15 Queer Bollywood, or "I'm the player, you're the naive one"

Patterns of sexual subversion in recent Indian popular cinema[1]

Thomas Waugh

Introduction: pelvic thrust, fluid terrain

Indian cinema is no doubt similar to the commercial entertainment industries that exist in many "modernizing" societies of the South, in that queer things are going on there. In fact Indian cinema has traditionally been more than hospitable to same-sex desire—regardless of the fact that it has never been so named—whether within institutions of publicity, stardom, fan culture, and reception, or within narrative worlds in which the borders around and within homosociality have always been naively and uninhibitedly ambiguous. The groundwork for a more "modern" proliferation of explicit erotic iconography—including the *homo*erotic—has been laid over the last decade: the "liberalization" of the Indian economy and the transnationalization of media have stepped up the cross-border importation of Northern erotic commodities and identity ideologies among the elites. The latest censorship brouhahas around the diasporic films *Bandit Queen* (Shekhar Kapur, 1994), *Kama Sutra* (Mira Nair, 1997), and *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1998) are reminders that the state censorship apparatus can hardly keep pace with, let alone contain, the proliferating sexual discourses in parallel films such as these, much less in Bollywood and regional popular cinemas. In these popular cinemas, ingredients from rape narratives and the newly merged vamp/virgin heroine to pelvic thrust dancing and "lewd" lyrics have been out of control for more than a decade.

The Indian cinema has not developed a recognizable domestic queer vector to the extent of, say, even Taiwan or the Philippines—at least "recognizable" to Northern eyes. Yet urgent critical attention is called for by the last decade's ferment within the sexual and gender discourses of Indian cinemas, and the shifting sexual alignments within the framework of masculinity that this ferment reflects. In such a complex landscape as that of contemporary Indian cinemas, there is no shortage of directions for future research. One could well explore several distinct fields:

1 The state-subsidized parallel cinema, where the bricolage of cosmopolitan queer iconographies is increasingly evident in recent films. One might have expected from the growing visibility of what Lawrence Cohen calls middle-class metropolitan

1 I am grateful to Saleem Kidwai and Dipti Gupta for having helped me navigate unsubtitled Hindi movies over the years, and to both of them as well as Shohini Ghosh, R. Raj Rao and Deepa Dhanraj for their helpful feedback on this article. "Bollywood" of course is the affectionate domestic shorthand for the commercial narrative film industry, traditionally cantered in Bombay (now Mumbai), but over the last generation spreading to the regional centers of the southern states, chiefly Madras (now Chennai) and Hyderabad.

movements and identities, especially in Mumbai and the other large urban areas, that they would have made more and earlier inroads into the parallel cinemas rooted in these urban cultures. But the parallel cinemas until very recently were remarkable for their timidity, no doubt stemming as much from the self-censorship and stagnation that marks this traditionally social realist sector, dependent on government bureaucrats, as from the tenuousness of those "imported" identities. Nevertheless, an increased momentum is hopefully augured by a whole slew of recent parallel works, however anxious and tentative they sometimes seem: Riyad Wadia's self-financed and anomalous 1996 short, *Bomgay*, fascinating for its recognizably cosmopolitan urban queer landscapes and identities (but an essentialist and reductive translation of R. Raj Rao's defiantly queer poetry); and the feature films *English August* (Dev Benegal, 1996), *Daayra* (*The Square Circle*, Amol Palekar, 1997), *Adhura* (Ashish Nagpal, 1996), *Darmiyaan* (*In Between*, Kalpana Lajmi, 1997), and *Karvaan* (*Shadows in the Dark*, Pankaj Butalia, 1999).

2 The diasporic cinema, which must rightly be seen for fifteen years now as a laboratory where the sexual discourses of metropolitan South Asian cultures are unpacked with a freedom and energy unknown at home. The dialogue between metropolitan and diasporic discourses is increasing, as is evidenced by the huge impact of Deepa Mehta's ongoing work.

3 The independent documentary cinema, which over the last two decades has amply documented the overall crisis in gender politics that is the necessary context for the findings of this chapter, while it has studiously avoided, true to its puritanical Griersonian heritage, the sexual subversions this crisis entails even when they have been staring it in the face. (The authoritarian voiceovers and expository rhetorics of mainstream documentary still largely preside over a political hierarchy in which the subjective and personal are overridden by collective agendas.[2]) Recently, tentative suggestions that this may be changing may be found in such works as Deepa Dhanraj's *Something Like a War* (1991), a film featuring an interclass women's "consciousness raising" group exploring sexual practices and fantasies; Balan's *Male Flower* (*Aan Poove*), a 1996 video documentary on a female-to-male transsexual in Kerala; Shyamal Karmakar's pioneering *Myths—A Dialogue on AIDS* (*Kimvad antiya*) on people with HIV in Madhya Pradesh (1994); and most recently *Summer in my Veins*, Nishit Saran's autobiographical coming out video of 1999.

4 The problematic of female homosociality and lesbian countercurrents across the cinematic landscape as a whole. This problematic is distinct from that of gay male and male homosocial discourses (although *Fire* has demonstrated a certain level of inextricability), given the male domination of both the cinematic apparatus and the public sphere of South Asian society as a whole, where male sexual expression straight or queer is the common currency of the realm, and female sexual expression is a highly charged and continuously challenged "problem" as well as a potent but invisible parallel, private sphere (as Dhanraj's work has suggested). This problematic has been broached with very interesting results by such critics as Ruth Vanita

2 For an exploration of a generation in revolt against the post-Independence documentary of the government Films Division, modeled both institutionally and aesthetically after John Grierson's imperial antecedents, see my "'Words of Command': Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary," *Cineaction!* (Toronto), 23 (Winter 1990–91), 28–39.

and Shohini Ghosh; thus my decision to focus exclusively on male–male patterns of desire and exchange in the present forum, however regrettable, is appropriate both intellectually and strategically.[3]

But since this brief chapter has the space to explore only one direction, I will concentrate on the profuse and richly ambiguous indigenous male–male sexual iconographies in commercial popular narratives of Bollywood cinema of the 1990s, and explore others of these four directions in future work.

