

Bromance in Bollywood: Is it dismantling homophobia and homophobia?

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Abstract

Traditionally Hindi films produced by Bollywood are not known to have taken an empathetic view of the plight of India's queer community. Projecting them as subjects of mockery, as aberrations and villainous have been the predominated approach of filmmakers. Given the power of the medium, such thoughts have percolated and influenced outlook of majority towards the gender minority. Yet there have been the odd films which contrast this oft adopted approach of Bollywood filmmakers. Though gender scholars have engaged in homoerotic reading of such films and unearthed underlying homosexual subtexts, feasibility of a different discourse about such films stands strong. By analysing films like Silsila, Dosti, Sholay, Dil Chahta Hai, Zindegi Na Milegi Dobara and Rang De Basanti this article relooks at tenability of homoerotic subtexts of these films. Specifically employing the theoretical framework of bromance, a form of homosocial bonding between individuals of the same sex, this article counters the conclusion of scholars about blurring of homosociality and homoeroticism in respect to characters portrayed in the selected films. This article argues that bromance films, made during the 20th century and thus far in 21st century, attempts to dismantle homophobia and homophobia. Intentions of such filmmakers were to sensitize viewers about romantic same-sex bonding, not necessarily falling within the purview of sexual attraction or homosexuality. They wanted to convince male viewers being emotionally and physically intimate with closely bonded friend, does not make someone gay or feminine. As such they aspired to lay the foundation of a liberal and inclusive social order with enhanced scope of discussion and deliberation about respectful social assimilation of queer individuals.

Keywords: Bromance, gender fluidity, homophobia, homophobia, queer, Bollywood

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

A poster boy of a stylised depiction of gay characters in Hindi cinema is Pinkoo. From the movie *Mast Kalandar* (1991, Director Rahul Rawal), Pinkoo is the quintessential flamboyant, effeminate gay included by scriptwriters to provide viewers with a comic breather. Pinkoo is not solitary and has many companions, noticeable across different films. In their article '*Portrayal of gay characters in Bollywood cinema,*' Bhugra et al. (2015) interpret the *Mohawk* hairstyle and English-speaking affinity, of Pinkoo, as deliberate inclusions to signify Western influence and its deleterious effect on Eastern values and morality. Pinkoo personifies the director's message, harbouring attraction towards the same-sex is a Western import, frequenting upper sections of society (Bhugra et al., 2015). Such interpretation perfectly aligns with discourses of the nationalists and the right-wing entities. Homosexuality is alien to Indian culture and ethos. Predating this interpretation, Gopinath (2000) in her article '*Queering Bollywood: Alternative Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema,*' had cited the example of Pinkoo to demonstrate how Bollywood films have traditionally attempted to project same-sex desire and foreign thought, belief and mannerism as synonymous.

Cut 17 years, and the persistence of such blatant stereotyping and westernisation emerges strongly in *Dostana* (2008, Director Tarun Mansukhani). The mannerism of the magazine editor and Abhishek Bachchan, while narrating the story of how he met and fell in love with John Abraham, reinforces the stereotyping of gays being melodramatic, pansy and effeminate. The setting of the story in Miami is indicative of the director's subtle attempt to provide an externalised and westernised prism, through which Indian viewers expected to interpret the relation between the film's two leading male characters. However, the inherent messaging is all too obvious, gay relation is mainly western and is therefore alien to Indian ethos and culture (Bhugra 2015).

Nevertheless, there exists an expanding and comprehensive body of literature, falsifying such posturing of yesteryear and present-day filmmaker. In her article '*Exploring the subversive Indian: Sexual dissidence and the "Queer" in Indian popular culture,*' Mukherjee (2017) demarcates emergence of same-sex relationships in India vis-a-vis the West. She mentions that in the case of the latter, prominence of the queer was a corollary to individualism. In the Indian scenario, queer marginalised under the pretext of collectivism. Owing to these dynamics, cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism have oft been used by scholars to explain acceptance or subordination of same-sex relations. Rahman et al. (2020) point out

that in general connotation, individualistic cultures are markedly different from collectivist cultures in their facilitation of a stimulating environment within which members can uninhibitedly express their attitudes, desires, identities and beliefs. Even if these are in contradiction to or violation of existing social norms, a high level of tolerance practised in such cultures (Hofstede 1980). In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, singular expression of desires, attitudes, beliefs and identities is discouraged. Instead, members are strongly motivated to act following societal expectations and norms and engage in socially approved roles. Thus, one expected to mould oneself as per approved social casting to ensure the manifestation of acceptable behaviour and attitude (Hofstede 1980). Linking this to sexuality Rahman et al. (2020) hypothesised, members in individualistic cultures having same-sex inclination will have a more significant degree of freedom in expressing it and behaving in ways which will be consistent with their inherent sexual preference and propensity. Alternatively, in collectivist cultures, members will not be encouraged to express same-sex interest and inclination or behaviourally reveal it. They are environmentally compelled to act in cohesion to accepted heteronormative gender norms (Rahman et al., 2020). Hence the assertion of Mukherjee (2017) that in India, accounts of same-sex relations and tendencies have always been compartmentalised in a cultural alcove so that the heteronormative societal sanctity defended from probable contamination.

