

Entering the Third Dimension?

By tackling transgenerndness head-on, release of three new films may signal Hindi cinema's coming of age.

By ANIRUDDH CHAWDA

In the Random House dictionary:

Eunuch: a castrated man, esp. formerly, one employed by Oriental rulers as a harem attendant.

Hermaphrodite: an individual in which reproductive organs of both sexes are present, a person or a thing in which two opposite qualities are combined.

In the Khush language:

Hijra: all of the above, none of the above.

Hindi cinema, whose usual domain is fantasy and grand spectacle soaked in moralistic-bordering-on-homophobic sentiments, may finally be reaching a new level of maturity with the arrival of not one or two, but three significant films featuring non-gender specific characters. The three films—Amol Palekar's *Daayra*, Kalpana Lajmi's *Darmi-yaan* and Mahesh Bhatt's *Tamanna*—are remarkable not only for the distinct collective departure they take from business-as-usual script-writing and characterizations, but also for registering a wider acceptance of serious art celebrating the lives of transgendered characters in utterly ordinary, loving, pained, triumphant, but altogether human settings.

The path that Indian cinema has chosen, however, to arrive at these newest and most promising films in the presentation of transgendered characters has been checkered at best. If we ignore the silly drag-as-equivalent-to-transgendered roles done by comedians ranging from Kishore Kumar (*Pa-dosan*), Mehmood (*Beti Bete*) and Shammi Kapoor (*Prince*) leading up to even bigger drag roles for marquee names like Aamir Khan (*Baazi*), Anil Kapoor (*Raaj Kumar*), with all of Amitabh Bachchan's drag routines thrown in there somewhere, a couple of distinct patterns emerged.

One was that somewhere along the line there developed a trend of having hijra companions to big name actors and actresses. In *Yaarana*, for example, Madhuri Dixit "adopts" Shakti Kapoor's hijra dance-director as her "brother" who, even though dipped in stereotypic flamboyance and mannerism, is allowed to have one or two lines to defend himself (keep

in mind that the concept of defending a "lifestyle" in Indian cinema is non-existent and mirrors the general lack of understanding for any non-heterosexual unions). Rishi Kapoor in *Bol Radha Bol* is rescued by (and from) a benevolent hijra, who is, again, a dance instructor. Govinda also appears to be fond of song sequences where he is surrounded by hijras (*Saajan Chale Sasural*, *Dariya Dil* and the upcoming *Chotte Sarkar*). Even the current hit *Raja Hindustani* has Karishma Kapoor chaperoned by two ambiguously-sexed male and female servants. In this school, all hijras are employed in the world of dance, they are all gentle as butterflies, but are also inexplicably made to disappear at the end of the film. This trend is most pervasive in the commercial, mass-appeal ghetto of Indian filmmaking.

The other, far more realistic, interesting and relevant trend is a more recent phenomenon. At the onset of the 90's, Mahesh Bhatt, maker of both art films (*Saaransh*, *Arth*) and commercial hits (*Naam*, *Dil Hain Ke Manta Nahin*), released another big hit *Sadak*. Its script improvised on the classic Robert DeNiro film *Taxi Driver* by having a hijra personify Sanjay Dutt's nemesis. The role of the mega-pimp Maharani, brilliantly played by Sadashiv Amrapurkar, at once crushed several working assumptions for Indian films.

One was that instead of the powder-dabbed lip-synching hijra previously mostly glimpsed in the background during chorus-singing scenes, Maharani, all of a sudden, was the object of wrath not because she was a hijra, but because she was evil. At night, with overdone make-up and flowing silk robes, she presided as the matriarch of her seedy brothel. By day, she trans-

formed into a long-haired ruthless gang leader whose fiery eyes even made the men in her entourage tremble. The other mirror that cracked was that until this point no hijra could be given a "Big Role" beyond the mere comic relief or self-loathing presence seen before. The Maharani role was integral to the plot, far more interesting than Sanjay Dutt's casual sleepwalk across the screen.