In this task, I have found little help in postcolonial theory, which I find all too often constrained by frameworks of race, class, and gender which cannot account fully for sex, indispensable as they are. Much of the theoretical attention to postcolonial culture and politics I find still squeamish by and large about same-sex practice or identities,[4] and much of the recent proliferation of breakthrough scholarship on Indian popular cinemas hardly less so. These two literatures I find limited in their applicability to a navigation of queer and homosocial South Asian textual practices; hence my own bricolage of eclectic sources ranging from Foucault to diasporic queer journalism to first-person narratives to literary fiction. However, for this initial scouting of the territory, I am most indebted, paradoxically, to ethnography, that most colonially constructed of disciplines. In particular here I rely most on queer American anthropologist Lawrence Cohen for having staked it out in terms of lived experience in two seminal articles on "third gender" and homoerotic political caricature respectively, based on field research in Varanasi.[5] This work confirms how helpful queer ethnography can be in its insistence on seeing sex where other disciplines see only the mantra of race, class, and gender, bound by their institutional genealogies of literary analysis or socio-political theory. Cohen's salutary stress on the local and corporal stakes of such research, real places and real bodies, is a lesson for our study of images and fantasies, reminding us of the importance of the sexed spectatorial body in the darkened cinema whether in Varanasi or Patiala. (A personal digression may be necessary to explain why I make symbolic use of this Punjabi city, where I once enjoyed many a movie, both Hindi and "English" [foreign], to keep alive a memory that I suppose is the genesis of this article, and to remind us of the strategic importance yet elusive substance of spectatorship. As a then closeted 22-year-old volunteer English teacher in advanced culture shock, I retreated in 1970 or 1971 to a Sunday showing of then closeted Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. All I

3 Ruth Vanita was a principal film critic for the Delhi feminist magazine *Manushi* in the 1980s and is co-editor with Saleem Kidwai of the anthology *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). For Shohini Ghosh's work, see "The Cult of Madhuri," *Gentleman* (Mumbai), October 1998, 26–28; "From the Frying Pan to the Fire," *Communalism Combat* (New Delhi), January 1999, 16–19; "The Troubled Existence of Sex and Sexuality: Feminists Engage with Censorship," in Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher, eds, *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), 233–259.

4 An exception to the "squeamish" rule is Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson, eds, *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Symptomatically, this rich interdisciplinary collection has no South Asian content.

5 Lawrence Cohen, "Holi in Banaras and the *Mahaland* of Modernity," *GLQ* 2 (4) (1995), 399–424; "The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas, and Academics," in Paul Abramson and Steven Pinkerton, eds, *Sexual Nature Sexual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 276–403. The holy city of Banaras on the River Ganga was called "Benares" by the British and usually "Varanasi" in post-Independence Indian English. Its inhabitants are called "Banarsi".

remember is the moment Leonard Whiting's Romeo unveiled his glorious buttocks, and the pandemonium that broke out in the theatre at that sight, a cacophony of male voices catcalling hysterically from galleries and stalls alike, letting me in on a certain disturbance around male sexuality and masculinity that was already in motion.)

I take to heart the cautionary methodological notes Cohen has sounded, though they are less easy to honor in the cultural studies field, where hybridity is the object, than in ethnographic research, where cultural purity somehow too often remains the unspoken agenda. He warns that we must avoid reducing our analysis "to a set of categories and incitements all too easily grounded in a globalizing heterosexual/homosexual opposition"; we must further avoid immobilizing this exploration "within a set of static tableaux frequently trotted out when Indian and sexual difference are narratively linked,"[6] specifically:

1 the disproportionate focus on the easy target of the hijra, the highly visible intersex persona often called a "eunuch" in English, whose public claim to difference in the Indian public sphere has been the dream of every Northern anthropologist and gay liberationist, "essentialized icons of India."[7] But the hijra has also recently become a Bollywood stock character, the most clamorous marker of sexual stirrings of the nineties screen, replacing perhaps the female avenger of the eighties as a cinematic weathervane, and I therefore cannot avoid coming back to this figure and her related brothers and sisters in a moment.

2 A second must to avoid: the unbalanced syndrome of colonial homoerotics inherited from Northern queer writers such as E. M. Forster. I am afraid this prohibition is equally impossible, and not only because I must confess at the outset my unquenchable Forsterian lust for three successive generations of Bollywood beefcake, tainted with Orientalist objectification and First World intellectual tourism, culminating in Akshay Kumar (Fig. 15.1). (Even within colonial cultural studies, the Forster and J. R. Ackerley connections are far from exhausted, given that the silencing of homosexual cultures and histories has only ended recently and there is still much catching up to do.) But in general, more seriously, representations of sexuality in the South cannot be artificially isolated from their historical backdrop of colonial relations. If all Northern discourses of the South are intrinsically founded on desire for the Other—in fact all intercultural knowledges—there is also, for all this imbalance, much reciprocity in the erotics and homoerotics of these discourses and knowledges. It would be absurd to dismiss the core of subaltern agency in the Hindophone audience's traditional obsession for the aura of the foreign in Bollywood delineations of sexuality, in the Calcutta johns' demands for blow jobs inspired by smuggled porn mags, which the sex workers are said to call "English sex," and in the craving by Indian Anglophone queers for diasporic and "foreign" knowledges, networks and bodies. Traditionally it is the parallel cinema rather than Bollywood that has broached most explicitly the colonial or transcultural sexualities in question, at least in constrained historiographical and literary generic form, but, as I have said, my excursion there must be undertaken at another time.

