of those thousands of Indians who would want to have broader outlook towards the formation of an inclusive society. Taking cue and inspiration from the serials mentioned, it can be claimed that the minimal portrayal has just crated a few ripples in the untouched waters of social inclusion but definitely as the culture changes and becomes more compliant towards the existence of homosexuality, multiple waves of uncluttered exposition by the Indian popular television, of such "taboos" would surely be a possibility.

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