1.2 Purpose of the study

Flowing from the above background, this paper envisages focusing on interpreting the message that directors might have intended to communicate through a depiction of bromance on the silver screen. Several scholars have viewed such characters from the paradigm of homosexuality and uncovered an underlying shift towards homoeroticism. By exploring different films with bromantic relations, made during different periods, this paper argues that such relations were devoid of any undercurrent of homoeroticism. Bromantic relations need not always be laced with homoeroticism. Physical and emotional intimacy is a part of bromance, but sexual inclination is mostly absent. By re-interpreting specific dialogues and songs of selected movies, this article points out that non-contextual interpretation of exchanges often resulted in erroneous conclusions about sexual preferences of involved characters, where none existed. In essence, this paper undertakes to highlight the possibility that makers of the discussed films, through their works, were probably trying to project bromance as being essentially normal and thus intending to destabilise prevalent sentiments of homophobia.

1.3 Methodology

This is essentially a qualitative study, which relies on the case study approach and utilises secondary data for analysis. Each film denotes a case representing bromance on screen, which are studied and analysed to outline its relevance to homosexuality and homoeroticism. Selection of films inherits the longitudinal aspect, as they hail from the 1900s to late 2000s. Theories put forward by different scholars form the theoretical framework within which bromantic relations of selected films are analysed. In particular a study which was conducted among male undergraduates and which identifies three characteristics of bromance has been used as the principal theoretical foundation for this study. Bromantic relations between characters, of the chosen films, have been compared vis-a-vis those concluded by the study to determine the extent to which such conditions are satisfied as the study mentions that bromance is mostly devoid of sexual innuendo, relations which perfectly fits the bromantic attributes assessed as being non-sexual. Therefore, films in which relation between characters matches with attributes identified by the study comprehended as bromance sans homoeroticism. Such findings subsequently cross-checked with a reinterpretation of songs and dialogues which previously thought to carry hints of homoeroticism. This aided in comprehensively concluding whether any possibility existed of sexual intimacy between the characters and whether songs and dialogues reflected the same in any way.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender fluidity and same-sex tradition in India

Scholarly reading of cultural and religious traditional texts destabilises the narrative of right-wing parties and questions gallery playing of Bollywood filmmakers, about queer being of western origin and influence. Pattanaik (2014) lists several examples from Indian mythology with prominent queer and gender fluidity connotations. Shikhandi, a princess brought up as a man and married to a girl, had to transform into a man to consummate the marriage. Bhisma recognised Shikhandi as Amba, from a previous birth, and refused to fight her in the battle. Arjuna exploited this opportunity and fatally struck Bhisma, altering the course of the Kurukshetra battle. Vishnu transformed into the enchanting Mohini to trick asuras into handing over the pot containing the elixir of immortality (Pattanaik 2014). Jarow (2003) narrates about Shiva's enchantment with Mohini, how he falls for and pursues her in the very presence of Parvati. Embrace of Shiva and Mohini, leading to a discharge of the former's energy, gave birth to the southern deity Ayyappa. He is also referred to as Hariharputra, being the son of Hari or Vishnu and Hara or Shiva (Jarow 2003). In this reading Pattanaik (2014) also mentions about

Kali becoming a man to mesmerise milkmaids, Gopeshwar transforming into a woman to learn and practice dancing, Samavan willingly becoming the better half of his male companion, and heroic Aravan taking on the form of a woman to marry Krishna.

Different scholars have drawn attention to the explicit description of queer being recurrent throughout Hindu scriptures. Narada-Smriti, Sushruta-Samhita and Kama Sutra considered being three principal works on this subject. Narada- Smriti did put forward a list of fourteen types of men, who were deemed unfit for marriage. The list included sandha or transgender, nisarga or intersex people and three classifications of homosexuals, namely mukhebhaga, kumbhika and asekyā (Sanyal and Maiti, 2018). Sushruta Samhita, a revered medical text of Hinduism, refers to kumbhika and asekyā as two distinct categories of homosexuals. The former undertakes a passive role during anal sex while the latter displays an affinity for the consumption of semen of other men (Sanyal and Maiti, 2018). The text advice the above categories and sandha or transgender people, to refrain from marriage. Importantly Sushruta Smiriti mentions that men who display feminine characteristics and females who show masculine characteristics have such tendencies from birth, thus clarifying that attract towards same sex is natural and not an apparition (Sanyal and Maiti, 2018).

Kama Sutra advised men who feel an attraction towards other men and who can do without the presence of women, should not get married. Instead, they should continue to love one another and thereby develop a trusting relationship which can potentially culminate into marriage (Sanyal and Maiti, 2018). It is significant to note that Narada Smriti authored around the first century before Christ, Sushruta Samhita around 600 B.C. and Kama Sutra in the third century A.D. (Hunt 2011). The groups were differentiated based on various sexual acts men performed on other men, and reflect the entire gamut of intimate acts and positions queers resort to or practice in present times. An expanse of knowledge and farsightedness of authors of these texts can thus easily gauged. Importantly these scriptures dismissed the probability of queer preferences acquired, arguing on the contrary that sexuality of any living being or entity decided during conception. In this regard, Kutumbiah (1962) noted that if sukra or the sexual fluid of the male dominates, the offspring will be male and heterosexual. If sonita, or blood of the female, dominates, a female heterosexual child will be born. If the proportion of sukra and sonita equates, or if the semen loses its productive power, then the embryo takes the form of a hermaphrodite (Kutumbiah 1962). In other words, it is the proportion of sukra or sonita, which determines the embryo's sexuality, which emphasises homosexuality is not acquired but

ingrained by birth. Notable here, individuals with non-heteronormative sexual desires were considered the third gender in most texts.