6 "Holi," 401, 422 n. 5.
7 "Pleasures," 279.

Figure 15.1 Beefcake poster of star Akshay Kumar: phallic coding and fan culture is more than hospitable to same-sex desire. Unidentified fan poster, collection of the author

3 Thirdly, Cohen's caution about domestic queer cravings, in terms namely of middle-class metropolitan movements and identities—which I shall henceforth call MMMIs—and their marginality to the larger landscape, is a useful one. Here again, I have to confess, the flesh is weak, for these cravings have provided me with the South Asian informants, networks, translators and, yes, friends and lovers without whom I would and could not have undertaken this research. In the MMMI dynamic, the incredibly lively diasporic queer movement has been deeply implicated. Diasporic queer culture, profoundly inflected by the MMMIs of its various host cultures, is a key presence on the global mediascape of South Asian sexuality—and not only among Anglophone elites, foreign-returned and otherwise. It inventories and dissects, interpellates and reclaims from its partial distance that which is unspoken back home up close, those alibis and buried energies of the metropolitan homosocial.[8] Indeed I am indebted to the brilliant listmaking of Aniruddh Chawda of *Trikone* for transmitting in print the obsessive oral culture of queer Bollywood

8 Gayatri Gopinath's paper, "Queer Diasporas: Alternative Sexualities and Popular Indian Cinema," presented at the same 1998 Society for Cinema Studies conference in San Diego where this presentation was originally tried out, focused on and provided a challenging assessment of diasporic iconography.

spectatorship, the Wisconsin diasporic proclaiming the canons that I have heard only excitedly whispered in Delhi.[9]

In insisting on methodological rigor and cultural integrity in transcultural studies of sexuality, one must not go so far as to assume the mythical purity of sexual cultures hermetically sealed from all external interaction—across class as well as cultural boundaries. And in assessing the marginality and privilege of MMMI cultures, one must not go so far as to deny either the indigenous cultural authenticity or the agency of those extensive communities inhabiting those cultures. We must not forget what Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson call "the deep histories of sexual contact and erotic entanglement between Europeans and 'others' . . . cross-cultural *exchanges* in sexualities—exchanges in meanings and fantasies as well as the erotic liaisons of bodies . . . 'sites of desire' formed by confluences of cultures, be they the tidal waves of European colonialism or the smaller eddies of sexual contacts and erotic imaginings created between cultures . . . this border crossing, this fluid terrain in the exchange of desires . . ."[10] Within the fluid terrain of a South Asian mediascape where Michael Jackson is demonstrably one of the most important choreographic influences of the last generation, and where Australian cricketers are the idols of millions of boys and men who have never spoken a word of English in their lives, who can say where the imported MMMIs end and the indigenous authentic begins?

Men with heart: neo-cons, buddies, and marginals

Arriving then at the principal task prescribed by Cohen, that is, the "local delineation of hegemonic forms of homosociality and of the multiple sites, modes and practices of their subversion, introjection and collapse,"[11] this is clearly a job for an observer of the popular cinema, despite the foregoing methodological traps. For Bollywood, in its incoherently heteroglossic and enigmatic spontaneity, its compulsive flirtations with the forbidden and addiction to the familiar, its foundation on same-sex audience formations, in Patiala as elsewhere, has always been the ideal locus for crystallizing the cultures of homosociality, both textually and contextually. The discourses of male bonding, mentorship, friendship, violence, rivalry over and sharing of women—in short of homosocial desire—cement this cinema across every generic category from multi-starrer action flick to social/family melodrama, and constitute a rich, volatile, and pluralistic site for recent unsettlings and resettlings.

Consider within this fluid or rather turbulent terrain of 1990s Bollywood, three parallel generic dynamics, each soliciting a specific audience constructed along gender and class lines, but all bound together in inextricable discursive alliance.

1 The resurgence of **neo-conservative romances** like the megahits *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* (What Am I to You?, Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) and *Dilwale Dulhaniya le Jayenge*

9 Aniruddh Chawda, "Cracks in the Tinsel Closet," *Trikone* (January 1996), 25–29; "Entering the Third Dimension" *Trikone* (April 1996), 18.

10 M. Jolly and L. Manderson, "Introduction: Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure in Asia and the Pacific," in *Sites of Desire*, 1.

11 Cohen, "Holi," 401.

(literally, Men with Heart Take the Bride, Aditya Chopra, 1995), which endlessly spectacularize and celebrate the rituals and resolutions of traditional marriages and families, and whose spinoffs are still piling up in 2000 without any sign of letting up. These films feature not so much the *new* man (since Indian male stars have always had permission to weep and recite poetry) as the revival of more traditional romantic conceptions of gender roles, the romantic hero having edged out the superman rebel of the seventies and eighties as the most saleable icon of the nineties. At least seventies star rebel Amitabh Bachchan would have got angry in every film rather than ask parental permission to marry as these timid films would have his compliant successors do.[12] The mild gender transgression afforded by the neo-con films' resort to the occasional opportunity for comic drag interludes and pumped up beefcake is small compensation indeed (In the latest *Dilwale* spinoff hit, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* [Straight from the Heart, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 1999], buff and chiseled Salman Khan spends virtually the first half of the movie naked, but the whole thing ends up affirming arranged marriages, parental tyranny, and female sacrifice all the same).

2 **Male friendship films**: the growing ambiguity and complexity, playfulness and boldness, of this traditional homosocial formula *par excellence* become increasingly self-conscious, even parodic, in such films as *Main Khiladi Tu Anari* (I'm the Player, You're the Naive One, Sameer Malkan, 1994). The formula is often syncretized with the heterosexual neo-romances, though women's roles in the male bonding films are maintained only to the degree necessary to offset panic and maintain the momentum of the star system.

