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says.

Do all women filmmakers, for instance, have to make women-oriented films? Why can't one just be a filmmaker? No wonder young indie filmmaker Sudhanshu Saria, whose film *LOEV* has been picked up for the South by Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas, told *The Hindu*: "I don't want the film to be looked at as an 'Indian' or a 'queer' or an 'Indian-queer' film. I want it to be looked at as just a movie."

Making films on homosexuals

Getting boxed into your own identity aside, it's not easy being a gay filmmaker or making gay films in India. "There is no support system within the industry – from finance to distribution, there is discrimination," says Onir. He finds it amusing that while Doordarshan telecast his national award-winning film *I Am* (2010), which was given a U/A certificate, satellite channels refused to screen it. "The government turned out to be more progressive than the corporates," he says.

Karan Johar is just as cynical. Seven "evolved", "aware" actors rejected playing the role of a gay man in his film in the *Bombay Talkies* (2013) anthology, he says, before Saqib Saleem agreed. "The actors are victims of the image they have created for themselves," he says. But there seems to be hope. Earlier this month, a three-member Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India, T.S. Thakur, referred a batch of curative petitions submitted against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a provision criminalising consensual sexual acts of LGBT adults in private, to a five-member Constitution Bench. It is no wonder then that unlike Onir and Karan, a whole lot of younger filmmakers are enthusiastic. A clutch of films in the last year has tried to break the mould in more ways than one, and more are likely to in the future. "We are moving in the right direction," says Apurva Asrani, writer of *Aligarh*. LGBT narratives are not just about men in drag or about stereotypes any more. "There is a whole spectrum of sexuality that is unexplored," he says.

Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh*, for instance, explores the prejudices entrenched in our society and addresses the contentious issue of criminalisation of homosexuality through the retelling of a real incident. The film is based on the life of Professor Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, who was suspended from Aligarh Muslim University for homosexuality and was later found dead under mysterious circumstances. Can a man's right to his sexuality be more horrifying than a homophobic society, the film asks. "Siras is a poet, a lover of music, not always a hero, just a guy next door, simple and ordinary. He mirrors the lives of many 64-year-olds, not just gay men," says Apurva.

For actor Manoj Bajpayee, who plays Siras, the film is about the bigger issue of the right to privacy. “What he does inside his home is his business. It’s just that he happens to be gay and hence a soft target. So he creates a world of his own,” he says. Did playing a gay character feel daunting? “I am not a judgmental person. Siras felt just like you and me. And I was working with a set of progressive, socially and politically aware people,” he says.

Kalki Koechlin was just as much at ease acting in *Margarita With A Straw*. “There was no apprehension because the character’s exploration of sexuality was done in a real, normal, casual way. It was about innocence and discovery,” she says. She also confesses to having said no to many obnoxious, funny lesbian characters. Apart from *Margarita...*, the recently released *Angry Indian Goddesses* had a lesbian relationship at its core.

Portraying sexuality as a fact

There are more such varied and explicit depictions round the corner. An adolescent struggles with the realisation that he may be “different” as he loves dance, mehndi and jewellery in Nishant Roy Bombarde’s short Marathi feature *Daaravtha* (threshold). “The film is an expression of the repressions faced; it is drawn from things I have seen closely around me,” Nishant says. Through his protagonist, Nishant asserts one thought: “We should be the way we want to be”.

Then you have *LOEV* which is all about showing LGBT love as any other love. “I am sick of all the gay tropes. I just wanted to make a love story away from overt gay politics,” says Sudhanshu. There’s no talk of Section 377, no violence or struggle. The film is just about three men in love. He calls *LOEV* a post-gay film – Gay 2.0 – where sexual orientation is stated as a matter of fact and sexuality is something accepted rather than made a big deal of.

This is what is happening abroad – **LGBT** narratives are playing out in a larger socio-political context. “There is a homosexual in a track of every popular TV series,” says Karan. So where should India be heading? “For me, it is all about portraying things with dignity, that’s the most subversive way to be,” says Sudhanshu. For Onir, the key is to show LBGTs as normal human beings. Kalki says the issue often takes over the creativity of the film in LGBT narratives. “We need to go beyond that to do more easy-going stories,” she says.

According to Shridhar Rangayan of Kashish film festival, the most interesting LGBT work has emerged in shorts, indies and documentaries in other Indian languages. “*Sancharam* was a beautiful, nuanced Malayalam film about two young lesbian girls in Kerala. Three films in Bengali with Rituparno Ghosh – *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Memories in March* and *Chitrangada* – have been about

sexual orientation,” he says. *Naanu Avanalla...Avalu* (Kannada) had the actor Sanchari Vijay winning the national award for playing a woman. In the Malayalam film *Mumbai Police*, Prithviraj is shown having a secret gay past. Shridhar’s own film *Yours Emotionally* explored homosexuality, including the lives of older gay men.