The inclusion of homoeroticism in ancient India and its expression through different forms of art, literature and architecture is well-documented and also emerges from the above. With puritanism being absent, homophobia was not the order of the day, and therefore sexual freedom of societal members was not impinged (Wilhelm, n.d.) Throughout the length of the Vedic period and the ensuing post-Vedic and Buddhist periods, queer people were never ostracised, victimised or subordinated. Even during the rule of the Gupta dynasty and the early years of the Islamic rulers, freedom of sexual expression and practice enjoyed by the masses and gays were as much a part of society as were heterosexuals. However, with the spread of the Mughal rule and strengthening of the extremist form of Islamic law, Sharia, efforts to regulate and control sexual behaviour and practises came to fore (Wilhelm, n.d.). Since Sharia did not approve of homoeroticism, queer people identified, brutally tortured and killed. The obvious messaging, anyone not complying with heteronormative behaviour would be eliminated. This practice got further entrenched with the commencement of the British rule and in keeping with prevalent traditions of the church, which had spread across England and Europe also, initiated the viewing of homosexuality as a criminal offence (Wilhelm, n.d.). In 1860 the colonial powers, having firmed their grip on Indian sub-continent, enacted the anti-sodomy law thereby institutionalising the criminality of homosexuality and queer preferences.

Thus, it emerges that while criminalisation of homosexuality is undoubtedly a western import, queer behaviour itself is not. It has been an integral part of sexual practices of ancient India and amply exemplifies the prevailing inclusive societal outlook before the incursion of Mughals and the British. Nevertheless, this has conveniently been overlooked and ignored by the Bollywood film fraternity, and the right-wing political groups, blissfully contributing to the continued marginalisation of the queer population, their victimisation and stereotyping. This is precisely where works like *Mast Kalandar*, *Dostana* and others have failed in living up to expectations of the disparaged queer community. Instead of assisting the queer in regaining their rightful place, instead of questioning the continued criminalisation of the community, films have perpetuated and carried forward a legacy which was never ours in any way. Queers have been persistently stereotyped, villains, mocked and used to titillate viewers. In *Sadak* (1991, Director Mahesh Bhatt) a hijra, though given prominent screen space, was cast as the villain Maharani operating a brothel in Mumbai. In a later interview, the director admitted that the scripting and casting did conform to existing societal perception of queers being aberrations

and immoral (Bakshi and Sen, 2012). In the first franchisee of *Housefull* (2010, Director Sajid Khan) there are sequences involving Akshay Kumar and Ritesh Deshmukh, where both exchange dialogues laced with double meaning. Their activities discreetly watched by Boman Irani, who assesses them to be gays. In one such scene Akshay, rubbing the sweat off his face, emphasises he will never do it again as it is very strenuous. As he walks out of frame, Ritesh enters and shown tugging in his shirt and telling Akshay he will have to do it again and again. Boman Irani watches them, overhears the exchange and collapses. In another scene, both shown coming out of the washroom in a loosened embrace. Ritesh's shirt wholly unbuttoned and his chest exposed, while Akshay rubs his face clean. The recent remark of the job done and it was great fun, to which the latter adds that it was very satisfying. Boman Irani again watches them from a distance, overhears the conversation and concludes them to be gays. While these indicative inclusions lend a comical touch to the film, it provided viewers with the clue that gays meant to for mocking at an evaluated only from the narrow perspective of physicality.

Simultaneous to outlining the inherent fallacy in approaches of individual filmmakers, regarding positioning and projection of queers being entirely out of place and exaggerated, it admitted that judging all filmmakers per the same yardstick is not prudent. Within the universe of Hindi films, individual works have subtly prepared the foundation for queer acceptance and societal inclusion and commendably projected angst, pains, struggles and conflicts of the community. Sans the contribution of such filmmakers and thought-provoking and sensitive messaging of their films, queer movement and members would have remained perennially impoverished. These works have bolstered spirit of a beleaguered community to fight against all the odds and sustain a movement culminating in the reading down of Section 377 in 2018.

2.2 Bromance in Hindi cinema

Woven into the storyline of several films, Bollywood has never shied away from narrating bromance on screen. Films depicting such relation, between two male friends, have often been read by scholars in light of interrelation between homosociality and homoeroticism and blurring the boundary between the two. This has steered conclusions towards the identification of homoeroticism as a subtext, within films depicting bromance. Diverging from the conventionally adopted and applied route, herein it is argued that bromance may not have necessarily stimulated viewers to take note of or become aware of, homoeroticism within the Indian societal context. In other words, across all the depictions of bromance the cross-over from homosociality to homoeroticism may not have happened. In this sense, bromance did not always imply homosexuality but rather attempted convincing viewers that all's well in

emotionally strong male bonding. Pattanaik (2018) states that in eastern aesthetic this is known as *shakha bhaav*, implying a form of deep, 'almost-romantic' bonding between men. Pattanaik (2018) stresses, such same-sex bonding is romantic but not sexual and cites the example of Krishna and Arjuna, who referred to one another as *shakha*. The former's counselling the latter during the battle of Kurukshetra, about one's duty towards upholding the rule of dharma highlights the kind of emotional strength and succour men drew from such same-sex relations. Building on this perspective, the bromance was used by filmmakers to drive home the point that it is entirely masculine to express one's feelings towards one's closet friend(s). It is entirely masculine to embrace and even kiss such a friend. Moreover, it is entirely masculine to hold his hand and say 'we will never part.' Before presenting readings of such bromance films it is pertinent to present an overview of the theoretical framework, the contours of which structures the readings.

