

Cracks in the Tinsel Closet

*Genderbending
in Bombay films*

By ANIRUDDH CHAWDA



Ashish Balram Bhagat and Irfan Khan in *Adhura* (1995), billed as India's first film on gay men

Down the years, the “treatment” that homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderness have received in the Bombay film industry, nicknamed **Bollywood**, can easily be summed by a kind of Big Bird word—ostrich-like. Like Indian culture in general, Bollywood would like to pretend, at least in public, that the only use of queerness is for quick laughs. Despite that public face, Bollywood still has a rich history of using gay-related imagery—we’re talking boys showing feelings for boys, girls showing feelings for girls, boys trying to pass as girls and vice-versa.

The era of modern Hindi popular cinema can generally be thought of as starting when the Big Three came on board in the fifties. **Raj Kapoor**, **Dilip Kumar**, and **Dev Anand** ushered in an exciting new phase in Hindi cinema. And, like the fledgling democracy's first baby steps, a new generation of actors and actresses ever so slowly began to display a kindred adventuring spirit. Since comedy has always been the universal “safe-space” for depicting the celluloid parade of queers, the initial trend in Bollywood was also led by the comedians like **Mehmood**, **Om Prakash**, and others.

Mehmood is probably the best “all-round” comedian ever to grace Bollywood—even more so when he tried drag. In early social dramas, usually as a sidekick to **Rajendra Kumar**, he would try on a gorgeous printed sari (couldn't tell the colors in that black and white era) to entice the likes of **Shobha Khote**, **Helen**, or **Indira**

Bansal. His show-stopping drag scene in *Beti Bete* (1960)—where he gets into a huge wig and a rather noisy ring on his ring-finger—is one for the record books.

Of the “serious heroes,” **Shammi Kapoor's** first cross-dressing attempt came opposite **Asha Parekh's** first role (*Dil Dekhe Dekho*, 1957), when he put on a (large) burka to pass as a girlfriend to Asha. The fact that *Dil Dekhe Dekho* was a hit proved that Bollywood's audience was not entirely averse to the idea of cross-dressing roles of popular male leads. The burka was much later used by **Arvind Swamy** to get close to **Manisha Koirala** in *Bombay* (1995).

The '60s brought something new—Technicolor—and the audience was finally able to see exactly what fashion sense these queen-wannabes had. So when a pucker-lipped **Shammi Ka-**

poor put his girth into a sari to tease a ravishing **Vijayantimala** in *Prince* (1966), all accounting for taste must have been checked in with the doorman. That comedy (and the outfit) went nowhere. The fashion police brigade hadn't

been trained at the time, or there would have been an instant citation.

Speaking of **Shammi Kapoor**, his screen persona always bordered just that side of being nelly. He skipped, literally, across many a light-hearted romance (*Junglee*, *Kashmir Ki Kali*, etc.). That made him the first male lead to prove the box-office respectability of the flamboyant male lead. Despite the fact that he sang an ode to a red (joy) stick (“*Laal chhadi, maidan khadi*,” in *Jaanwar*, 1960), this Kapoor never had a chance to become Bollywood's celluloid gay diva—and no loss there.

Kapoor's biggest challenge in the '60s was someone who copied all of Shammi's style—and was better at it. When **Jeetendra** became the newest dancing dude, he starred opposite then newcomer **Mumtaz** in a widely disregarded musical (*Himmat*, 1968). This movie was groundbreaking in being one of the first to show cross-dressing by

Compulsory viewing for South Asian lesbians: Hema Malini and Parveen Babi in *Razia Sultan* (1983)





Genderbending as practised in *Mayapuri*, which bills itself as the "family film weekly": Amitabh Bachchan's curves, and Sridevi's lines

the female lead in a semi-serious setting. Mumtaz runs away from home to escape the clutches of her arranged suitor, puts on tight pants-a-la-'60s, and tries to pass as a truck driver who is afraid to drive! Jeetendra smells something fishy while being attracted to him (her). This homo-erotic attraction becomes clear when Jeetendra sings:

*Hai shukar ke tu hai ladka,
tujhe dekh mera dil dhadka;
Kya hota meri tauba,
agar tu ladki hoti ...*
(Thankfully you are a boy,
seeing you my heart beat
faster;
Goodness only knows the out-
come
had you been a girl...)

