

Critique

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Badnam Basti: Stimulating the Queer Chronicle

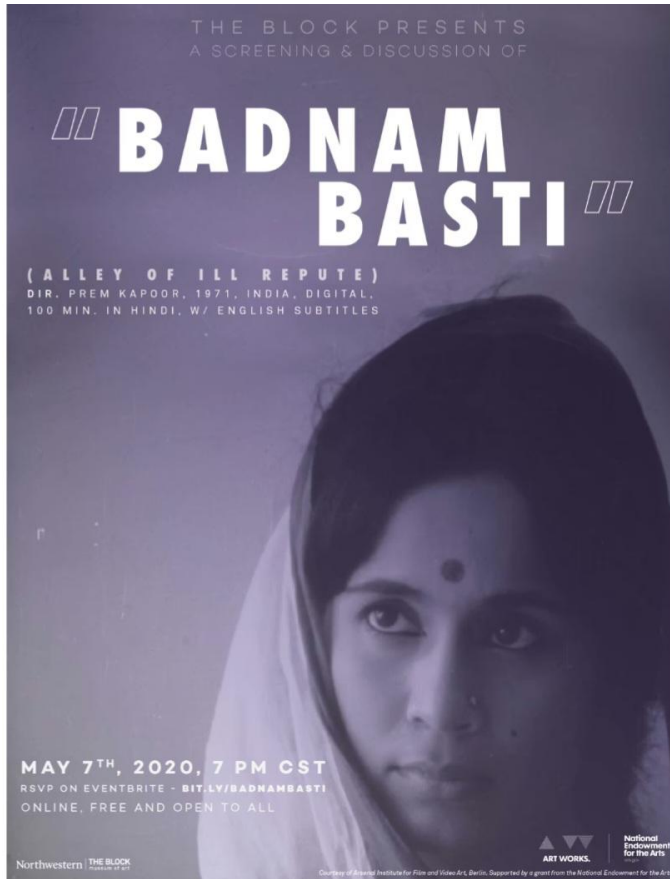


"I thirst for you" - *Badnam Basti*

In its long history, Indian Cinema has always functioned as a generous laboratory of experimental characters, layered psychology, facts and faces and multiple dimensions of the societal behaviours. The portrayal of LGBTQ community in Indian screen has historically dealt with marked challenges, like exaggerated layouts, stereotypes, shallow comedy, caricatures and often vilification. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in sensitivity towards a more thoughtful approach to queer narratives. Efforts are now being made to present these stories on screen with the depth and complexity they deserve. Whereas the silver

screen has taken a long time to attribute humanity, individual esteem and uniqueness to the real hermaphrodites, Hindu mythology had empowered the celebrated this marginalized community with power, honour and unique individuality, even in that ancient and nondigital town of history. Renowned mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik wrote in his celebrated book "Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You" – "*Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of maleness and femaleness. There are stories of men who become women and women who become men, of men who create children without women and women who created children without men and of creatures who are neither this nor that,*

but a little bit of both like the makara (a combination of fish and elephant) or the yali (a combination of lion and elephant). There are also many words in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil like kilba, napumsaka, mukhabhaga, sanda, panda, pandaka, pedi, that suggest a long familiarity with queer thought and behaviour”



Badnam Basti, directed by Prem Kapoor in 1971 and based on Kamleshwar Prasad Saxena's eponymous novel, is one of the most subversively radical films in Indian cinema. Made on shoestring budgets and filmed against the hot, dusty backdrop of Mainpuri, Uttar Pradesh, the film does an intimidatingly rare thing: it presents a bisexual love triangle—Sarnam, Bansuri, and Shivraj—in a sensitive manner. Its story is conducted in low-key realism, not melodrama, and from the very form it creates an implied recognition of queer desire—not approved by conventional morality, but made

with the authority of lived emotional fact. Rediscovered many decades later, *Badnam Basti* has been considered a watershed moment in the history of queer representation in India, not in any obvious declarations, but in passionate yearning, kinetic gesture, and cinematic implication, thereby presenting a strong case study in how limitation may be transformed into creative possibility.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, India was marked by deep-rooted social conservatism and rigorous censorship. Homosexuality remained a peripheral issue, deemed illegal under Section 377 and subjected to social repression.