Then came Mani Rathnam's excellent *Bombay*. Squeezed in between the story's many incendiary political time bombs, the film also featured an unnamed hijrarani rescuing one of Arvind Swamy and Manisha Koirala's young sons from a mob. Instead of the chuckles that usually accompany the on-screen arrival of a hijra, hushed audiences—already awed by the film's power—readily accepted the hijra as part of the rich mosaic of characters served up by Rathnam. Her character stands up to physically

defend the child from the sectarian bloodhounds. That startlingly unexpected cheers from packed audiences greeted this scene is just another reason that *Bombay* emerged as a milestone in Indian filmmaking.

Enter the newest additions to this selective club. Mahesh Bhatt's newest film, *Tamanna*, based on a true story, also carries a loaded plot. Paresh Rawal, who has come a long way from doing bit drag scenes in supportive roles (*Mohra*), plays Tikku, a street-dwelling hijra who refuses to follow the conventional livelihood for hijras—money making by dancing. Tikku also raises as his own a little girl he found abandoned many years earlier. The girl, *Tamanna* (played by Pooja Bhatt in her own debut as producer) emerges central in a battle of wits between Tikku and *Tamanna*'s biological father.

Mahesh Bhatt, who sorely needs a hit after recent box-office disappointments like *Papa Kehte Hai*, is riding his come-back on *Tamanna*'s fortunes. Suddenly, the tables have turned. In an effort to break the mold of conventional big-budget filmmaking, an established director, using a big name cast in a big-budget production, is once again reaching out by showcasing a hijra in a central role. After *Sadak*, *Tamanna* is Bhatt's second use of a transgendered character in a pivotal role. That fact alone elevates the father-daughter team of Mahesh and Pooja Bhatt as distinguished filmmakers that actively



Paresh Rawal (left) stars in *Tamanna*, a film based on the life of Tikku (right)

seek out interesting, well-made movies about transgendered folks.

The similarities between *Tamanna* and Kalpana Lajmi's upcoming *Darmiyaan* have already generated controversy. Here, according to the tattlers, a young male dancer ("a woman trapped in a man's body") is raised by a courtesan against the

backdrop of a kotha, or house of sin. The perception that *Tamanna* is somehow a continuation of *Darmiyaan*—the life-story of the afore-mentioned Tikku—has not gone unnoticed by Lajmi, who publicly voiced criticism of, among others, Paresh Rawal for dropping out of her project to join the Bhatt camp.

Even though still under production, Lajmi's *Darmiyaan* has also witnessed trailing notoriety. Publicity flared up when all of veteran Naseerudin Shah, matinee-idol Shah Rukh Khan, world-class homophobe Saif Ali Khan, ex-hunkster Sunjay Dutt and model Govind Menon were considered for the male lead before Lajmi settled on little-known Arif Zakaria. For the mother-figure female lead, Lajmi went

through Rekha, Dimple Kapadia, Reena Roy and Amrita Singh before deciding on Kiran Kher. Even though production for Lajmi's project is behind schedule, in part due to the many cast changes, few are giving up on Lajmi, one of India's few notable female directors, given her significant previous achievements (*Rudaali*).

Amol Palekar, mostly famous for starring in a couple of sedate musicals opposite Zarina Wahab in the 70's (*Gharonda, Chitchor*), turns in what may be the most unusual storyline of all. His *Daayra* enters the world of an ambitious male Odissi dancer, played by the hunky and always-interesting Nirmal (*Bandit Queen*) Pandey, whose dream is to not only mimic the various intricate gestures of the female dancers around him, but also to capture the entire feminine language through his dance—indeed, to become the feminine persona that he senses is struggling to breathe freely within him. Also pre-

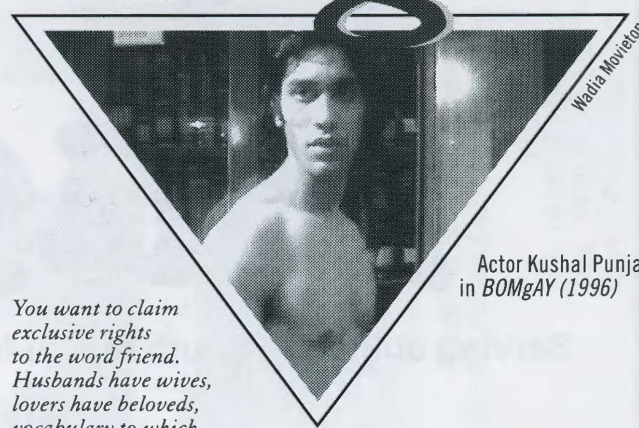
sent in the dance troupe is a local female performer, played by a bewitching Sonal Kulkarni, who is forced by circumstances to play only masculine roles onstage only to find herself attracted to this non-traditional man.