2. 3 Theory of homosociality and bromance

As a terminology, homosociality is frequently and simply employed to explain and illustrate social bonding between two individuals of the same sex (Hammaren and Johansson, 2014). Scope of the term was widened by Sedgwick (1985), who explored homosociality from the perspective of diverse desires and intimate bonding occurring between same-sex individuals. Deciphering the complexities and interrelationship between homosociality, homosexuality and homophobia, Sedgwick (1985) put forward a new theoretical framework of masculinity and gender. She contended the progression of homosociality into homoeroticism assumes the presence of a continuous relationship between the two. In the context of male homosociality, continuity of its relation with homoeroticism radically obstructed by societal considerations and norms, and this gradually alters into a discontinuous one (Sedgwick 1985). Her assertion was, homosocial bonding among males may not always and compulsorily have homoerotic underlining because of the ruptured continuity.

Interestingly, Sedgwick (1985) stated that the degree of continuity of relation between homosociality and homosexuality was more substantial among women than in men. This discontinuity premise, thus, enables viewing of homosociality as male relationship or bonding emanating from the cohesion of homosocial longing and affection and homosexual panic (Hammaren and Johansson, 2014). Herein homosocial longing implies men seeking out other men for affection and intimacy, while homosexual panic implies apprehension about such longing for affection and intimacy transforming into homoerotic desire. Driven by homosexual panic, men consciously attempt to emphasise or highlight their heterosexuality either by talking

about or showcasing relation with women or by undermining the existence of homosexuals. Thus, every time a Maharani showed instigating an evil act or gay stereotypes made to perform funny acts, homosexual panic is stroked, and the notion of heterosexuality strengthened.

Bromance, the specific subject of this section, refers to close and affectionate relation between two or more males. Though contained within the broad framework of homosociality, the bromance is divergent from the traditional perception of homosocial relation between men and the premises of competition and hegemonic masculinity hierarchies on which some of the theories of masculinity are constructed (Hammaren and Johansson, 2014). Distinct from competitive propositions, bromance flourishes on non-sexual love, friendship and togetherness and provides a space within which such relations can become meaningful (Chen 2012). At this juncture, it is essential to note that bromance can develop between heterosexual males, homosexual males or between hetero and homosexual males. While the former is more frequent and commonly seen, the latter being comparatively rare still exists (Nardi 2001).

Chen (2012) had correctly identified three elements of bromance and elaborated on them to explain its inherent nature and quality. The first element, as indicated above, is bromance limited to men and is sexual. It is a way of expressing male-male love, affinity and intimacy. The second element, it occurs between heterosexual males and is therefore generally regarded as a complicated communication and expressing of affection and affinity between them. The brotherhood aspect in such relation underlines reemphasises of heteronormativity and homophobia. Viewed another way, it stresses that sharing such a relation does not necessarily make two males gay. This, however, does not rule out crystallisation of such a relationship between two gay males or between a gay and a heterosexual male. The third element of bromance, involved intimacy shifts between the outlines of sexual and asexual relations. This means that despite a high degree of intimacy is a reality in such relations. It is not always sexual. As such bromance contrasts the kind of friendship society accepts or approves between men and also counters the notion that intimacy is inherently sexual (Chen 2012). Thus, summarising the above, two clear deductions can be made. First, in homosocial relations, there is always underlining of homophobia which motivates such males to reiterate their heterosexuality. Second, bromance, which is a form of homosocial relation though embodies intimacy does not necessarily attach a sexual connotation.

Before the commencement of the modern era, such intimate and affectionate homosocial relation was never cynically viewed. As Victorian rule stabilised and consolidated, policing of homosocial relations became the order of the day (Kimmel 1994). Tripp (2005)

attributed this to increasing awareness about homosexuality, which was vehemently despised by rulers of the era. Men displaying affection or affinity for other men were considered gays and due action initiated. This stymied the formation of homosocial bonds and psychologically prevented men from loving, caring and emotionally depending on other men (Lewis 1978). They stopped confiding in each other and could never get themselves to share their intrinsic feelings and problems with members of the same sex. From an environment where transparency and mutual feeling were nurtured and respected, men suddenly found themselves enveloped by an impinging and claustrophobic atmosphere. Anderson (2009) termed this homophobia and highlighted its deep-rooted impact on male personalities, both physically and emotionally, throughout a significant portion of the twentieth century. McCormack and Anderson (2015) add, due to soaring levels of homophobia and the fear of social identification as gay, men started to consciously and overtly showcase or demonstrate their heterosexual inclinations and shied away from anything which could project them as being feminine or gay. Fehr (1996) points out that homophobia compelled men to adhere to heteronormative norms of behaviour, even when internally, they had the desire and yearning for emotionally and candidly forming homosocial bonds with other men.

On this subject, a critical study was conducted by Robinson et al. (2017), involving undergraduate male students, to assess how friendship experienced by the participants reflected the expansion of boundaries of homosocial relation in present times. Interestingly, the researchers mention shared interest, emotional intimacy and physical intimacy as three characteristics of bromance (Robinson et al., 2017). It recalled that these aspects had been highlighted by earlier researchers also. All participating students agreed to the commonality of interest being a vital aspect of the development of bromance. When the interest of individuals and their personalities align, bromance happens. The commonality of interest emerged as an essential prerequisite of bromance and homosocial relations (Robinson et al., 2017). On the aspect of emotional intimacy, participants pointed out this clarifies the difference between friendship and bromance. They held that level of emotional sharing and confession is much higher in bromance than compared to friendship. Several shared accounts of secrets which they have exclusively shared with their bromance but no other friends (Robinson et al., 2017). The clear distinction made between bromance and friendship is noteworthy, in this context. Researchers note the observation of young participants about how bromance instilled within them a sense of security, leading to unbridled disclosure and feeling of emotionality arising from love and complete faith.

