

# Third Gender in Indian Films with a special Reflection on Chitrangada

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**Abstract-** The paper is to highlight on the depiction of third gender issue in Indian Film with a special focus on film Chitrangada. With an understanding of gradual representation of third gender in world cinema it tries how the issue has made its road to Indian Films. It explores various issues on problems related to third gender portrayed in the film Chitrangada.

**Index Terms-** Third gender, films, Chitrangada, homosexuality

## I. INTRODUCTION

While there are various issues that are becoming the basis of film making, the issue of third gender has not occupied much space in Indian films as compared to mainstream films. The main stream films in India have showed the third gender very often as part of a film, sometimes to introduce humor content in the films as *Chhakke*, *Hijra* etc, but the films have not dealt much with the third gender question, which shows the lack of acceptability of third gender in the mainstream Indian films. The Bengali film *Chitrangada* in this light can be regarded as one of its type which deals with homosexuality raising many epistemological questions on homosexuality. The paper thus tries to discuss the portrayal of third gender issue in films with a special focus on Indian film *Chitrangada*.

## II. THIRD GENDER AND ITS SOCIAL POSITION

Third gender can be described as a category of people who neither fall under feminine gender nor under masculine gender straight way. Many of whom have certain physical characteristics which are expressed in morphology, and many have some hormonal or genital characteristics. Again it also includes people of opposite sexual orientation than what they are. The different categories of third gender can be described as below:

- Eunuch: an historic English term for a man who has been castrated to perform special social functions.
- Intersexual : a term referring to people who are born with a mixture of both male and female hormonal, chromosomal and genital characteristics( historically referred as hermaphrodite)
- Hijra : A term originating in south India referring to a person usually born male or intersex, but who uses female pronouns as dresses in feminine /women's attire
- Transsexuals : a term referring to someone who changes their sex through medical ( surgical and / hormonal) procedure
- Transgendered: a term referring to someone whose gender identity is different from the one traditionally

assigned to their sex category ( people are born into sex categories of male and female , many but not all then become gendered masculine or feminine and into men and women). Thus transgendered person both in the female sex category may identify with the gender category man . This may or may not involve surgical operations.

- Drag : a term that comes out of gay culture, involving someone temporarily performing a gender not usually associated with their sex ( through dress gesture and so on ). Ironic humor and extravagant campiness is often involved.
- Transvestite/Cross dresser: these are older terms with meaning and histories—and often the term is used in a derogatory fashion. In terms of practice though, crossdressers are often not gay, but straight men who simply enjoy dressing up as women.

While third gender constitutes a significant percentage of world population but in terms of social recognition the category of people suffer from diverse experiences of social exclusion. According to UCLA School, 3.8 percent Americans identify them as LGBT. The institute also found bisexuals make up 1.8 percent of population, 1.7 percent as gay or lesbian, transgendered adults make up 0.35 of the population. In Britain, 1.55 percent of populations are gay. It is around 726,000. An Estimate of transgender persons in India is 1:400.India has the highest gay population in the world. It has 2.5 million gays of which 7.5percent are HIV positive<sup>1</sup>. (14 March 2012, BBC News India).

While third gender comprised of a significant proportion of population yet it suffers from deprivations and exclusion. It is observed that LGBT people face harassment in school, colleges and in workplace too. They are looked down upon by the mainstream genders i.e., men and women. For a longer period the third gender people faced difficulty of various kinds. They are not allowed to have sex with their partner of same sex; they are not permitted to adopt a child. They are not allowed to marry each other. The third gender category also suffers from discrimination in employment and housing. Though there is myriad change in case of their social standing in many countries as many countries have recognized homosexuality still it has not equal recognition irrespective of societies wherever they are present. Around 13 countries recognized same sex marriage, in many countries there are anti LGBT workplace discrimination law. Yet the third gender deprivation is still observed in diverse ways in many countries. In India the recognition of third gender passes through complex stages while a High Court verdict of

Delhi recognized same sex, the recent ruling by Supreme Court against same sex shows how the fate and status of third gender of the country with largest number of people of third gender awaits legal and thereafter its social recognition.