What develops is the most unusual love story portrayed on Indian cinema in quite some time. A woman who dresses up as a man falls for a man who likes to dress up as a woman. The spectre of the lanky and striking Pandey, the object of adulation for many for playing the long-haired Vikram Mallah in *Bandit Queen*, opposite Kulkarni, who could stand in for the late Smita Patil as a possibility, squaring off in a defiant courtship, is at minimum a play on gender politics in the 90's. The matchup is also unusual in that a "heterosexual" pairing—it features a man and a woman, stupid—that enter a relationship that is outwardly free from the trappings of gender roles.

How well these new movies are received may signify the opening of a new chapter not only for Indian films, but also for India. Indian cinema, the most "liberal" in South Asia in terms of subject matters allowed, may be flexing new muscles. The true pulse of how Indian culture accepts the many shades of non-traditional relationships depicted here, however, will not be measured by the number of awards each film picks up at international film festivals. Even though *Daayra*, for example, received positive word-of-mouth at the Toronto and London Film Festivals, it was rejected by the jury in the panorama section of the recent Indian International Film Festival in Thiruvanthapuram. For the sake of all of us, true success will only result if all these films pack them—in India. The greatest outcome would be all three of them being successful enough to spawn a cartload of wannabes. Whatever the outcome, three significant films dwelling on alternate sexualities in one year will surely make 1997 a remarkable year. ▼

How well these new movies are received may signify the opening of a new chapter not only for Indian films, but also for India. Indian cinema, the most "liberal" in South Asia in terms of subject matters allowed, may be flexing new muscles.

BOMgAY



Actor Kushal Punjabi in *BOMgAY* (1996)

You want to claim exclusive rights to the word friend. Husbands have wives, lovers have beloveds, vocabulary to which you cannot be admitted.

Friends only have friends over for dinner.

(Friends by R. Raj Rao)

By YUSUF ISMAIL

"A vivid idea of what it means to go man-hunting in the VT underground lo-or shake a leg with 200 men on a postage-size dance floor at the Voodoo on Saturday night. Yes, it looks glamorous but Riyad shows there is a punishing fee extracted by society for the wicked whirl."

—Ashok Row Kavi in *THE METROPOLIS*

"The concept of sex needs to come out of the closet. That will empower the individual."

—Riyad Wadia in *MID-DAY*

BOMgAY, billed as India's first indigenous gay (short) film, is certainly worthy of this claim. It is composed of a series of vignettes set to six poems of R. Raj Rao, an emerging and openly gay writer from India, whose collection of short-stories entitled *I Locked My Flat in Soul City* recently received critical acclaim. Each of the vignettes, though remarkably different in timbre and tone, touch on facets of gay life in India, both real and imagined, from friends getting together for a meal to the dangers faced by the "Ammonia Maharanis" (as dubbed by Ashok Row Kavi in *The Metropolis*) cruising in a public toilet. They are brought together in a technically superb eleven minutes, under the experienced eye of filmmaker Riyad Wadia, who himself hails from one of India's oldest and most respected movie houses, Wadia Movietone, and came to public attention with his documentary on his great-aunt Nadia of Hunterwar fame. Wadia has also just completed a 50 minute documentary called *Mermaid Called Aida* on the life of an Indian transsexual named Aida.

For *BOMgAY* Wadia teams up with Jangu Sethna and ropes in some well-known names like Kushal Punjabi (*A Mouthful of Sky*) and Rahul Bose (*English August*) who get to do a rather daring scene in a university library. Wadia told *The Telegraph* that "initially we were worried about frontal nudity. There had to be eroticism but no crudity." Rajit Kapur (*Making of the Mahatma*) provides the narration. *BOMgAY* only hints, poetically, of the tantalizing possibilities of a newly emerging gay subculture from the subcontinent, even as it touches on the universal fears and fantasies of being gay anywhere.

Shantabai who comes once a day to wash your undies goes many steps further. She thinks a man without wife and kids is cremated by the Bombay Municipal Corporation upon death.

(from *Opinions* by R. Raj Rao)