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Investigating the Relationship between media representation and social attitudes towards LGBTQ Individuals in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between media representation of the LGBTQ community and the corresponding social attitudes toward them in India. With the diverse backdrop of the nation, the LGBTQ community faces a complex stance. A pivotal influencer of public perception and opinion in India is the film and entertainment industry, making it an important focal point of this study. By analyzing the impact of various movies on perceptions of the LGBTQ community, this paper highlights the industry's potential to drive transformative change in majority opinions.

KEYWORDS: LGBTQ, Media Representation, Social Attitudes, India, Film Portrayal

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, significant progress has been made regarding issues concerning the LGBTQ community worldwide, including India. Individuals and groups have actively challenged traditional norms, laws, religious beliefs, and opinions to shed light on the struggles faced by the LGBTQ community. In India, there is often a clash between traditional values and progressive ideas regarding gender and identity, resulting in a

diverse and complex stance. However, with the influence of the media, the scales are gradually tipping toward greater acceptance.

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between media representation and social attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals in India. It will analyze how general media coverage affects public opinion and examine various portrayals of LGBTQ characters and themes. Through this

exploration, the paper will highlight how media representation can influence public opinion about the LGBTQ community, challenge stigma, and promote inclusion.

The purpose of this investigation is to gain a better understanding of the close link between media representation and social attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals, particularly in a country like India where the entertainment sector, including Bollywood, music, and other forms, holds immense popularity and influence. Additionally, given that India is an extremely religious country, with Hinduism being the oldest religion, this paper will also explore the correlation between religion and the formation of previous opinions. By examining this relationship, the paper aims to provide valuable insights into the role of media in shaping public opinion and transforming attitudes toward marginalized groups.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Historical and Social Context

The history of LGBTQ people in India is complex and intricately tied to their cultural and religious beliefs. Unlike many other places, homosexuality has not always been viewed as negative or deviant in India. Historical artifacts like the Kama Sutra and other pieces of art depicting homoerotic scenes demonstrate that homosexuality was not condemned in the past [1]. Moreover, certain deities, such as Ardhanarishvara, have been associated with transgender identities. However, there are texts, like the Manusmriti, that demonize homosexuality and prescribe punishment [2]. Consequently, Hindu communities hold divergent and non-unified views, with some considering homosexuality a sin while others accept it.

The arrival of British colonization in the 18th and 19th centuries brought about a shift in attitudes toward homosexuality, which took a more negative direction. New laws and

ideologies were introduced, including the strict criminalization of homosexuality. In 1860, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was established, making homosexuality a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment [2]. Even after India gained independence, Section 377 remained in effect, leading to the LGBTQ community remaining hidden and frequently subjected to abuse and violence. Only in the late 1900s did a few Bollywood movies begin featuring homosexual characters, although they were often portrayed as villains. For example, the 1936 movie "Achhut Kanya" portrayed a lesbian character as a villain who was ultimately punished for her actions. Similarly, the 1949 movie "Chandravati" depicted a lesbian relationship as deviant and immoral, leading to the ruin of the characters [2]. An attempt to portray homosexuality in a positive light in the movie "Fire" (1996) was met with heavy backlash and protests [4].

B. Media Representation and Progress

Since the Supreme Court's landmark ruling decriminalizing homosexuality and recognizing its constitutional rights in 2018, there has been a gradual shift in the media representation of LGBTQ individuals in India. However, much of this representation has been limited to stereotypical portrayals and has failed to accurately capture the diverse experiences of the LGBTQ community. Mainstream media often focuses on the victim narrative surrounding LGBTQ issues, highlighting the community's oppression and criminalization [3]. While shedding light on the community's constant oppression is important, mainstream media should also emphasize the lives and success stories of LGBTQ individuals [3].

On a positive note, there has been an increase in the visibility and representation of LGBTQ

people in Indian media, including movies and TV shows. Examples include "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga" (2019), a mainstream Bollywood film featuring a lesbian love story; "Made in Heaven" (2019), a web series featuring a gay wedding planner; and "The Family Man" (2021), a spy thriller featuring a transgender hacker. Additionally, a growing number of LGBTQ-led media outlets provide a platform for the community to share their stories and shape their narratives through online news portals, magazines, and social media accounts.

