

Bollywood

In bed with Bollywood: sex and censorship in Indian cinema

Bollywood may be the blushing ballerina to Hollywood's brazen pole-dancing stripper, but, as the history of film censorship in India reveals, its screen stars are no stranger to the lip lock

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With India being the world's biggest producer of films (around 1000 last year, twice that of America) its censor board, aka the Central Board of Film Certification, has its work cut out. It watches and certifies every film, both Indian and non-Indian, before they can be shown to the country's masses.

There is the popular misconception that Bollywood films do not show scenes of a sexual nature: they do. However, when comparing the screen time or manner in which kissing (or more "bedroomly" activity) is portrayed in Bollywood versus Hollywood, Bollywood is a blushing ballerina, whereas Hollywood is as brazen as a pole-dancing stripper.

Simple osculation can still cause quite a stir in Bollywood. Films are actively marketed on the numbers of lip locks they contain. Last year's Shuddh Desi Romance traded on its rumoured 27 kisses to tempt in the audiences. With all these excitable tongues wagging, you would be forgiven for thinking it's something new on screen in India, but it's not: Anglo-Indian actress Seeta Devi became the first to pucker up in 1929 in the German-Indian production A Throw of Dice, aka Prapancha Pasha.

Censorship had arrived in Indian films only 11 years before. The earliest attempt to exercise an element of control over India's film industry came during the British Raj with the 1918 Indian Cinematograph Act. This was five years after the release of what is generally considered India's first feature film, 1913's Raja Harishchandra.

The power of issuing a U certificate (suitable for all) or an A (adults) was given to the district magistrates of the various states, with the chiefs of police getting involved for good measure. Ambiguous suggestions of principles to the film inspectors led to confusion as to what would make it through.

Early attempts at on-screen liberalism – including the longest kiss in Indian screen history, an almost four-minute epic between Devika Rani and her real-life husband, Himanshu Rai, in 1933's Karma – fell victim to the censors. Things further tightened after independence in 1947 – both in terms of attitudes towards sex and film censorship in general. The central government took greater control and was assisted by, rather than solely empowering, regional officers.

The Cinematograph Act of 1952 offered more "principles for guidance in certifying films". In terms of sexual contact, if a film was against the interests of "decency or morality" then it would not be given a certificate and therefore couldn't be shown.

Ways to avoid an inconvenient re-edits emerged. Shots of two flowers swaying together in the wind, although perplexing to the uninitiated, was one euphemism denoting a kiss and canoodle between the film's starring couple.

The most recent amendments to the act occurred more than a generation ago in 1983. A lot has changed since then. With the internet enabling streaming and downloading (both legal and illegal) it's not difficult for anyone to see pretty much anything. So does censorship even make sense in 2014?