3 The new **sexual marginality film** of the nineties. This pattern encompasses several subgenres, most notably
   - the action films where transgenders and more "recognizable" gay men have emerged as charismatic film-stealing villains (as in *Mast Kalandar* [Ballad of Intoxicating Joy, Rahul Rawail, 1989] or *Sadak* [Mahesh Bhatt, 1991] respectively);
   - the melodramas with hijras as matriarchal heroines or supporting players, such as *Bombay* (Mani Rathnam, 1994) and *Yaarana* (Comradeship, David Dhawan, 1995). *Adhura*, a TV melodrama, even has a MMMI-constructed gay man as hero. And all this is not to mention, of course, a multiplication of old-fashioned comic cross-dressing in romances and comedies; for example, veteran bit-part comic Rajendra Nath's flaming character in *Raja Hindustani* (1997), the latest in a hoary comic tradition of epicene sidekicks and minor characters. Despite Cohen's warning, I see the hijra (and her sisters and brothers, for they are interchangeable on a certain level, as neither filmmakers or non-hijra spectators make the sharp taxonomical distinctions made by hijras themselves) as an emblematic sign of something stirring, beyond her former *Mrs. Doubtfire*[13] role of maintaining rigid sexual difference. The hijra can now be promoted from her previous status as background figure or low comic diversion—a status still maintained in many films, incidentally—to the complementary narrative functions of supermenace or supermother.

12 See Ashwani Sharma, "Blood, Sweat and Tears: Amitabh Bachchan, Urban Demi-God," in Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin, eds, *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 167–180.

13 Interestingly, knockoffs of *Mrs. Doubtfire* have now appeared in both Tamil and Hindi.

Figure 15.2 Paresh Rawal as hijra supermother Tikoo in the hit melodrama *Tamanna* (depicted with real-life Tikoo, right). Courtesy of *Trikone*, April 1996

Hijra Tikoo, melo supermother

Let us linger briefly in this melodramatic landscape of the heart, before circling back to the male buddy action territory. The most interesting of several key films of the nineties, *Tamanna*, Mahesh Bhatt's 1996 hit (reportedly based on a real story), can be seen as a melo hybrid of *Les Cages aux folles* and *Stella Dallas*, in which Paresh Rawal stars as Tikoo (Fig. 15.2), an adopting hijra parent to an ingenue romantic heroine, Tamanna. This film is intensely and explicitly linked, perhaps not so paradoxically, to the cinematic reaffirmation of kinship happening elsewhere at the box office, for it details the adopted daughter's fanatical search for and confrontation with her supervillain biological father and suffering biological mother before returning to embrace her alternative family. Tikoo is sanitized to be sure, despite the grating shriek of her disembodied voice. She refuses to belong to the more flamboyant sisterhood of the streets, now that she has a daughter to bring up within the respectable institutions of the middle classes, as the narrative repeatedly makes clear, and her former sisters in struggle are bitchily disdainful of what they see as her treacherous upward mobility. Interestingly, Tamanna finds out the truth about her adoptive parent only when the class contradictions become fiercer than the contradictions within the gender/sex system: Tikoo has had to go back on hijra dancing duty to keep her daughter in her posh private school, and can't cover all her tracks

well enough. Gay and lesbian Indian observers have found it especially significant that Tikoo has an implied domestic partner/boyfriend in the person of a Muslim shopkeeper named Saleem, an additional trope of social subversion and reconciliation—across religious communal boundaries this time—which cements the alternative familial structure to which Tamanna will eventually return at the film's happy end.[14]

Other transgendered characters, minor in most cases, have appeared in at least two other melodramas hinged on exacerbated class violence, *Bombay* and *Raja Hindustani*, and one wonders if their supporting dramatic role in these films, as well as in *Tamanna*, somehow partakes of the traditional hijra ritual function as social mediator of hetero-conjugality (especially at births and weddings). In any case, Tikoo deftly encapsulates popular culture's problematization of sexuality, family, and gender in one overdetermined body and vividly performs its interpenetration with socio-economic dynamics and class anger. Is Tikoo, the angry and tender castrated mother, the rebel Amitabh of the nineties?

Akshay and Saïf: homo play

I now want to leave aside the female generic framework of the social melodrama, where sexual otherness seems to cohabit the traditional familial sex–gender system without too much stress, and circle back to the male genres, the friendship and action films, starting specifically with *Main Khiladi*. An action film, I said, but it's really a male romance in more respectable guise. This 1994 hit is a *Lethal Weapon*-style buddy-buddy caper film, starring my Akshay as a macho but upright cop and Saïf Ali Khan as a decadent movie star recruited to his gangster-busting activity (Fig. 15.3).[15] Along with *Tamanna*, *Main Khiladi* has been widely recognized as the most vivid site of big things happening, both by the Mumbai gay circle around the magazine *Bombay Dost* and by local and foreign queer academics.

On screen, the two stars Akshay and Saïf enact male companionship at its most playful and physical, and symmetrically embody antinomies of masculine style and identity that replicate gender difference on the homosocial axis. In the Akshay vs. Saïf opposition, we have the not unfamiliar oppositions of

butch vs. dandy
lean vs. pudgy
hairy vs. smooth
square vs. odalisque
Hindu vs. Muslim
fighter vs. dancer
naked vs. clothed
mature vs. ephebe
authentic vs. glamorous
techno-warrior vs. hysterical klutz

14 Ruth Vanita, "Trauma of Being 'Different,'" unidentified English-language Indian press clipping, c. 1996, kindly provided by the author; Saleem Kidwai, unidentified publication in Indian English-language media, c. 1996, manuscript kindly provided by the author.