Robinson et al. (2017) mention that participants being magnanimous in their use of endearing expressions when elaborating their feeling and attachment for their bromances. Having explained these aspects, participants did not stop short of distinguishing between homosocial bonding and homosexual attraction. While clarifying the feeling to be asexual, participants added that sex is not integral to love. Therefore, two people can be in love, without feeling the need to indulge in a sexual act (Robinson et al., 2017). This does not conclusively rule out physical intimacy, which was highlighted by all participants as being integral to bromance. Lying in bed together, cuddling each other and even kissing was acceptable to participants, and many agreed to having indulged in these. Kissing, for them, is an expression of love and affection and not always a sexual overture. They expressed comfort in being physically nude with their bromances and described it as an apt way to strengthen their emotional bonding. After all, if they can share their secrets with their bromances, participants could not find a justification for not being physically transparent with them. Some participants recalled how they bathed together after rugby game without any inhibitions and how soaps used to be intentionally dropped (Robinson et al, 2017).

3. Analysis of selected films

3.1 Bollywood bromances of the 1900s

3.1.1 Silsila

A reflection of this specific aspect can be traced to *Silsila*(1981, Director Yash Chopra) and to the scene where Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor are shown taking a shower together. Mischievously Shashi Kapoor drops the soap and asks Amitabh to fetch it, who bends halfway through and then straightens up refusing to go all the way down. As both breaks into a riot of laughter, Shashi Kapoor reminds Amitabh how none used to volunteer to do the job even during their hostel days. That this dropping of soap, while showering together, is a common prank also gets established from the narrative accounts above. Kavi (2000), in his article '*The Changing Image of the Heroic Hindi Films*,' indulges in the homoerotic reading of this exchange and concludes it as a 'clear reference to the "penetrating" image of Amitabh Bachchan.' How such an image gets established or how the 'act of penetration' can be inferred is not clearly explained. Additionally, a queer interpretation of the exchange only, without taking into consideration what is said before and after, seems predetermined on two counts. First, if Kavi's conclusion about the person bending down to pick up the soap subjected to penetration holds, it automatically contradicts opinions expressed in the study cited above.

Participants had opined that showering together is normal in bromances, which are markedly asexual relations. Despite nudity and physical proximity during the act of showering, participants did not inform getting indulged in sexual acts. So, Amitabh and Shashi Kapoor, who are bromantic friends, indulging in penetrative sex during showering and initiating it by dropping the soap seems somewhat untenable and does not gel with the basic fabric of bromance. Also, if Shashi Kapoor's recollection about none agreeing to pick up the soap in the hostel interpreted in the same line, it would imply that one who did go down subjected to penetrative sex in full view of others and this had given birth to apprehension among others. Indeed, if such had happened, expression accompanying such recollection would not have been gleeful. Second, viewers subsequently learn that even as children Amitabh and Shashi Kapoor used to bath together in the nude. The former recalls a rather embarrassing incident of the time. Children indulging in such an act magnify their bonding, intimacy and emotional transparency without any underlying dimension of homoeroticism. So, if both are used to such act since childhood, reflecting notions of homosociality and bromance, it does not come out clearly how such homosociality added the layer of homoeroticism as they grew up. Especially when it is evident that both characters do not reside in the same place, how homoerotic feelings developed within them remains unanswered. Thus, while bromance gets established between Amitabh and Shashi Kapoor, a homoerotic underpinning is somewhat implausible and shaky.

3.1.2 Dosti

Another movie with a sensitive and emotional portrayal of bromance is *Dosti* (1961, Director Satyen Bose). A chance meeting on the streets of Mumbai occurs between Ramu after an accident handicapped and Mohan, blind probably from a childhood illness and instant chemistry transpires. Ramu, who could play the mouth organ, and Mohan, who could sing, start performing together to earn a living. With both having none to fall back on, they find solace and comfort in their companionship. When Ramu expresses his desire to rejoin school, Mohan toils hard to raise the required amount. Together they rent a house, Ramu gets admitted to a school and starts excelling in academics. However, after an evening's incident, Ramu is compelled by his class teacher to shift out of the slum dwelling and stay at his residence. Though this leaves Mohan emotionally devastated, he remains concerned about Ramu's future and well-being. When he hears that Ramu has decided not to appear for his final board exams, he resorts to street performance, raises requisite funds and hands it over the school authorities. In the process, he suffered from serious ill health and admitted to a hospital.

The day results announced, Mohan learns about his friend topping the exam. On the other hand, Ramu too learns about the sacrifice of his friend. He rushes to the hospital, and their proximity restored.

In *Dosti*, Devi (1990) had found significant suggestions underlining same-sex relations between the two protagonists. Mapped vis-a-vis the theoretical premise of bromance, the homosexual subtext of Ramu and Mohan's relation is difficult to locate. On the contrary, it satisfies all the three characteristics of bromance identified by Robinson et al. (2017), thereby lending credibility to the argument that Ramu and Mohan were bromantic friends and not necessarily gays. Not being physically agile, not having anyone to depend on, deprivation from love, affection and care for the excellent and impoverished condition are aspects of commonality. This is realised by both protagonists and given the hardships faced. They decide to stay cohesive. Mohan expresses this realisation as 'God has facilitated our union. We will stay together.' Within Ramu's apparent light-hearted comment, 'You cannot see, and I cannot walk,' one can detect a similar realisation about equilibrium they conjointly can achieve. The aspect of shared interest further intensifies when they start performing. It is Ramu's music and Mohan's song that draws in crowds, increasing their daily income. In the absence of either, labour, the other would have had to put in to earn clear later in the film. The apprehension of incompleteness, they would be enveloped in when apart, binds them together. This is unique to bromantic relation.