But way before Mumtaz, before even the sun had set on the empire of a certain European island, an ultra-butcht Australian-born heroine left a remarkable legacy in Bollywood. The '30s and '40s witnessed a heroine variously nicknamed (after her films) Fearless Nadia, Diamond Queen, Hunterwali Hansa—or, mostly, just Nadia. She emerged on horseback as an early beacon for Bollywood's torchbearing femme-lead genre. In *Bombaywali*, for example, Nadia organized an all-female army to fight a gang of (male) outlaws. In her first few roles, the plot was "resolved" by Nadia marrying. But Nadia's mentor, protofeminist and producer Jamshed Wadia, soon began to have Nadia appear without any male leads—leading to all kinds of eyebrows being raised.

Ranjan and Mahipal were to Bollywood what the likes of Buck

Rogers were to Hollywood—leads in B-rate fantasy/adventure formulas that became '60s matinee fodder. The female counterpart to these two was a Punjabi star named Nishi. This heroine single-handedly fought back hordes of sword-wielding opponents, scaled castle walls in a single try, and never wore a sari. And all this without a strong male presence, making her at least a very feminist heroine. Her roles in little known movies like *The Deccan Queen* and *Punjab Mail* were the precursors to the fiercely independent—not to mention butch and attractive—female-lead trend carried on by Sridevi (*Sherni*, 1987) and Rekha (*Phool Bane Angare*, 1990). While there was never anything particularly queer about Nishi's roles, the fact that she did them without any male leads, sidekicks, or saris was, once again, in itself interesting.

The Master Showman himself, Raj Kapoor, was no stranger to using a sexually ambiguous scenario to entertain brown, black, and white noses all the way from Johannesburg to St. Petersburg. In his opus *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), Padmini plays the butch Minoo Master who in order to escape the clutches of male-dominance over her life, convincingly dresses in a shirt, pants, and a boyish 'do. On meeting the Joker, she develops romantic feelings for the Joker—but snaps back to reality when reminded of the sexism she seeks to escape. The symbolic splash of cold water in her face comes in a simple scene where the Joker nonchalantly remarks on her delicate hands.

Late in the '60s, an overnight superstar phenom was created when Rajesh Khanna lipsynched a Tata-lorry full of tearjerkers on his way to the top. In 1994, more than a decade after his last decent role (*Avataar*, 1982)—a decade in which he did much bitching about his fall from the top—Khanna

was asked by *Filmfare* magazine if he had, as an actor, ever "made any compromises." Never one to miss an opportunity to blame others for his demise, he said, "I never compromised my dignity. I could never see myself putting on a sari and singing 'Mere angane mein tumhara kya kaam hai.'" He was referring, of course, to Amitabh Bachchan in *Lawaaris* (1981).

Let's put that homophobic outburst into perspective. What that means is that the murderer (*Ittefaq*, 1969, and *Dushman*, 1972) and bigamist (*Daag*, 1973, and *Aasha Jyoti*, 1984) roles Khanna took on were true to his personality? Huh?

In 1995, homophobia raised its ugly head again when Saif Ali Khan assaulted Indian gay activist Ashok Row Kavi in "retaliation" for Kavi disparaging his mother Sharmila Tagore's acting mannerisms and questioning the on-screen chemistry between Khan and reigning Bollywood gorgeoso Akshay Kumar in *Main Khiladi Tu Anari*.

Mr. Khan—you in your swishy black leather—we think you protest too much. This son of a cricket great Mansoor Ali Khan of Pataudi and legendary actress Sharmila Tagore, herself hailing from the household of a Nobel laureate, has trouble deciphering fact from celluloid.