"Although Badnam Basti was recut and rereleased in 1978, it faded into obscurity; until recently, the film was presumed lost. In late 2019, Simran Bhalla, The Block Museum 2019-2020 Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellow, and Michael Metzger, The Block's Curator of Media Arts were conducting research in the catalogue of Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art, in Berlin for the program Morning Will Come: Modernity in Indian Cinema."

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In this atmosphere, Hindi cinema effectively restricted same-sex desire or else encoded it in grotesque caricature, pathologizing it in psychiatric tropes. Against the grain, *Badnam Basti* chose to represent Sarnam's relationship with Shivraj not as transgressive spectacle but as emotional harmonization: shared care, closeness, unspoken need.

The film is not a statement story, but rather an exploration of emotional geography, where desire is found in looks, touches, and micro-moments of dependence. The inclusion

of Bansuri in the triangle does not cancel queer possibility but complicates all bodies on the scene: desire is complicated, layered, and cannot be reducible to tidy categories. The bisexual framing resists queer-retroactive "gay" or "lesbian" readings, presenting instead attraction as fluid, contingent, and profoundly human.

This formal tactic is central: it renounces didacticism and resists Orthodox binary moral judgment. By engaging its characters as full, contradictory, and emotionally human- of course when their emotions are "forbidden" by social logic, the film makes queer value claims without melodrama. This is particularly effective because the film's 1971 release was narrowly distributed and received marginally; decades would pass before scholars and cinephiles would reclaim the film as a queer classic. Its journey from obscurity to rediscovery in Berlin speaks to both its durability and to how visibility hinges upon archival survival and scholarly reconnection.

Cinematographer R. M. Rao and editor-director Prem Kapoor identify *Badnam Basti* as squarely belonging to the parallel cinema tradition of the period, but they intersperse it with breaks in form that peak emotional encounters. This is a film set in small-town Uttar Pradesh, not on sound stages and synthetic locations; rather in the actual streets, markets and homes of its parent state. It is composed of dirt roads, crowded fairs and intimate spaces of buses and homes. The realism of the mise-en-scène uses colour, texture, and specificity to engage us into its emotionally charged statements. There is no glamour or desire here, the characters are situated within the socio physical messiness

of their everyday work and struggles. Therefore, the tangible infrastructure of the film generates a political claim. Here is queer intimacy against the condition of public exposure, and yet, it is entirely real.



Framing is often close, generally avoiding long shots and optimising medium close-ups. There are moments when the camera lingers on physical intimacy - two hands touch over a piece of fabric (reminding us of the Maryam Touzani film *The Blue Caftan*), a silhouette of a neck upon some shoulders, and the flicker of an eyebrow at a minor gesture. Sometimes these emotional windows seem to say more than even the vocals. They can encapsulate the unseen intensity and nuance of relation. The visual language might be one of slow nearness, even as public worlds of physical discourse. In this way, *Badnam Basti* blends the stylistic ethos of India's parallel cinema, neorealist texture blended with minimalist storytelling and the visual grammar of withheld meaning.

Music composer Vijay Raghava Rao, poetically literate musicians like Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan, and archival vocal sources like Harivansh Rai Bachchan add to a soundtrack that serves as interior commentary.

Instead of employing playback numbers to externalize feeling or bring about escapism, the film incorporates recited poetry, or melodic folk/harmonic phrase, as if

hearing a character's internal affect. The musical interventions do not further the plot per se; they translate feeling into sound, impressionistic and close. The presence of a classical vocalist like Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan itself conveys a sense of disciplined stillness, each phrase has gravity beyond melodic line. The music is simple, mixing soft sounds and folk styles with light melodies. Silence also feels like music. The music highlights feelings but doesn't tell you how to feel. A song may quietly show up to balance moments of tension or hidden agreement. These choices make the music feel serious, setting it apart from other contemporary films.



Bollywood of the time tended to employ flamboyant song-dance to confirm heterosexual love. In contrast, the film presents songs as inner monologues, not intended for performance, and with a more subdued approach. This approach allows the film to explore queer love, where desire is subtly felt rather than openly declared. Of all the compelling strengths of *Badnam Basti*, perhaps the greatest is its use of dedicated performances by relative non-stars: Nitin Sethi, Amar Kakad, and Nandita Thakur.