That this bromance is emotionally intense is depicted across various moments of the film. Mohan describing Ramu as the eyes which will locate his long-lost sister, his handing over the entire earning amount to Ramu after a robbery attempt, both vowing not to leave one another and repeated reinforcing of continued mutual commitment exemplifies the inherent strong emotional bonding. This feeling heightens post the scuffle in school which leaves Ramu bruised and injured. Mohan arranges for the medicine to alleviate Ramu's pain and suffering. In a poignant display of feeling, Mohan sighs and regrets not being able to see as it robs him of the opportunity to nurse Ramu back to health. He vents this desperation, loving caressing Ramu all through.

Moreover, he does so in the full glare of the camera and through it, the viewer. He is not ashamed of this feeling, has no qualms about it and makes no attempt to hide it from us. As the camera captures a candid framing of Mohan's face, his exuberance at the very thought of being able to take care of Ramu is overtly palpable. He is barely able to contain the internal

surge of emotion triggered by the realisation that he too is capable of taking care of someone and that he too is wanted and longed for. When Ramu says that Mohan's caressing is enough to provide him relief, the wave of feeling within the latter reaches crescendo. Overlapping of these experiences and accounts of participants of the Robinson et al. (2017) study can hardly miss.

Across different scenes and moments, viewers get exposed to physical intimacy of the bromantic friends. Embracing one another sitting on the park bench, sleeping cross-legged on the footpath, sharing the single bed, Mohan trying to feel Ramu's proximity by touching his pillow and the unbridled hugging on meeting after many months reminds viewers of their physical closeness. Notably, when they meet in the hospital, towards the end of the film, they passionately hug each other and again in full view of others. Here too, the lack of inhibition is striking, and nothing holds them back from showcasing it. If this is to interpret with a homoerotic or homosexual subtext, then it would also follow that such expression was possible because the protagonists were able to overpower inherent homophobia and homophobia. Nevertheless, given their socio-economic condition and the period of the film, overcoming societal diktat and internal homophobia, to harbour homoerotic desires, appears overstretching of analytical reasoning and imagination.

Reading a specific song from the film, 'Chahunga mein tujhe sanjh sabera' Bhugra et al. (2015) in their article '*Portrayal of gay characters in Bollywood Cinema,*' had concluded it revealing the homosexual relationship between the protagonists. A translation of the first stanza of the song presented below:

I will long for every evening and day.

Yet never will I again,

By your name

Call out to you

This self-resolve by Mohan was interpreted by Bhugra et al. (2015) as a feasible way to prevent others from learning about the underlying homosexual dimension of their relation. Read in conjunction with the event just preceding the song, the reason for Mohan's resolve gains clarity. On hearing Ramu's decision to move in with his class teacher, Mohan visits the house accompanied by his neighbour's son. He repeatedly calls out to Ramu, to come out and move back to their room in the slum. Ram eager to see Mohan, appears at the window but on the insistence of his master does not utter a word. Mohan, not aware of his friend's presence, keeps calling and hears nothing in response. Pained and dejected Mohan returns and vows never to

reach out to Ramu again, though treasuring the feeling he harbours. Expression of his internal turmoil pours out through the song, the last line of which reflects the state of mind and its resultant resolve. Certainly, connect of this with the emotional intimacy facet of bromance appears stronger than with homosexuality. For there are many instances before this song through which their homosexual connect would have become apparent. When Mohan goes to fetch medicine for Ramu, the neighbour's daughter directly comments about how Mohan is protective and caring about him to which Ramu readily agrees. She would have already perceived the strains of homosexuality between the boys, to make the observation. Mohan buys a lantern so that Ramu's studies do not suffer because of lack of illumination, Ramu hands over his academic excellence medal to Mohan and opines that he is the real hero and so deserves it, the first time Ramu refuses to move in with his teacher saying he cannot leave Mohan alone...all these incidents are pregnant with the indication for neighbours and others to conclude that the boys are gays. If they did not do so and instead celebrated the bonding of the two, there appears to be no tenable explanation about why Mohan would want to guise their homosexual preference by refusing to call out to Ramu. Hence the reading of a homosexual subtext comes across as susceptible. Instead, the above underlines a healthy emotional intimacy and connect, which lends credibility to placing of the relationships within the ambit of bromance.

3.1.3 Sholay

Jay and Veeru's relation in *Sholay* (1975, Director Ramesh Sippy) has also been subjected to homoerotic reading more often than not. Gopinath (2000) mentions that romance between the two male friends comes out clearly from a duet song in which their undying love and loyalty for each other communicated. Gopinath (2000) adds how gays outside India interpreted this as transparent admission of male-male love and subsequently adapted the song an anthem for gay pride marches organised across New York and San Francisco. A specific line of the song has been read by Kavi (2000) also, with the conclusion that it is outrightly homoerotic and subtly suggestive of the penetrative sexual act. Before discussing the above conclusions, translation of the song attempted by Rao (2000) in the article '*Memories pierce the heart,*' is presented below:

We will not end this friendship

We shall be together even in death

Listen, my friend

Your victory is mine

My loss is yours

*Your sorrow is my sorrow
My life is your life
For you I will risk this life
For you I will play with fire
Make enemies of the whole world
People see us as two
But actually, we are one
O God, bless us
So, we never separate
Never wound one another
We shall eat and drink together
Live and die together
Till life lasts*

The specific lines this portion of the discussion is based on are extracted and presented below:

*For you I will risk this life/ Jaan pe bhi khelenge
For you I will play with fire/Tree lie le lenge
Make enemies of the whole world/Sab se dushmani*

Kavi (2000) had mainly interpreted 'Tere liye lelenge,' as being suggestive of sexual intimacy between the friends. His argument, this overtly implies one friend willing to engage in penetrative sex for pleasure and satisfaction of the other. Kavi (2000) mentions 'lelenge' as a street slang in Hindi which means to get fucked. At best, this is an immensely narrowed and limited interpretation of the word which has different connotations depending on the sentence it appears. Refraining from a detailed discussion of the various sentence constructions in which the term generally used, it suffices to mention that broadly 'lelenge' means to take. Moreover, 'to take' need not necessarily imply something penetrative.