In the mid-'80s, a Bollywood tattler ran a cover story on "Bisexuality in Bollywood." With many innuendo and interviews with "insiders" and "ex's," the article confirmed what is commonly known—that Bollywood is no different from any other tightly knit, self-supporting, self-perpetuating, myth-making machine that looks after its own and will go to great lengths to preserve its turf. The story left no doubt that there are just as many queers in Bollywood as anywhere else (Duh!). One name the article did mention was that of Deepak Parashar—a B-actor, most notably known for playing opposite Pakistani actress Salma Agha in *Nikaah* (1983). The story goes that he was forced to quit movies after word "got out" that he was gay.

This same article also had readers playing the guessing game about who in

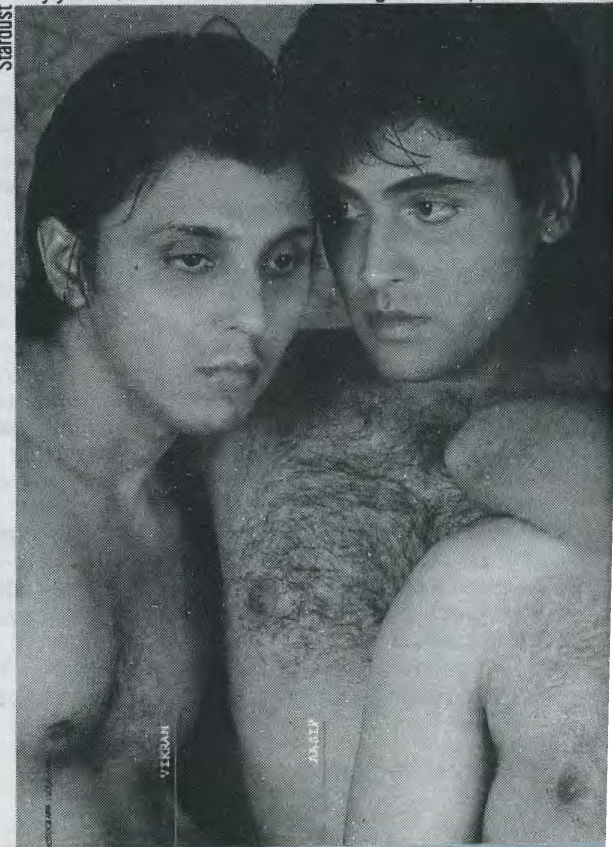
Bollywood "was" and who "wasn't," presumably, gay or bi. Example: The popular son of an old time legendary he-man is commonly known as straddling that preferential fence. The purported basis for his on-again-off-again relationship with the ex-wife of a one-time superstar was his inability to account for weekends away from her—when he was "out with the boys."

Why is it okay to let a lesser known name like Deepak Parashar take the fall while the antics of a more popular, richer name is passed off as a chapter in The Lifestyles of Rich and Stupid? Looking after their own—one can guess. And the closet perpetuates itself. It is interesting to note that several of these stories hint at the private lives of actors and actresses. Maybe we have arrived in a decade where "lifestyles" in front as well as behind the camera can be talked about, and that's a break from the past.

Some stories, though, are still best left untouched. So who really needs know the story of Jackie Shroff and Anil Kapoor having the same size—um, waist, that is—for they have admitted that they actually trade blue jeans with each other from time to time (*Filmfare*, September '92). Ms. Prudence dictates that we not air this bit of smelly laundry trivia any further.

One of the most frank—and most disturbing—gay-themed Bollywood films was art-film-maker Ketan Mehta's *Holi* (1984). Made with a relatively inexperienced cast, a significant chunk of the narrative focused on some gay boys at a boarding school. A char-

Why you should subscribe to *Stardust* magazine: a spread from 1989



acter named Lalu continuously blackmails his sex-partner, Anand, into providing "small" favors—presumably including sex. The greater lie comes in the form of Om Puri's college principal character also blackmailing Anand—into ratting on his buddies. The principal threatens to expose "the kind of relationships he has with certain kinds of friends (*kaise kaise doston ke saath kaisee kaisee dosti hai*)."