Karan says the world of arts is a liberal zone but society is still not. We are stuck with moralities and censorship. People still associate shock value with homosexuality. “We filmmakers will keep pushing the envelope,” he says. The key is whether it will get delivered in the right size and shape.

Gays in Indian Cinema

Aniruddh Chatterjee reports on Bengali movies

The first Bengali film to show gay relationship was Subrata Sen's *Nil Nirjane* (2003). It's Raima Sen's debut film. Raima and Mou Baidya shared on screen kiss. Definitely, the first same sex kiss on screen in Bengali cinema, if not Indian cinema.

Rituparno Ghosh did three films that dealt with gay relationships. He acted in all three: *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Dir: Kaushik Ganguly) – 2010; *Memories of March* (Dir: Sanjoy Nag) – 2011; *Chitrangada* (which he directed as well) - 2012

Mainak Bhaumik directed *Family Album* in 2015, a mainstream Bengali rom-com about a lesbian relationship starring Swastika Mukherjee and Paoli Dam.

Sangeetha Devi reports on Telugu movies

Telugu **cinema** has been going through a churn in the last two years. The routine masalas have taken a bashing irrespective of the big stars associated with them. Some new ideas are creeping in, thankfully. But Telugu cinema is light years from portraying queer characters with dignity. For years comedians like Ali and Venu Madhav have done so-called comic parts with stereotypical gay characters – sometimes clad in a sari and doing a little gig.

* In 2013, when *Bol Bachchan* was remade in Telugu as *Masala*, just the fact that a young actor like Ram agreed to play the effeminate part like Abhishek Bachchan made headlines.

* The 2014 release *Aagadu* (Mahesh Babu and Tamannaah Bhatia) had Ashish

Vidarthi play a character called Mallikarjun, who tries his best to conceal his queer identity. He is accused of rape but continues to act macho to hide his sexual orientation. The humour associated with his character was quite annoying. The film bombed and this characterisation was also ripped apart.

* Another dud called *Lakshmi Raave Maa Intiki* (2014) had a disgusting episode featuring a supporting actor, Satyam Rajesh, who falls in love and faces opposition from his love interest's father. The love interest is a young lad. The film makes a caricature of their romance.

* Shankar's *I* had makeup artist and hairstylist Ojas Rajani play the character of Osma Jasmine, a hair dresser spurned by Vikram (there's also a bit where Vikram and comedian Santhanam sing and dance around her ridiculing her). She turns out to be vengeful and one of the villains. The transgender community in Tamil Nadu was up in arms against filmmaker Shankar for this character.

* There was a small scene in *Manam*, which starred the three generations of Akkinenis - Nageswara Rao, Nagarjuna and Naga Chaitanya. On a flight, Nagarjuna chances upon Naga Chaitanya (who was his father in previous birth) and leans towards him to click a selfie. Naga Chaitanya squirms and moves away saying 'Nenu aa type kaadhu' (I am not that type). It showed the lack of acceptance of gay characters. But the scene was quite well handled, in fact hilarious.

Prasanth Vijay reports on Malayalam movies

The list and observations are mostly courtesy facebook group "Malayalam Movie & Music Database (m3db)"

Lesbian:

Randu Penkuttikal (*Two Girls* - 1978)

Deshadanakkili Karayaarilla (*The Migratory Bird Never Cries* - 1986)

Sancharam (*The Journey* - 2004)

Nasrani (2007)

Penpattanam (2010)

Silent Valley (2013)

Escape from Uganda (2013)

White Nights (2016)

Gay:

Rithu (Seasons - 2009)

Sufi Paranja Kadha (*What the Sufi Said* - 2010)

Mumbai Police (2013)

English (2013)

My Life Partner (2014)

KaBodyscapes (Upcoming)

Innallenkil Naale (*Tomorrow if not Today* - 1982)

Yathra (*The Journey* - 1984)

Freedom (2004)

Papilio Budha (2013)

Unto the Dusk (2014)

Flat No. 4B (2014)

Life of Josutty (2015)

Transgender:

Chaandupottu (2005)

Ardhanaari (*Part Woman* - 2012)

Odum Raja, Aadum Rani (*Running King, Dancing Queen* - 2014)

Soothradharan (Thread Bearer - 2001)

Salt 'n Pepper (2011)

Thira (Wave - 2013)

Balyakalasakhi (Childhood Companion - 2014)

Swapaanam (The Voiding Soul - 2014)

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