### III. THIRD GENDER IN WORLD CINEMA

The visibility of third gender in world films has passed through the same stages as the very issue of third gender has passed through in getting recognition in society. It has been seen that the straight art films were not hospitable to gay films from the very inception of the portrayal of homosexuality in films. Though homosexuality has been part of many films, the regular portrayal of homosexuality was observed mainly with the decade of 1970s and afterwards. The film on homosexuality though started with William Dickson's Motion Picture in 1895, where two men were shown dancing, 'Different from the Others' can be considered as the first gay right movie that was produced in 1919. While gay issues are portrayed in different countries in different points of time, the frequent production of gay films are highly observed with the culmination of gay right movement in the decade of 1970s and 80s and thereafter. The visibility as politics<sup>ii</sup> became one of the major strategies of gay right movement which is observed in the development of film and screening of films in different countries. A number of film festivals were organized by different organizations e.g., BFI London LGBT film festival, San Francisco International Film Festival, New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival and its counterpart New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. These festivals emerged as one of the major platforms for gay films and gay right movements.

The gay issues have got considerable place in many films of Britain, France, Germany, Canada and the U.S.A. To mention a few gay films in the nineteenth century are: the British films - *The Leather Boys*(1961), *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), *the Nighthawks* (1978), French Films- *Un chant d'amour*, *Orphee* (1950) *Une robe d'e'te'*(1996), American Films as *Longtime Companion*(1989) *Damned If You Don't* (1987) *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Black Swan* (2010).

In the beginning gay role did not get prominence where gays were portrayed with part representation of the fact some times as gender role reversal, flamboyant etc. The gay issue became the theme in many movies mainly during 1920s when filmgoers were less in number because of economic depression. So, controversial theme was the subject matter of many films to have more shockwaves in audience.

Initially the gay films were synonymous with experimental films. But the films started to get momentum in 1990s when a number of film festivals were frequently organized in the decade. The amplification of gay issues in film took place in 2000s. It is to be mentioned that in 2007, two million people joined the Madrid hosted Europride<sup>iii</sup>, unlike 1995 when it was joined by 5000 people only. In India the first mainstream Gay Film Festival was held in the year 2010, in the month of April.

The recent decades show multiple varieties of gay films. It can be noted that IMDb<sup>iv</sup> lists 94 popular gay movies in 2012 and 76 gay movies in 2013. This shows how third gender has gradually shown its visibility in different countries. Gay issue also caught the attention of the Disney which is bringing the first

animated full length film on gay. Thus the gradual popularity of the gay films in terms of its production, screening and viewing shows the gradual acceptance of third gender issue in the societies over the world.

### IV. THIRD GENDER IN INDIAN FILMS

While the film making on gay issue was observed century ago, India opens its account in late eighties of twentieth century. Though like many other countries it shows gay visibility in 2000s when a number of gay films are produced. The first film known to focus on gay sex is *Bomgay* which is a short film of 12 minutes. The film was not released in India as the maker believed that it may not get certificate from Censor Board. The *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* is the first Malayalam film which showed love between two school girls who decided to elope from the school and to be together to take revenge against their teacher who used to harass these girls. The film is positively critiqued for its portrayal of same sex orientation very beautifully. The films on third gender are largely found mainly with 1996. It is the year when *Fire* was produced but was released in India in 1998 which met with huge protests by different organizations and thereafter has set a stage to debate on homosexuality. Directed by Deepa Mehta, it can be considered as the first mainstream film where Lesbianism got a clear and comprehensive visibility. While the twentieth century marked the visibility of few gay films or other third gender films as *Fire*(1996) *Tamanna* (1997), *Darmiyaan* (1997), *Daayraa* (1996), *Dostana*(1998), *Bombay Boys*(1998) etc. the twenty first century gradually added to the issue further with its increased number of films and increased representation in terms of dimension and content. It is interesting to note that the year 2009 onwards the number of films on third gender has increased more. The year has seen two gay films *My Son is Gay* a Hindi film and *Ritu*, a Malayali film. While *My Son Is Gay* is based on a story of an orthodox mother and her Gay son who struggle to accept the gay identity. In 2010 a good number of films were made on gay theme. While the year 2009 and 2010 are important for third gender in India because it is to be noted the Delhi High Court verdict on permission of marriage between two homosexuals took place in 2009 and the year 2010 marked the first International Gay Film Festival in India. The 2010 itself has produced at least five films on gay issue as *I Am* (Hindi), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Bengali), *Donno—Y—Na Jane Kyou* (Hindi), *Goa* (Tamil), *Pankh* (Hindi). While *I Am* is a compilation of four short films, where gay theme becomes the focus of one part of the film. *Arekti Premer Golpo* is the first film on homosexuality after the decriminalization of the homosexuals in India in 2009.