Sarnam is a complex character, sharp, restless, and deeply lonely. Sethi portrays him with internal tension: the character's physical strength does not negate his emotional

uncertainty. Far from melodramatic wild tears or shouting, Sethi's power lies in his stillness, in what he withholds. A lingering gaze, a tightening of jaw, a quiet regret in a moment of intimacy - these are his tools. Contemporary reviewers noted how Sethi's brooding presence anchors the film's emotional gravity.

Shivraj is vulnerable rather than subservient. Delicacy and sincerity are given him by Kakad, who refuses to foist him in the passive role in a triangle. Rather, his attentions are modest, his love real. The relationship between him and Sarnam is restrained but convincing: small gestures, guarded closeness, emotional communing through movement instead of talk. Where words betray them, performance takes up the slack.

In contrast to most "female triangle-member" characters of the time, Bansuri is not a *deus ex machina* or a mere decoration. Thakur's Bansuri is torn and real, she is in love with Sarnam, dreads the repercussions of his emotional looseness, both literal and devotional—in her life, and has her own needs. Thakur strikes agency against distress, she is not villain or victim, but a fully rounded character whose interests within the triangle provide the drama with moral ambiguity.

Since these are non-star performers, the acting evades expectation from the audience. There are not any established screen personas to be evoked or deconstructed. We encounter these individuals on the page of life - clumsy, sincere, confusing, unvarnished. This realism is the film's strongest point in creating emotional truth.

Since its initial release, *Badnam Basti* vanished from circulation. In the age of digital

technology, a print on 35 mm was excavated from Berlin's archives, screened, restored, and exhibited in film history and queer festivals. This archival return places the film not as a failed experiment but as a cinematic miner's discovery, an integral link in the chain of Indian queer stories. The film historians and curators have since referred to it as "a precursor to queer cinema in India," though its bisexuality and narrative complexity defy simplicity. Until recovered, its loss underscores how neglect of the archive effaces marginalized histories and how their re-emergence remakes cinematic memory.

The movie can't be called perfect. Pacing is slow at some points; scenes are developed unevenly, dialogues falter, and transitions can be jerky. Critics of the time accused the film of incoherent editing in some areas. Limited budgets resulted in uneven lighting and sound at times. But these imperfections provide the film with its raw spontaneity. The occasional awkward formalizing can be interpreted as part of a movie that was radical in material but produced on the periphery of resources.

In 70's, specially in a period of socio political turbulence of the nation, Indian cinema could rarely think about bringing LGBTQ issue to visual proceedings. *Badnaam Basti* dared as a radical parameter to conceptualize the emotional formats of bisexuality and homosexuality. It acknowledges that illicit desire is not always about comforting the libido, but about being present and being cared for. It photographs desire as everyday pleads for queer feeling

without spectacle, enacts intimacy as human and not sensational. The film adeptly captures love's nuances in an age when such representation stood a chance of censorship or erasure. Now, as India's queer cinemas thrive and proliferate, *Badnam Basti* is a powerful testament to how quiet resistance can lead to and actually plant the seeds of greater narrative ambition.

The film carries bold subtlety. Its revolutionary topic, an unuttered, emotionally knotted same-sex longing was not shouted from rooftops, but spoken in close proximity. Through rooted camerawork, measured framing, formal cutting, and understated yet suggestive music, the film constructs intimacy as political statement. Its performances are neither showy nor artificial and grasps the emotional ground: hands stay in place, eyes look into one another, silences vibrate with more comment than any dialogue. Although technical clumsiness and pacing mismatches contribute to its formal success, those faults enhance its veracity.

Rediscovered from decades of abandonment, it is both a cinematic relic and a living text, one that challenges us to revisit the ways in which cinema speaks about the quietness of forbidden desire and social visibility's dependence on archive and advocacy. For queer scholars of Indian cinema, for students of new waves and film form, for viewers looking for tales that subvert the binaries of desire and representation, *Badnam Basti* is still indispensable - not because it bawls, but because it conceives.