Holi, in addition to a being a remarkable film, was a milestone for two significant reasons. Mehta explored what was probably the first incidence of homosexual blackmail in a serious Hindi movie. Secondly, it also depicted the grave consequences of breaking the unspoken pact of secrecy that gays—or any non-majority group, for that matter—use to survive in closely knit communities. The reference to Holi sadly comes from the blood-bath that Anand suffers at the hands of his "buddies" when his coerced double-cross is discovered.

Amitabh Bachchan—Big B, AB, angry-young-man, angry-middle-aged-guy, or whatever else he has been called—has one of the most recognized names on the Indian subcontinent. No other name in front of the camera has ever acquired so much basic star power. He can now be adorned with yet another distinctive crown. He has the distinction of having done the most number of "gay-related" roles that have reached an astonishingly huge audience all over the world.

As fine a serious actor that he is, his persona also wore a more



Fearless Nadia, the legendary star of Indian cinema in the 1940s

jubilant headpiece from time to time. Imagine a mad scientist deviously melting together Robert De Niro with stretchy drag-princess Ru Paul—and you begin to get the idea. By the early '80s, when Big B was at his prime, his drag and nelly-guy roles in *Lawaaris*, *Don*, *Namak Halal* and *Mahaan*, to name a few, received a great deal of hype, "mainstream" attention (envy?), imitators, and detractors. In Bollywood, his name became synonymous with the celluloid drag queen. In addition to haunting poor Rajesh Khanna, "*Mere angane mein tumhara kya kaam hai*" became the anthem for millions. Amitabh was so successful doing drag and nelly roles that in the early '80s, a Karachi hijra group actually named him their honorary chairwoman!

That this Bollywood dynamo could get away with so many non-traditional roles can be seen as a mellowing of the kind of "hero" Bollywood audiences would accept, and however minuscule, that was progress. With either a **Shashi Kapoor**, **Rishi Kapoor**, **Vinod Khanna**, or **Dharmendra** at his side, Big B swash-buckled his way through many buddy-buddy and male-bonding action-adventure flicks. It is rumored that once, when asked who his favorite heroine was, Big B reportedly quipped: Shashi Kapoor. Do we laugh now or later?

The height of that male-bonding genre in Bollywood is probably the one movie that comes closest to being Bollywood's all-time best action/adventure/"desi" Western film: *Sholay* (1975). Despite the "visible" romancing of **Hema Malini's** character by **Dharmendra**

(Veeru) and the unrequited thread between **Jaya Bhaduri's** widow-in-white and **Amitabh's** (Jay) stoic gun-for-hire, there is also a strong homo-erotic vein in the movie. Other than Jaya's character heavily slamming the door behind her as the final nail to the tomb of her bleak widow's future, no other scene in the movie gets as much emotional ammo as Veeru's reaction to Jay's death.

Director **Ramesh Sippy** goes to great lengths to have us think that Jay and Veeru are inseparable—*completely* inseparable. They appear to live together, go to jail together, eat and drink together, and would readily die together, for each other. They even get to sing their anthem to male bonding:

Yeh dosti, hum nahin chhodenge; todenge dum magar tera saath na chhodenge ...
(Our togetherness, I will never desert; This breath may stop, but your companionship I will never desert ...)

Yes, this is in the tradition of the great same-sex "friendships" that South Asian culture sometimes swears by. But there is more here. In prison, an openly gay prisoner approaches Jay and Veeru. From the very first frame where the three meet, one could swear that all three have known each other for a very long time. They stand elbow to elbow in comrade-fashion—a stance hard to ignore on the 70 mm wide-screen format—when trying to smoke out the jailer's spy—and Jay/Veeru readily accept their gay cellmate.

Like that other tale of hired-guns doing things that men do—*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*—*Sholay* can be elevated to South Asian gay-friendly cult status.