15 *Main Khiladi* was so successful that it led to the sequel *Tu Chor Main Sipahi* (You're the Thief, I'm the Officer, 1998), in which Akshay Kumar reprised his role but Saïf Ali Khan apparently thought better of the idea.

Figure 15.3 Akshay Kumar and Saïf Ali Khan in *Main Khiladi Tu Anari:* homosocial male romance and playful antinomies of masculine erotic style

teetotaler prude vs. promiscuous drunk
self-controlling law-enforcer vs. impulsive actor
heterosocial vs. homosocial
family man vs. bachelor (with valet!)
offscreen cockteasing vs. offscreen homosexual panic

Offscreen? The plot thickens: offscreen, a third party was recruited to cement a three-way confrontation between *three* modes of masculine desire. *Bombay Dost* interviewed Akshay Kumar and got him to acknowledge and welcome his gay fans, running a beef-cake pic of him in a towel alongside (Fig. 15.4).[16] But this baring of onscreen dynamics was one kind of fan discourse that got Saïf so very very upset that he punched out the gay critic who spoke the unspoken, Ashok Row Kavi, journalist and intellectual, the most visible homo in India, and very epitome of MMMI.[17] If Saïf was protesting too much

16 Reported in *Trikone* 12 (2) (April 1997), 13. I am told that Saïf suffered homophobic fan gossip at the time of his marriage earlier in his career.

17 See such publications as Kavi's "The Contract of Silence," in Khushwant Singh and Shobha Dé, eds, *Uncertain Liaisons: Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 1993), 147–174; the Saïf incident was reported by Chawda in "Cracks," 26.

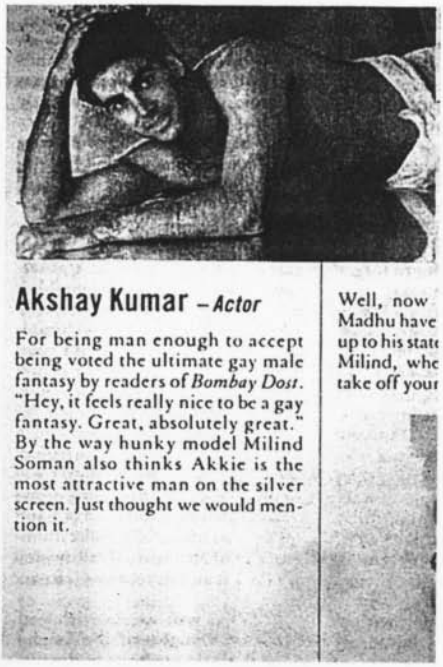

Figure 15.4 Akshay Kumar in his towel acknowledging his gay fans, seen through queer diasporic eyes. Courtesy of *Trikone*, April 1996

in his offscreen macho role, it may be because onscreen he personified his half of the romance with winking gusto, far beyond the call of duty, expressing an adolescent crush on the macho cop with a wide-eyed "Wow!" at each one of his martial feats, and sharing practical jokes, jealousy fits, touching and cuddling with his co-star throughout. The two men also traffic in women, or at least, Saïf acts as mediator between Akshay and leading lady Basanti, actively orchestrating their courtship by liquoring up the upright cop who would otherwise not succumb. (Akshay wakes up naked and disoriented [as I did after the screening], wondering whether he has drunkenly deflowered the virginal Basanti, leading, for me at least, to the question of who had disrobed him and put him to bed, and to a comparison with the role drunkenness plays in Northern coming out narratives.) The role of panderer is reversed in the musical number, as we shall see.

The jokey juvenilization of the male figures in this friendship narrative is a standard dynamic with almost all unmarried male characterization in Bollywood representation—as if homosocial play is OK among kids and heterosexual marriage soberly awaits them when they grow up. This is inscribed most vividly and symptomatically in the musical dance duet the two heroes perform. Musical numbers in the nineties still crystallize much of the creative and technical energy of the Bollywood apparatus (followed closely by combat scenes and other spectacle set pieces). The *Main Khiladi* duet, acquiring even more significance as the title piece of this film, is situated about a third of the way into

the narrative. The heroes have just had a little spat, sensitive Saïf makes Akshay beg forgiveness for some childish offense or other, and the two tearfully reconcile through a hug with Saïf caressing Akshay's hair, cheeks and ears, staring into his eyes. At this point the musical number literally bursts onto the screen and none too soon, preventing the kiss that reasonable spectators—at least I—might have expected logically to ensue. The song's function is thus not only to consolidate, probe, and ultimately celebrate the friendship that is at the core of the film, but also to deflect any inappropriate inference. The initial discourse of the lyrics is about the two friends' individual uniqueness as "player" and "naive one" respectively. This discourse of friendship, initiated by Akshay's singing, admits to occasional quarrels, which are mockingly reenacted throughout the rest of the song, and which seemingly have the same role that conflict has as a dramatic obstacle in Northern narratives of heteroconjugality. This friendship discourse is nonetheless somewhat paradoxical, since most of the lyrics sung by Saïf in answer are sidetracked by the problematic of women. Saïf exults in the uncontrollable "firecrackers" that he feels in the presence of the red cheeks and slim waists of attractive women, whom he wants to kiss and eventually live happily ever after with. We're thus back to the familiar homosocial triangle, for Akshay has to share his volatile buddy with the girls.[18] The two discourses alternate, the interrogative musing about the origins of such strong heterosexual attraction vs. its implications for male homosocial commitment, the hope that Saïf's attraction to women, seen as uncontrollable and puerile, will not interfere with their mutual recognition of each other as friends.

