

News Report:

The saturated colours, shrill background music and over-dramatic dialogue are the hallmarks of any ordinary Indian television soap opera. What happens next is a lot less typical.

“I can never love you or any other woman. I’m in love with a man,” a young man tells his shocked wife, while his boyfriend looks on, relieved. The popular Hindi-language soap “Maryada: Lekin Kab Tak” (Honour: But at What Cost?) on *Star Plus*, which featured the path-breaking storyline in June, says it attracts 13.5 million viewers weekly. Screenwriter Damini Shetty says, “We wanted to break new ground with ‘Maryada’ and talk about issues that people typically shy away from.”

The show focuses on a patriarchal, conservative family, the Jhaakar clan, in small-town northern India, whose eldest son Gaurav is gay. “It would have been easy to show a gay person in a hip urban set-up, but we wanted to show it in this context to show that it’s a reality in every society, in villages, in small towns, where people struggle, like Gaurav, to come out to their families,” adds Shetty.

Actor Daksh Ajit Singh, who plays Gaurav, says he receives a lot of fan mail from viewers who see their own lives reflected on the small screen. “One gay fan from Delhi wrote to me saying that his mother loves soaps and after watching this show, she has finally stopped pressuring him to change and get married,” said Singh.

He also recalls a conversation with an old friend, who watched the show and was taken aback by the subject matter. “He said he watched it with his children and was embarrassed to see me with a guy. I told him it was no big deal. We are only showing what is real, that’s all,” states Singh.

As satellite television took off in the subcontinent in the 1990s, Indian soaps slowly began to tackle controversial subjects like marital rape, female foeticide and child marriage, all the while tugging at the heartstrings of their largely female audience.

Recently, a number of shows have ventured into the uncharted territory of featuring gay characters.

In addition to “Maryada”, supernatural teen drama “Pyaar Ki Ye Ek Kahaani” (This Is A Story About Love) featured a subplot involving a gay architect who developed a crush on his flatmate. “Mahi Way”,

a show about an overweight writer, Mahi Talwar and her gay best friend, is a cult favourite on YouTube.

The largely positive response to these television programmes reflects the changing attitude to homosexuality in India. Two years ago, a landmark Delhi High Court ruling decriminalised homosexuality, which was illegal under a 150-year-old British colonial law that banned “carnal intercourse against the order of nature”. Conviction carried a fine and up to ten years in jail.

Other indicators of the community’s growing prominence include a boom in gay magazines, same-sex Valentine’s Day cards and the Bollywood hit *Dostana*, in which a mother accepts her son’s supposed boyfriend.

However, as a sign that prejudices still run deep; in July 2011 Indian Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad referred to homosexuality as “unnatural” and “a disease which has come from other countries” during a televised speech. Although gay rights activists were quick to condemn Azad’s remarks, many people said they agreed with his views.

India still boasts no high-profile figures who are openly gay or lesbian in the fields of sport, politics, or entertainment and many Indians continue to regard homosexuality as a mental illness.

Media critic Shailaja Bajpai believes shows like “Maryada” are quietly paving the way for greater social acceptance of homosexuality. “It’s to do with the nature of television watching. Because TV comes into our homes, it pushes people to talk with their families and friends about things that ordinarily make them uncomfortable.”

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