No one actress can be said to "symbolize" (for lack of a better term) Bollywood's lesbian psyche like Amitabh does for the gay male. The most explicit reference to lesbianism came in *Umbartha* (1982) where **Smita Patil** pleads for clemency for two women discovered indulging in "unnatural behavior" at a women's boarding house. That is in no way saying that examples—both covert and more subtle—of strong women-centered roles where the male

lead is sometimes almost optional, have not existed. Quite the contrary. Films like *Nagina*, *Sherni*, and *Bhumika* come to mind. And even when there was a male lead like **Shekhar Suman** as Charudutt opposite **Rekha's** courtesan in *Utsav*, the review in *Filmfare* described his soft "sensitive" looks as "a pederast's delight."

In addition to the Mumtaz

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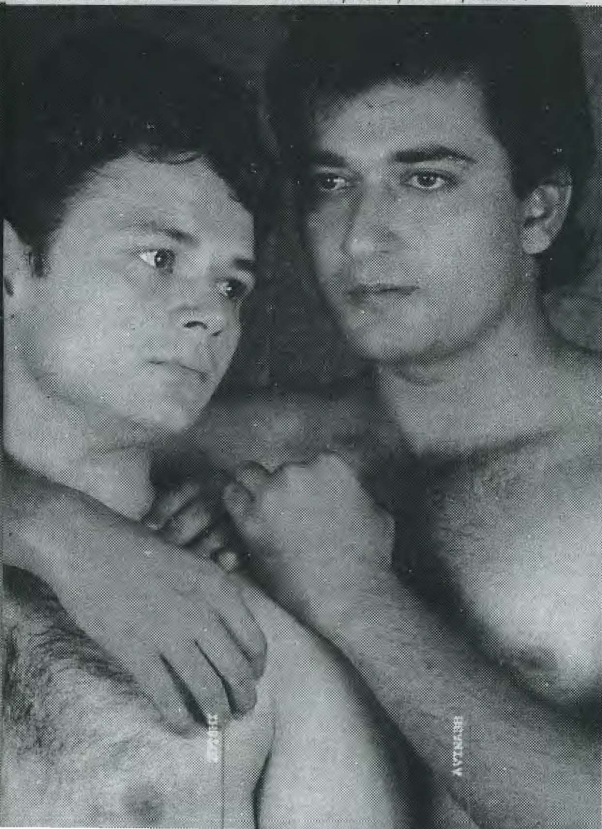


Jabbar Patel's *Umbartha* (1982) was the first Indian film with two lesbian characters Jangam and Sunanda

and **Padmini** roles already cited, **Hema Malini** (nick-named Ice Maiden for apparently succeeding in keeping her *male* leads at arm's length on-screen) starred in the high-costume drama *Razia Sultan* (1983). This movie features heavy on-screen chemistry between Hema's *Razia* and her attendant **Kakul** (a ravishing **Parveen Babi**) on a luxurious boat ride. To get the all-woman pleasure-tour started, *Razia* lovingly touches another attendant (**Sarika**, in a noteworthy role) who worries out loud about the comfort of the boat ride for Her Highness *Razia*.

The pleasure-boat leisurely treks a small indoor lake as the resting princess is openly caressed with loving fingers and feathers by **Kakul**. We see the princess' lips gently outlined by **Kakul's** soft fingertips as a gesture mimicking the touch of the princess' absent male love (**Dharmen-**

featured the "bare-all dare-all" **Vikram**, **Aasif**, **Zutshi**, **Avinash**



dra), as Kakul lip-syncs a lullaby. This seven-minute sequence also includes a thinly veiled kiss between the two women—probably a first for any big budget Bollywood movie. As noted lesbian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar said of this scene: “It is absolutely compulsory viewing for all new and uninitiated South Asian lesbians.”

The one actress to watch in the coming years is **Madhuri Dixit**. Although this '90s phenom has no outstanding woman-to-woman celluloid moments to her credit, she has already touched on cross-dressing. Anyone just back from Jupiter probably missed the box-office tsunami *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), and La Dixit as the femme half of a couple where her female partner imitated a butched-up **Salman Khan** (the hero) in a song sequence. Then in *Yaarana* (1995), in order to escape the clutches of her husband-from-hell, she convincingly dresses as a girlish boy.