Within the choreography as well, a dialogue between male friendship and distracting heterosexual courtship unfolds. The lines of female chorines, jerking and galloping, posing and pouting, however vivid in their red and yellow sequined tutus and tights, are strictly backdrop to the performance, lyrical and dance, by the male duet, amazingly athletic and unrestrained in their interaction with each other. (Such a male–male dance duet has been absolutely inconceivable within Hollywood culture since at least the early fifties male duets of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, etc.). At one point Akshay sets up Saïf with a chorine, and resumes the tolerant exasperation that he displays at several points in the number whenever his impulsive buddy gets waylaid with his rivals. Often, their interaction is strictly macho, faux pugilistic, or competitive.

At other times the choreography is a surrogate for courtship behavior: Akshay lifts Saïf at the hips and carries him down the chorus line toward the camera; later the supine Saïf, seen laterally, thrusts his groin upwardly toward the center of the frame, while Akshay, standing above him, is making similar pelvic thrusts toward the camera, so that the low angle perspective of the frame brings their thrusts together; toward the end of the number, the two dancers face each other and grasp each other's shoulders and Saïf walks backwards vertically up a handy pillar, supported by Akshay, as the two maintain eye contact. They literally can't keep their hands off each other: Akshay puts his tie on Saïf, slaps his ass, even seems to touch his groin. But it is the larger, symmetrical bodily movements themselves that most play up the physical intimacy of the friendship bond, as they high kick in sync and prance together down the gauntlet of nautch girls.

18 Homosocial triangulation is a narrative structure that is arguably more prevalent in Bollywood than in Hollywood, Howard Hawks notwithstanding, with many precedents ranging from Raj Kapoor's classic *Sangam* (1964) to Surendra Mohan's Hindu–Muslim variation in *Aap Ke Deewane* (You Are My Everything, 1980).

How can we account for all of the winking that is going on, who is doing it with/to whom, and on how many levels—choreographer? songwriter? performers? director? spectators? In comparison, an earlier generation's epochal male duet, "Yeh Dosti" (This friendship), sung between Dharmendra and Amitabh Bachchan in *Sholay* (1975), evoked univocal innocence and crystalline unself-consciousness. In that pioneering "curry western" megahit, the duet took place on a motorcycle and sidecar, occupied alternately by the star duo, who clutch and caress each other's hands, shoulders, head and thighs more consistently than the handlebars, all the while excitedly declaiming,

> We vow to remain friends;
> We'd rather die than sever our friendship.
> Your victory is my victory,
> Your defeat is mine as well.
> Your distress I share
> Just as you share my joy.
> Our love is reciprocal.
> At the risk of my life, for your sake
> I'd incur the enmity of others.
> Though two in body
> We're one in soul—
> Never shall we be separated.
> We eat and drink together
> We'll live and die together.

No need for disavowal and deflection here. A mid-song interlude suffices, where a winsome village woman, complete with water jar, flirts with the two singers at the roadside and the two briefly compete with each other over who goes first—before jointly abjuring hetero skirtchasing in deference to male friendship. The whole song bursts with the freedom of the road, the luxury of the landscape, and the physical exultation in male bonding—the final stanza has Dharmendra perched on Amitabh's sturdy shoulders as the two ride off into the horizon. There is perhaps no better index of Bollywood's evolution between the seventies and the nineties than the comparison of this *anari* duet with the *khiladi* duet twenty years later. Both articulate an over-the-top playfulness, but *Main Khiladi* adds layers of winking semiotic play to the layers of musical and choreographic play.

I am not arguing that play is the alibi for same-sex desire in any simple way (though it may well be on some level in the latter case). Rather I am seeing in these duets an echo and confirmation of Cohen's finding that play, whether corporal, social, or semiotic, is a prevalent axis of same-sex desire in North Indian homosocial culture, along which the gradations between sociality and eroticism are both relative and finely coded. Participant-observed by Cohen in the "real world" of friendship networks and cruising parks of Varanasi, this axis of erotic play is allowable both there and in Bollywood's parallax world because situated within a predominantly heterosexual framework:

> Most of the Banarsi men I know [situated on this axis] . . . focus their erotic attention on women. Their *nazar*, their desiring look or gaze, rests more often on the passing bodies of women than of men. But of this "mostness," this majority, those I know well have played with other men from time to time, in adolescence or on

> occasion thereafter. These men speak about same-sex sex and desire in two ways. Intimately, among family and close friends of one's generation, sex is play, or *Khel*. It is about joking around and about friendship, *Dosti*. Different men may articulate the boundaries of friendship and play differently. For most, penetrative sex is seldom an idiom of play and in fact marks its boundary. The boys and (to a lesser extent) men who play around with friends their own age and of similar background must negotiate this mutual terrain of play.[19]

No wonder Saïf panicked when the most famous homosexual in India trumpeted out his onscreen "play" as something un-playlike—stigmatized, foreign, penetrative, and very serious!

Maharani and Pinko: homo violence

Cohen's other axis of same-sex desire is also very serious, associated with the adult world, involving power dynamics of violence, often intergenerational, that can also be detected and confirmed in the movies, specifically in the action pictures:

> Less intimately, framed within the world of older and younger or more and less politically powerful men, sex between men is about violence, manliness, and dependency. Dependency can be framed positively or negatively, but the language of most men, including many of those who regularly cruise for sex in the city's parks, is a negative language of using and getting used, of the law of the fishes: eat or be eaten . . . the bodily violence of social difference that frames the alien Other as one who must take his desire through you or be taken by yours.[20]

The intergenerational dynamic is transferred to the cinematic universe primarily in the conventional character of the elder gangster supervillain, usually inspired by the Northern James-Bond-style megalomaniac bad guy, who with snarling excess traditionally hounds the toothsome young heroes to the final conflagration. And indeed in *Main Khiladi*, the villain sends his humungous Mohawked henchman to mow down Akshay with his monstrous phallic gun at the very climax of the cabaret duet *jouissance*—now that's disavowal! Akshay and Saïf may escape that one, but eventually both take their turn to be done *to* at the end of *Main Khiladi*: Saïf is tied to a chair like Pearl White, but the bare-chested Akshay is suspended by his wrists above a frothing pit in an endless display of nude masochistic suffering.[21] The escalation of male nudity seems to be part of the male friendship/male violence formulas, for this is not the first time that Bollywood has saved the naked star torso for an ultimate fleshly mortification and spectatorial delectation at the climax. Leading man Sanjay Dutt gets a similar moment, literally crucified, at the end of *Sadak*, and it is to this somewhat nastier action film, similarly set within Mumbai's gangster/smuggler milieu, that I would now like to turn.