### V. CHITRANGADA AND THE QUESTION OF THIRD GENDER

The film *Chitrangada* was released in 2012 and is directed and starred by Rituparno Ghosh. The film explores multiple dimensions of the problem of being a third gender. The desire of being a different sex is highlighted in the film as the choreographer wants to introduce the theme of *Chitrangada* as wish of one individual to change its sex as it finds the existing sex identity as undesirable and unbearable. The naming of the

film *Chitrangada* is purposefully selected which has multiple dimensions. It is seen that the heroine had to play a sex role reversal as her father wished her to be so. The king who had a wish for a male child, the most desired sex a patriarchal society wishes for a child to be, discovers that the child he is blessed with is a girl. So he asks her to play a role of a boy. Accordingly, the princess continues to grow up as a boy. When she met Arjun, who went to her dynasty in the north east part of present India she had fallen in love with Arjun. As a result she finds it difficult to keep her womanhood in disguise and decides to throw her sheath of man hood and express her love for Arjun.

Film *Chitrangada* is based on Rabindra Nath Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* the source of which is the Great epic Mahabharata . The film talks about how third gender is a social reality that suffers from social exclusion in diverse ways. It digs into various issues related to third gender.

The first issue is the acceptance of third gender identity within the institution of family. Very often it is reported that whenever a third gender unveils its identity the family members react to it very strangely. The real experience of third gender as shown in T.V. shows tells the similar story. The film portrays the mother as ready to accept the reality, and father is shown to be huddled with difficulty in accepting the fact.

The film also shows the difficulty that lies to start a conjugal familial life by the people of third gender. Rudie who discovered the desire to have a child in Partho, only made his mind to go for a sex reassignment surgery so that it can help them to adopt a child. Rudie set to do so because he knew that the society and law will never permit two men to adopt a child. Hence to be a woman physically he decided to change his sex.

The suffering of the third gender is also shown to have another dimension when his boyfriend Partho left Rudie to marry a real woman. Partho gave an explanation that he wants to marry a natural being not an artificial woman as Rudie is going to be after the surgery.

The film has got a philosophical dimension too. It brings into certain epistemological question on the nature of body, its form and formation and finally the permanency of it. The very being homosexual according to the film is a reality which transcends the concept of manhood and womanhood. Rudie brings up all these questions when his father asked him when he will become a girl after the sex reassignment and whether there is any possibility of change of his name after the surgery. As change of sex and name may pause some technical problems in inheriting the parental property by Rudie. The very dialogue was meaningful to capture the realities of sexuality. It also reflects how becoming a sex is a physical process. It is never an end but an ongoing process. The sexuality is not a two dimensional reality rather a human being can be a man, woman or any other sexual entity. So one should not give a full stop to understand sex

from two perspectives i.e., man and women but a third perspective can also be equally meaningful in that.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Indian Films on third gender shows similar trend as other films on third gender depicts, over the world. The fact that film as a reflection of society can better be understood here in the context of production and screening of third gender films. The production of film on third gender went along with the movement for recognition of third gender in the society. This is highly observed throughout the world e.g., in Spain after third gender category got legal recognition in 2003, shows the visibility of gay in terms of production of films and its viewing. India also showed similar scenario. The issue appears prominently in the films as it appeared prominently in the society. The decriminalization of homosexuality in India can be considered as one of the major causes of production of third gender films and the screening.

The film *Chitrangada* which was released in 2012 starred and directed by Rituparno Ghosh is one of the films which brings the issue of the third gender in minute detail. It focuses on the multiple dimension of the issue of the problem a member of third gender community faces. Starting from the issue of acceptability and non acceptability of the matter by different members of the family, the technical hurdle of adaptation of a child and marriage of two gay men without proper mainstream sex code, all are shown with detailed analysis. The film also shows a mixed recognition of third sex and third gender with depiction of difficulties faced by third gender.

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