We should also here briefly mention something about lip-synching in general. A trait peculiar to Bollywood, and usually mentioned only in passing, is the age-old practice of having male singers, almost always in the background, singing from a female perspective—and vice versa. Some of these songs have a sensual same-sex appeal to them. Consider the immortal music director/singer **S.D. Burman** singing a song picturized on **Nutan** in *Bandini* (1953):

*Oye majhi, oye majhi, o majhi;
Mere saajan hain us paar,
main is paar
(O boatman, o boatman;
my lover is on the far shore,
I remain on this shore).*

In the '60s, the great **Mohammad Rafi** sang “*Baharon phool barsao*” (*Suraj*) in the same vein, and this unique tradition continues even now. In *Kartavya* (1995), **Pankaj Uddhas** sings from a feminine perspective:

*Pardesiyon se poochh, poochh
royi mein;
Mera mahi, ja ke kyun nahi aya
...
Jaane uski hi yaadon mein
khoyi main;
Dhali raat dhali, nahi soyi
main.
(Foreigners be asked, ask if I
wept;
my mate, why hasn't he re-
turned ...
In remembering him I lost
myself completely;
Passing night passing, not
slept have I.)*

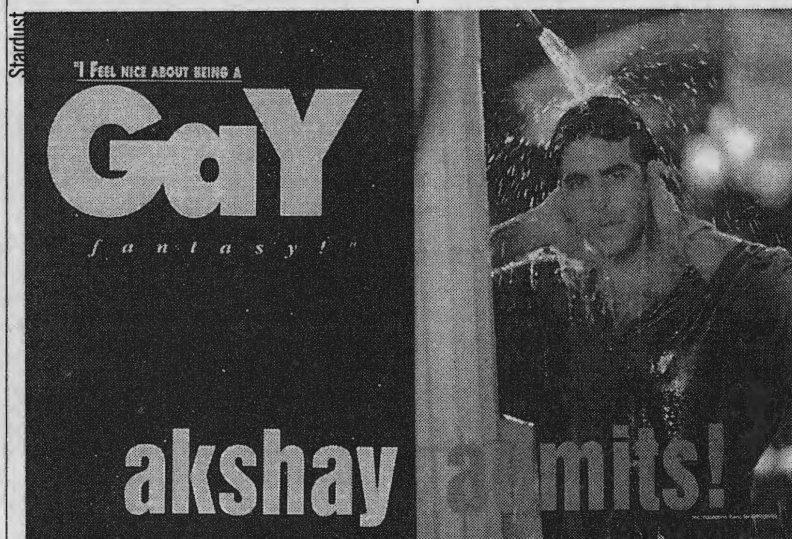
In the '90s, Bollywood has come a full-circle. Drag scenes are now quite commonplace—sort of like Hollywood in the '50s when Jack Lemmon and Tony Randall got away with it in *Some Like it Hot*. While cross-dressing, especially men as women, has been quite acceptable as comic relief, it still is seldom shown as a premise for the actor's *homosexuality*—at least not overtly, as we have seen.

With mixed reactions from the fashion corner, significant male leads have tried to grace a silk sari here and there. **Anil Kapoor** briefly “hid” behind a sari during the **Jackie Dimple** song in *Ram Lakhan* (1989), **Sanjay Dutt** mimicked **Madhuri Dixit** doing *Choli ke peeche kya hain* (*Khalnayak*, 1993), **Aamir Khan** got into a fab maxi-dress and high-heels for a complete song in *Baazi* (1995), and hunky **Arvind Swamy** donned a burka in *Bombay* (1995).