19 "Holi," 417.

20 Ibid.

21 Does the fact that Akshay has his luxuriant armpits shaved and unshaved in alternating shots in this suspension scene signify anything more than Bollywood's traditional contempt for continuity and its delectation for frequent costume changes within a single "number"? A subject for further research.

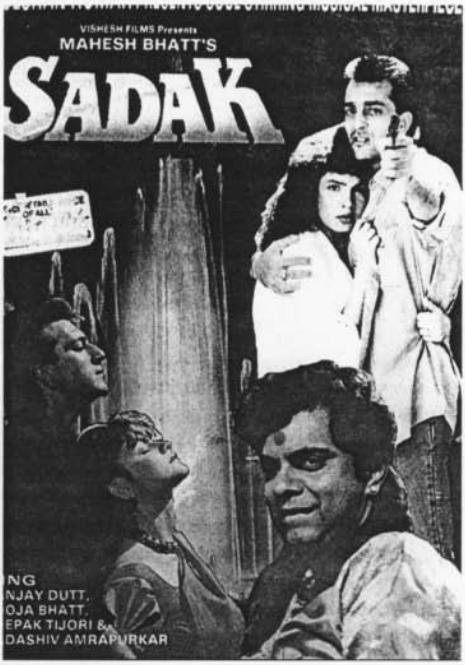

Figure 15.5 ***Sadak***: Sadashiv Amrapurkar as rampaging and phallic hijra supervillain Maharani and the cowering institution of heterosexuality she's out to get (video jacket)

Sadak's villain is the implausibly rampaging and phallic hijra pimp Maharani, played by Sadashiv Amrapurkar (Fig. 15.5). Maharani clearly embodies Cohen's second model of desire, despite her dubious gender credentials. No doubt hijras are associated, in popular culture as well as in anthropological research, with prostitution, but the character of megapimp Maharani is more than an ethnographic treatise. She is so successful in performing the contradictory horror and attraction of the same-sex violence model that the narrative incoherence of her role as simultaneous penetrator and penetratee hardly matters. Maharani's setpieces are neither Tikoo's hysterical revelations nor Akshay's musical extravaganzas, rather monumental concatenations of over-the-top menace and violence, wreaked with weaponry that seems even more parodically phallic than the usual Bollywood variety. In one endlessly protracted scene for example, the quivering Sanjay and his ingenue co-star flee Maharani's rage and super-shotgun in an underground parking garage, as if it is the institution of heterosexuality itself that is her target. Honored by the Indian Oscar equivalent, the *Filmfare* Award, Maharani's ferocious charisma, bedecked with as many signs of revolt and marginality as jewelry and makeup, clearly constitutes what we used to call within MMMIs a negative image.

So does Pinko. Of all the queer villains of the last decade, the charismatic male-gender-identified villain of *Mast Kalandar*, incarnated by respected and popular

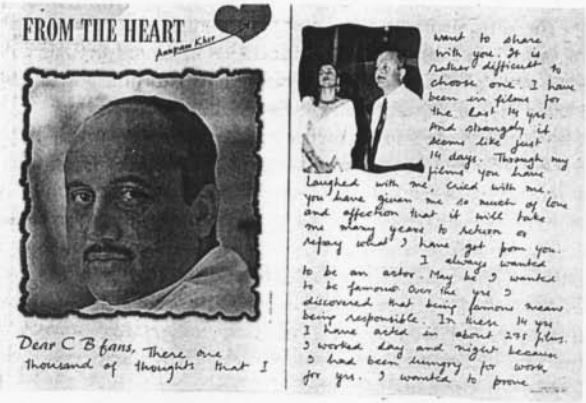

Figure 15.6 Star fan profile of Anupam Kher: "serious" heterosexual construction of actor who was catapulted to fame playing swishy queer villains. Courtesy of *CineBlitz* (Bombay)

"character star" Anupam Kher (Fig. 15.6),[22] is the presence most closely matching the MMMI stereotype. A middle-aged man with shaved skull and mustache who is set up as a weak daddy's boy to his supervillain father, Pinko has what it takes and flaunts it as defiantly as any hijra—but as a swishy man rather than as a crossdresser. Pinko openly comes on to men onscreen, namely the other minor character actors who are put in place as his "love interest," fellow villain Prem Chopra and ineffectual corrupt cop Shakti Kapoor, since the leading man is apparently off-limits. Pinko may be effeminate, but like the Kali-esque Maharani, he is full of cinematic and sexual power, heir to generations of cabaret bad girls who always used to lose the hero and often their lives but win the movie. Pinko has one show-stopping setpiece, predictably a cabaret scene not dissimilar to that which would show up in *Main Khiladi*, for cabarets have been the site of exotic (i.e., Northern) and illicit sexualities since the colonial period. Here Pinko is most associated with the modes of parody, excess, and reversal, an interesting analogue to Northern camp sensibilities. Flouncing across the parking lot for his cabaret scene, irrepressible in his pink suit and jewelry, Pinko is already singing the parody of a Bollywood torchsong standard, reversing the pronouns. On the way he has to berate two women onlookers for making fun of him, asking them if they don't have brothers at home and are not ashamed to tease a man in public. More love-song parodies ensue once inside the club, with Pinko leading a full-blown gender-reversal version of "Ik Do Tinn (One, two, three)," a famous hit song about a female singer's passion, seconded by lineups of waiters/chorus boys in yellow satin shirts. The outrageous parodies of