While drawing his inference Kavi (2000) conveniently ignores the lines preceding and following it, thereby missing the context in which it appears. Reading of Kavi (2000), if correct, robs the last line of its meaning and renders it redundant. The first line, however, stands, albeit with an altered meaning. Connected to the idea of penetrative sex, the risking of life would mean contacting some deadly disease in the process. However, noting that the first case of AIDS/HIV detected in India in 1986 (Solomon et al., 2006), a decade post authoring of this song, credibility of the interpretation gets diluted. Thus, it argued that the song is about love,

friendship, bonding and associated feelings and any homoerotic subtext absent or unidentifiable.

Similarly reading of the song's translation by Rao (2000) does not project any covert homosexual messaging or indications. How a homoerotic interpretation emerged or got attached to the song appears beyond reasonable comprehension. Probably it is a case of missing the woods for the trees.

Contrastingly, when analysed from bromance paradigm, greater clarity emerges regarding Jay and Veeru's relation. Being brothers-in-crime underlines the aspect of shared interest, a key criterion of bromance. Though much not revealed about the background and upbringing that they belong to the identical socio-economic condition can be presumed. They partake in crime together, get arrested together and serve jail sentences together is all too evident from the film's narrative. It will not be an exaggeration to assume. This partnership enables them to earn a living and support themselves, similar to the arrangement between Ramu and Mohan in *Dosti*. As such *Thakur Saab* also requests for information for both Jay and Veeru and not singularly, being well aware of their potency when together. The perpetuation of crime in the quest for earning defines the shared interest of these bromantic friends.

The coin often tossed to arrive at mutually acceptable decisions, symbolises the emotional intimacy between the two. Being firmly attached emotionally, none is ever ready to let the other face a threat or get into a situation potent with the dangerous outcome. Veeru confides in Jay about his love interest in Basanti and later entrusts him with the responsibility of convincing Basanti's aunt about marriage and nurses' Jay when he gets wounded in a gun battle with Gabbar's team. True to the song, Jay risks his life to save Veeru and Basanti when they are kidnapped and held in confinement by Gabbar and his men. When they are pursued and cornered by the dacoits, Veeru refuses to leave an injured Jay, fearing for the life of his friend. When Jay sustains fatal injuries, Veeru repeatedly complains that he cannot be left alone. Symbolically Jay breathes his last in his friend's embrace. Noteworthy is the coin Jay had tossed to decide who would continue to resist the approaching gang, had the same sign on both sides. It is indicative of Jay's decision not to put his friend's life in the line of fire having learnt about his aspirations of leading a happy married life. These actively establish the emotional intimacy angle and justify reading and interpretation of the relation as bromance with homosocial subtext and not homosexual or homoerotic.

3. 2 Bollywood bromance of the 2000s

3.2.1 Dil Chahta Hai

Considered a cult classic, Dil Chahta Hai narrates stories of three friends, their love interests and life journey. Akash, Sameer and Siddharth, are college friends and their shared interest lies in being around each other at all times. Sameer is usually the target of Akash's pranks and gleefully takes it within his stride. Between his friend and girlfriend, he opts for the former when the latter develops a dislike for him. On his part, Akash convinces Sameer about the type of girl he needs...someone who will love him the way he is. Sameer heeds and obliges. Siddharth is more reticent, of the three, and balanced. He moves to support Sameer every time Akash picks on him. He too bullies Akash, revealing location details to Akash's girlfriend. Siddharth undertakes a pivotal role in the marriage of Sameer, motivating him to express his feelings to Pooja. Emotional intensity and trust are essential for such a relationship, an example of homosociality. Ideally expressed through the song, on their journey to Goa:

My heart wants that

Golden days should never end

My heart wants that

I am always among friends

Lovely conversations

Happen every day

Evenings are fun and nights full of songs

May we always are surrounded by happiness

Like this time, may we be happy all along?

My heart wants that

Golden days should never end

My heart wants that

I am always among friends

The longing of this bunch of bromantic friend reminds of Jay and Veeru. They too prayed for their *yaari* much like Akash, Sameer and Siddharth.

3.2.2 Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara

Within the friendship of Arjun, Kabir and Imran reflections of the dynamics of Akash and friends traced. Much like Siddharth, Kabir plays the supportive and balanced between the three. Arjun and Imran strike up an argument when the former's mobile is disposed of by Imran. Here a pre-decided pact to undertake a road trip and participate in adventure sports is the shared interest. It is a lucrative opportunity for three friends, staying apart mostly, to spend quality time. Emotional intensity is apparent from how fundamental issues sorted, without any

relational strains. By the end of the trip, their friendship nourished and strengthened. They exchanged emotional turbulences, guiding and supporting each other to find ways to calm the upheavals. Imran apologises to Arjun for his behaviour four years ago, and Kabir confesses about neither being in love with Natasha, nor interested in marriage. In a poignant moment, Arjun asks Kabir if it was to discuss this problem, with his close friends, that he had organised the trip.