Even more promising could be the full impact of the **Akshay Kumar** phenomenon. The baton-twirler for the current parade of

interest, **Prem Chopra**, to a peaceful co-existence of sorts with Pinky's father. Kher's role in *Zamana Deewana* (1995), directed by **Ramesh (Sholay) Sippy**, was that of a bumbling police detective who resorts to drag to establish a truce between quarreling old-time (and old) friends **Jeetendra** and **Shatrughan Sinha**. There is a touch of seriousness in a dream sequence where Kher, in various (and gorgeous) outfits, does a longish slow dance first with Jeetu and then with Shatru. Marked improvement from *Mast Kalandar*.

At the 1994 Filmfare Awards Show, therefore, Kher must have again been advancing his market share when he appeared in high-drag dressed as something called “Janet from Johannesburg”—and many in the audience were completely fooled until he revealed his identity. Maybe few care, but Kher appears to be enjoying himself. The fact that he appears to actively seek out these types of roles is noteworthy in itself.



A film star who knows how to take a compliment: this spread from *Stardust* (June 1995) quotes Akshay Kumar as saying, “I feel nice about being a gay fantasy.”

Bollywood stud-muffins, he has been actively reaching out to a gay audience. Akky has on various occasions made a special effort to publicly acknowledge his sizable gay following. Most recently (*Filmfare*, August 1995), asked if he was “happy being a gay fantasy as well,” Akky retorted, “So what? I don't have the right to condemn the way anyone chooses to live. What's wrong if gays like me? I think it's an achievement to be their heartthrob as well.”

In the '90s, **Anupam Kher** has carved a remarkable market niche for playing what he calls “gay” roles. As stereotypical as his *Mast Kalandar* (1989) role was, it did reveal the reactions of the men that his character Pinky came in contact with—ranging from the flagrant homophobia of Pinky's love

Another actor who has made repeated forays into drag has been **Shakti Kapoor**. He can play a flamboyant villain (*Andaz Apna Apna*, 1994) as well as a cross-dressing village idiot trying to avoid an always unsuspecting **Kader Khan** (*Maidan-e-Jung*, 1995). Shakti, however, has not attained the “notoriety” from doing drag that **Anupam Kher** has.

Along the lines of non-gender-specific roles from recent years, two examples stand out. In *Sadak* (1991), **Sadashiv Amrapurkar** did an outstanding turn as the she-devil Maharani. Amrapurkar's Maharani matched lead **Sanjay Dutt** step for step in wit and on-screen time—coming across as a powerful character that at once incited both fear and sympathy. For a big-budget—rather than “main-

stream”—Hindi movie, this was the first use of a hijra in such a critically serious role. Amrapurkar won a deserved Filmfare Best Supporting Actor award for this must-see movie.

The other reference is from master filmmaker **Mani Ratnam's** “*Bombay*” (1995). This highly controversial movie featured an unnamed hijrarani in a small but significant role. During a Bombay riot scene, she comes to rescue one of **Monisha Koirala** and **Arvind Swamy's** young sons and

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makes a simple yet powerful plea calling for equality between Hindus and Muslims, between rich and poor, and—although she doesn't exactly say it, but given her situation—between gay and non-gay.

The medium of television—a luxury only recently made affordable for South Asia's emerging middle class—also stands ready to take sizable strides in bringing homosexuality out of the darkness of misconceptions and ridicule to a potentially vast audience. Producer (and lead actor) **Ashish Nagpal's** soon-to-be-released *Adhura* (meaning “incomplete”) tells the tragic story of a rich industrialist falling in love with a male newspaper editor. Tragic stereotypes aside, if Nagpal's gamble pays off—and it should for no other reason than the publicity that is sure to follow—then Bollywood may also be forced to follow the “small screen”'s lead in getting serious about using gay characters and gay storylines as an integral—and uncompromising—part of the entertainment spectrum.

As vital and vibrant as some of the lesbian/gay filmmakers and films have become in the South Asian diaspora, it is just as critical that voices from within the subcontinent be heard. In a perfect world, *Adhura* would be judged on whether it is a good movie, rather than how good a gay movie it is. When that day arrives, all of us may actually be a step closer towards making sure that our stories are *adhura* no more. ▼