22 *Trikone* has for some time had its approving eye on the subsequent career of Kher who seems in danger of typecasting: in *Zamana Deewana* (Ramesh Sippy, 1995) he plays "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 also a dream sequence that shows Kher in "gorgeous outfits" doing a slow dance first with one then the other. The 1994 Filmfare awards also featured him in drag (Chawda, "Cracks," 28).

conventions continue to pile up in the number, e.g., a poker game where Pinko winkingly wonders whether he'll get the king, sitting in the lap of his anointed, poor frazzled Prem. The comedy of gender reversal is a standard in Bollywood, as in many popular cultural forms around the world, but here the inflection is pushed to the limit of sexualized marginality, in opposition to the commoner sanitized version.

In the final scene, Pinko naturally gets his comeuppance. But as a relatively harmless second-string villain, he is only jailed rather than blasted to smithereens like Maharani, and in any case is happy to end up in jail with his love interest. He winks boldly at the audience through the cell bars in the last shot of the film, signaling his amorous intentions with regard to his cellmate. ***Mast Kalandar*** may be one of the earlier films to wink this boldly, to deploy knowingly a postmodern multiple address of this kind: such an excessive invocation of MMMI codes implies a familiarity with them in at least part of the audience, and for spectators not familiar with Northern images of homosexuality, the film is content to transmit a generalized polyvocal message of illicit, exotic sexual thrills—and unabashed, slapstick cinematic pleasure.

Yes, pleasure, for villains aren't necessarily bad, and Pinko and Maharani both stole their respective films. Indian audiences gleefully identify villains with the stable of broadly performed character actors who have specialized in them generation after generation, so much so that many of the generic megalomaniacs consistently outshine their rather humdrum leading men. That queer villains should be a trend of the nineties may well reflect Bollywood's insatiable passion for Northern-flavored novelty, the iconographic spinoffs of global transculturation, but it clearly also reflects something more. The fact that the two most memorable queer villains are the hijra Maharani and the daddy's boy Pinko no doubt helps contain and deflect the "eat or be eaten" model of sexual predation that haunts masculinity in Varanasi. But such charismatic queer villains equally clearly provide both the Indian queer spectator, silent and alone with his buddies in the crowded stalls in Patiala cinemas, and the queer denizens of the Bollywood assembly line, both the flouncers and the discreet ones, with the pleasurable consolation of visibility. They offer a hook for what Foucault would call a reverse discourse, a language and frame for resistant self-definition. The politics of the "negative image" may well be beside the point in a culture based on a pre-political terrain of simultaneous visibility and invisibility, polyvocality and ambiguity.

The charismatic queer penetration model articulated by Maharani and Pinko functions, I would argue, in dialogical counterpoint with the play model in the romances and friendship films, together constituting what Cohen calls "split masculinity."[23] In fact the two patterns can surface in the same films, with the violence and spectacular marginality of the penetrator counteracting the childlike intimacy of homosocial play—and vice versa. If homosociality is indeed a continuum whose gradations toward the homoerotic are volatile, culturally determined, and highly nuanced, violence can be at either end of this continuum, a ritual of male bonding that calls for an enamored "wow!" at one end and the enactment of sexual possession at the other, and the pleasures of recognition and novelty at both ends. In the universe of the cinema, unlike the Varanasi cruising park, the roles of the player and the naive one are not separate, but simultaneous and often interchangeable.

23 "Holi," 421.

Clearly something queer

It is dangerous to offer monolithic generalizations in such a pluralistic field as Indian popular culture, but something queer is clearly going on in Bollywood. This is true certainly within the increasingly brazen and devious Mumbai studio subcultures, which Ashok Row Kavi has called the gayest in the world, and apparently also within the spectators who are watching . . . or at least within some of the spectators who are watching . . . or at the very least within some unconscious part of some of the spectators who are watching. Since the realm of fantasy and desire is hardly as measurable on screen as behaviors are in a social network, the popular cinema only obliquely and contradictorily registers the flux of socio-cultural shifts, unlike ethnography, and the cultural texts of star performances, which have been the most salient vehicles of queer stirrings within Bollywood to date—Akshay/Saïf, Tikoo, Maharani, Pinko—provoke a response that is not directly and literally translatable as ethnographic data or social meaning.

Nevertheless, it is tempting to entertain the too symmetrical cross-cultural comparisons that automatically come to mind between the respective modernizations of sixties Hollywood and nineties Bollywood, between the "something queer going on" in the sixties North and the "something queer going on" of the nineties South Asia. For each industry responded to the sexual revolution at its backdoor with frantic and contradictory cycles of visibility and deflection, alterity and domestication. Such comparisons may well risk imposing Northern-centric and teleological readings on autonomous Indian trajectories, along the lines of Martin F. Manalmansan IV's admonition about imposing globalized Northern models of identity on third sexualities "within a developmental and teleological matrix."[24] But we would be remiss in not at least trying the comparisons on for size. Ultimately, though, in comparison with an earlier and distant sexual revolution that had something to do with Leonard Whiting's buttocks, and even in comparison with the more recent elite and diasporic discourses of the Indian MMMIs and art cinema, the Indian popular cinema's discourses of same-sexuality and fluid masculinity are not so much developmentally far behind or way ahead but in another galaxy. Who's the player and who's the naive one?

24 Martin F. Manalansan IV, "In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma," *GLQ*, 2 (4) (1995), 424–438, 428.