Notwithstanding several scenes of the friends hanging around bare-bodied, no sexual innuendos strike the eye. There was physical intimacy but not with homoerotic undertones. The complete transparency and emotional depth of the bromance here resembles other bromances across films.

3. 2. 3 Rang De Basanti

The cinematic approach of bromantic storytelling reached a new zenith in *Rang De Basanti* (2006, Director Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra) in which five bromantic friends, inspired by the acts of five revolutionaries, set out to avenge the killing of their pilot friend. Ashodia (n.d.) notes the film is celebrating the bromance of legendary freedom fighters Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Ashfaq Ullah Khan and Chandra Shekhar Azad. The film was acclaimed both nationally and internationally, magnifying the effectiveness of the central message that bromance provides males with the power to bring about a change in the existing order. *Sonu Ke Titu ki Sweeti* (2018, Director Luv Ranjan), also featuring a bromance between the male protagonists, needs a mention because of a specific song reminiscent of the iconic number expressing Jay and Veeru's friendship in *Sholay*. This song has rendered to homoerotic reading. However, following the emotional intimacy characteristic of bromance, it is normal for a friend to feel overwhelmed with pain and anxiety on the eve of his bromantic friend's marriage. In a gesture of self-consoling, he reminds himself of this bromantic friendship spanning several births and not disrupted by anyone—a translation of the song presented below (Vetticad 2018).

If you are displeased,

Who will laugh?

If I lose you,

Whom will I have?

When you fall silent, I get afraid,

Now, who will call me his?

You are my reason,

Without you I am nothing.

I am your friend.

I am your friend.

That bromance continues to find favour among the new breed of filmmakers, is apparent from the portrayal of bromantic relations in other films like *Style* (2001, Director N. Chandra), *Munnabhai MBBS* (2003, Director Rajkumar Hirani), *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006, Director Rajkumar Hirani), *Rock On!* (2008, Director Abhishek Kapoor) and *3 Idiots* (2009, Director Rajkumar Hirani) also.

4. Conclusion

In a recent flick, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020, Director Hitesh Kewalya) male protagonist Karthik declares that his partner Aman's father needs treatment to recover from a severe ailment, homophobia. During much of 20th and 21st centuries till now, one school of filmmakers may have been trying to cure society of precisely this severe disease through their films. Some such films have highlighted and discussed herein. Above analysis, per the theoretical model of homosociality and bromance, opens up space for debating what precisely were the subtexts of such films. Were directors like Satyen Bose, Ramesh Sippy and Yash Chopra and others trying to address, and thereby dismantle, notions of homophobia and homophobia plaguing minds of viewers? Viewed against the backdrop of queer movement in India being in its nascent stages, during most of the 1900s, this question assumes significance. If indeed filmmakers had attempted to address deep-seated viewer apprehension by promoting the expression of same-sex love in real life, they indeed were harbingers of queer liberation in the country.

The early years of the present century have been monumental for queer movement in the country culminating in the first significant landmark, reading down of Section 377 by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India. With bromance continuing to find favour among filmmakers, and society not entirely liberal for and comfortable with queer inclusion the possibility of films having homosocial subtexts appears potent. Bollywood fraternity members have come out in support of more significant degree of queer liberation, and therefore their trying to make a social statement about wrongly-placed homophobia and homophobia might be plausible. For it is only through alteration of a mindset of the majority, that minorities receive the rightful place. Moreover, if this is the case presently, the dismantling of imported puritan notions may well have been one of the objectives of a *Sholay* or *Dosti*.

Through the cinematic portrayal of same-sex dependency and emotional bonding, directors may have subtly but actively tried to differentiate between same-sex romance and same-sex eroticism. Sensitivity, with which bromantic relations were scripted and brought to life, indicates the directorial intention of presenting another perspective on the subject. That there is nothing wrong in loving, embracing, cuddling, sharing the bed with or showering together with another man, appears to have been an overarching message. That it is perfectly humane to develop such bonding whereby one puts the safety, security and well-being of a friend of the same sex, before oneself; that is perfectly fine to express pain and outrage at the loss of such a friend, and that is fine to suffer emotionally if something goes awry in the relationship was consistently presented through different films and by different filmmakers. That homosocial bonds can exist without spilling into the homoerotic domain comes across forcefully in the narratives of Ram and Mohan or Arjun, Kabir and Imran. Through efforts to dispel homophobia or homophobia, which held back many from forging such relations, filmmakers probably laid the foundation for a more individualistic expression of one's innate feelings of love, affection and sexuality. These films aimed to carry forward the creation of a more liberal societal space, where every individual would be free to express what and how he feels for another member of the same sex. They assured and provided confidence to an entire generation to confess their love for their friend, or hold his hand, or chill out with him indifferent to how it viewed by society.

Definition of terms used.

Bromance –Bromance combines two words, brother and romance. This unique, but non-relation between two or more men often stated as brothers from another mother.

Homoeroticism – The phenomenon of sexual arise via someone from the same sex. This is just a state of desire, can be either be fleeting or permanent in time.

Homosexuality – An enduring romantic or sexual attraction towards another member of the same sex. This also implies identity and self-expression, such a person derives from being a part of the community of others sharing similar attractions.

Homophobia – Homophobia refers to adverse feelings and perceptions about homosexuals and homosexuality. This consists of general ranging attitudes like prejudice, hatred, contempt, aversion evolving from fear about the societal reaction. Such fear is often irrational and arises from a lack of information or beliefs.

Homophobia – This refers to the fear and anxiety of being perceived as homosexual, basis behaviour which is understood to be reflective of homosexuality. Since homosexuality is less desired than heterosexuality, homosexuals are often bullied and discriminated. This gives rise to fear.

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