As a result of these media representations, the Indian audience and society have become more aware and empathetic towards LGBTQ people. They have challenged stereotypes and misconceptions about LGBTQ individuals and celebrated their diversity and dignity. However, there are still several gaps and challenges in media representation of LGBTQ people in India, including a lack of authentic voices, diversity, and intersectionality; persistent negative or sensationalized portrayals; censorship or backlash from conservative groups; and limited access or reach to marginalized communities.

Rituparno Ghosh's films serve as a testament to his artistic ability to portray LGBTQ characters in a nuanced, complex, and multidimensional manner within a conservative and homophobic society. Ghosh's works address the challenges faced by LGBTQ characters in accepting their identity, sexuality, and relationships. These films showcase the fluidity and diversity of LGBTQ identities, encompassing transgender, bisexual, intersex, and queer individuals. They do not shy away from depicting the violence, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by LGBTQ individuals in India.

The critical acclaim and numerous awards that Ghosh's films have received at national and international film festivals speak to their quality. However, these films have encountered challenges in terms of censorship, distribution, exhibition, and audience reception. Limited mainstream media coverage, low box office returns, and a lack of screening venues have hindered their broader reach. Nevertheless, Ghosh's films have played a pivotal role in creating a space for LGBTQ voices and stories in Indian Parallel Cinema and LGBTQ cinema in general. They have also inspired other filmmakers to explore LGBTQ themes in their work, fostering awareness and empathy among Indian audiences.

III. ANALYSIS

The media has a significant impact on public opinion and values, particularly regarding social issues like the LGBTQ community, as discussed earlier in this paper. In the case of India, media representation has played a pivotal role in shaping how people perceive and understand this marginalized community. The media portrayal of LGBTQ individuals, whether positive or negative, shapes societal attitudes, beliefs, and values.

The effect of media representation can be understood through the agenda-setting theory presented by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw. The agenda-setting theory states that the influence of media affects the presentation and coverage of issues, which in turn affects public opinion on those issues. Media coverage in various forms, including newspapers, TV shows, and movies, plays a crucial role in shaping the views and thoughts of the public. Agenda-setting occurs at three levels. The first level manipulates the public's mindset through excessive coverage, known as object salience, which influences what the public considers important based on media focus [6]. The second level involves influencing the public's opinion by

articulating their ideas for them, which is determined at the first level. The third level suggests that when people think of an object or idea, they rely on their existing network of information, and if that information is heavily biased, it becomes easier to manipulate new information.

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, the portrayal of the LGBTQ community in Indian cinema plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions, attitudes, and values. Films are a powerful medium that reaches a broad audience, making them influential in cultural narratives. Bollywood, the most popular cinema in India, holds immense influence in shaping societal perceptions, attitudes, and values, directly linking media representation of the LGBTQ community to social attitudes. While Bollywood alone cannot change all perceptions about the LGBTQ community, positive portrayals have the potential to challenge social prejudices and broaden perspectives. Here, I would like to analyze a set of films that depict the LGBTQ community both in a positive and negative light and explore public opinion regarding the LGBTQ community.

"Kapoor and Sons" is a 2016 Indian family drama that involves the Kapoor family, their relationships, and the conflicts that arise when family secrets are revealed. The movie explores various themes, such as love, acceptance, and the complexities of familial bonds. While the struggles of familial bonds can depict the lives of the LGBTQ community and their eternal struggle to come out to their parents and family about their gender or sexual identity, the movie brilliantly portrays the elder son's sexuality as one of the side issues leading to the breakdown of the family. Unlike other directors who make sexuality the main point of the story, this approach creates relatable and realistic characters. The mother's initial criticism and practical disownment of her

"perfect" gay son highlight a major flaw in her perception. The movie realistically shows the gradual acceptance of the gay character by his mother, without resorting to a magical or forced transformation. Overall, the gay character in *"Kapoor and Sons"* is depicted with depth and sensitivity. The movie's overarching theme of familial relationships broadened public opinion about LGBTQ issues and sparked conversations about inclusivity and acceptance.

"Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan" is a 2020 Indian romantic comedy that delves into the problems surrounding the LGBTQ community, particularly societal acceptance of same-sex love. The film portrays two characters, Kartik and Aman, who face opposition and prejudice from their families when they come out as a couple. Unlike many movies that focus solely on internal conflicts or take a comical approach to LGBTQ issues, this movie goes further by exploring the struggles faced by the LGBTQ community after individuals come out. While the movie highlights internal conflicts, the focus remains on Kartik and Aman navigating societal expectations and family pressures. This realistic portrayal provides depth to the characters, avoiding the reduction of LGBTQ individuals to mere stereotypes. The gradual transformation of societal attitudes through the power of love, conveyed in the romantic comedy format adored in Bollywood, delivers a strong message of equality. It is difficult to gauge the precise impact of the movie on the acceptance of the LGBTQ community, but the film received critical acclaim and certainly brought the struggles and triumphs of the community into mainstream consciousness.

"Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui" is a 2021 romantic drama that again explores the challenges and complexities faced by the LGBTQ community, this time through the

lens of a transgender character. The film revolves around the characters of Ayushmann Khurrana and Vaani Kapoor, with Kapoor portraying a trans woman. While the movie received some criticism for its portrayal, it goes beyond surface-level representation to shed light on the internal conflicts, constant fear of rejection, and courage required to embrace true identities and desires. The film offers a realistic experience of what a transgender woman faces daily, including the teasing from friends upon discovering Ayushmann's relationship with a trans woman. Through this narrative, the film sparked conversations about inclusivity, understanding of the LGBTQ community, and compassion from relatives and society at large. With positive reviews and the presence of popular actors like Ayushmann and Vaani, the movie positively displayed these relationships, making acceptance more accessible.

On the other hand, "*Humshakals*" is not a movie that heavily focuses on the LGBTQ community. However, there is a small segment where three male protagonists cross-dress as women for comedic effect. This exaggerated humor reinforces stereotypes that do not accurately represent the LGBTQ community. This representation reflects society's mocking of and finding comedic relief in the LGBTQ community, perpetuating discrimination.

Similarly, "*Laxmii*" is a 2020 horror-comedy film that received significant criticism for its portrayal of the transgender community. The movie tells the story of a man possessed by the vengeful spirit of a transgender woman. It garnered extreme backlash for perpetuating offensive stereotypes, inflated mannerisms, over-sexualization, and language that perpetuates cycles of stereotypes and discrimination. The film failed to offer an accurate representation of a transgender

person, despite starring Akshay Kumar and attempting to normalize transgenderism through such a popular character. Critics felt that casting an actual transgender actor would have depicted the role much better.

IV. CONCLUSION

The literature review has provided a comprehensive understanding of the correlation between media representation and social attitudes regarding the LGBTQ community in India. In a country like India, where the entertainment sector is vast and news agencies hold influence over public opinion, there exists a strong connection between the thoughts and values of the public and what is portrayed in the media.

The findings above indicate that media plays a significant role in either reinforcing or challenging stereotypes regarding the LGBTQ community. Proper portrayals of LGBTQ characters, where their sexual identity is not their sole defining characteristic, have been effective in creating a more positive view of this community. It is evident that actors and movies have a profound impact on conveying ideas, as young children and society as a whole look up to these actors as role models. Therefore, actors and the movie industry bear a great responsibility in shaping the values of the public. The portrayal of complex LGBTQ roles by actors like Ayushmann Khurrana, who infuse them with humor, is empowering for the LGBTQ community and contributes to positive change on this issue.

IV. LIMITATIONS

It is important to note that this paper lacks primary quantitative or qualitative data, which could be further explored. Conducting interviews and questionnaires would illuminate aspects that may have been overlooked, offering insights from movie critics and actual members of the LGBTQ

community who have been positively or negatively affected by these movies. This would enhance the strength of the research conducted and establish a clearer relationship, potentially including specific statistics on how people have been impacted by these movies or media coverage.

Additionally, obtaining perspectives from individuals outside the LGBTQ community regarding their views on these movies and whether their perceptions of the LGBTQ community have changed would provide valuable insights.

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