

Portrayal of Transgender people in Tamil Cinema.

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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 Tamil films. With associate degree understanding of gradual illustration of third gender in world cinema it tries however the problem has created its road to Indian Films.. It explores various issues on problems related to third gender portrayed in the Tamil films. The Male to Female Transgender Community emerges as the most visible queer culture in India. Cinema provides viewers the ideologies and beliefs sensationally through celebrities and distorts reality. The primary objective of this study is to describe the role of Tamil Cinema on Social exclusion of MtF Transgender Community of Tamil Nadu. The study supported the face-to-face survey analysis of 416 MtF Transgender people of province. The study shows that Transgender individual's area unit considerably excluded from family and made to drop out from college and mostly involve in sex work and beggary for living thanks to their transgender identity. The perception of the Transgender Community clearly describes that Tamil Cinema negatively propagates and maintains the dominant ideology about Transgender people in society. The control of communication mutes the Transgender community and the unequal power relationship drives then to the multidimensional social exclusion in Tamil Nadu. Using case studies and in-depth interviews as the research methodologies, this paper will attempt to objectively study the portrayal of the third gender in Tamil cinema, and why representation of such gender/sexual minorities is important in the context of a society, especially in the current day and age.

1. Introduction

India considered as a sexually conservative society where many gender variant identities have existed in the history of India. However, Male to Female (MtF) Transgender culture emerges as most visible minority queer culture in India and likely to be further marginalized (Kalra 2012a). Transgender people have been burdened by centuries of prejudice, discrimination, sexualharassment and social bias and barely tolerated in Indian society. Most of studies state that the MtF community of Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India is more vulnerable than other gender/sexual minorities of India (Suguna 2013a, Shabeena 2013, Kisha 2012a), UNDP 2011), PUCL-K 2001a), Venkatesan et al 2000 & 2001). Most of the MtF transgender people of Tamil Nadu are excluded from family with social stigma and widespread discrimination forced them to be disseminated across the country for livelihood opportunities (Nanda 1999), Kalra 2010) Shabeena, 2013). They live a life of abandon, wandering like nomads, selling their body to save their life for another day. Hence, they significantly affected by HIV (7.4%) compared with the general population (0.31%) (TANSACS 2010-2011), NACO 2007, 2008 & 2012), considered as object of verbal and sexual violence and socially excluded.

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 mainstream 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. Such representations gain more importance when dealing with marginalized, oppressed or largely stereotyped communities. One such community is the transgender community. Despite a lot more people choosing to openly discuss gender identity, gender expression, gender non-conformity and other related issues like non-binary identities and sexual orientation these days, the transgender community continues to remain a marginalized section of the society in a lot of countries. Thus, the way the transgender population is represented in films (a mass media vehicle still loved and supported by millions of people worldwide) becomes crucial.

Besides, Transgender community constantly questions the misrepresentations of Tamil Cinema and protests for offending transgender identity and other sexual vulnerable minorities under the pretext of freedom of speech (*The Hindu 2015a*, *Sanjana 2015a*). However, there is a resounding silence on the issues of transgender relationships, lives and culture, conversely representing only as objects of fun and spreading stereotypes (*Selvaraj 2008a*). Subsequently, being second largest film producer of Indian film industry, studies strongly disclose the greater influence of Tamil cinema, on socio-cultural issues and state governance in Tamil Nadu *Hardgrave (1973a)*, *Pandian (1992a)*, *Dickey (1993a)*, *Prasad (1998a)*, *Rajanayagam (2002b)*, *Selvaraj (2008b)*. Hence, this study intends to explore the role of Tamil Cinema on Social Exclusion of MtF Transgender people of Tamil Nadu in order to include them into mainstream society with equal rights and recognition.

2. Third Gender in World Cinema

The visibility of third gender in world films has tried and true an equivalent stages because the terribly issue of third gender has tried and true in obtaining recognition in society. It's been seen that the straight art films weren't hospitable to gay films from the terribly beginning of the portrayal of gayness 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 problems area unit pictured in several countries in several points of your time, the frequent production of gay films area unit extremely determined with the end result of gay right movement within the decade of Nineteen Seventies and 80s and thenceforth. The visibility as politics 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.

3. Analyses of A Few Tamil Movies and their Portrayal of the Transgender Community:

The representation of Transgender identity have found in the Mythologies, Folklores, Thirukkural, Sangam literature, Tholkappiyam and contemporary literature and culture of Tamil (Munish 2010, Ayyappan 2012a). Transgender writers, performing artists and television talents are also emerging to present their creative ability in literature, drama and television shows.

Writer and social activist *Mangai* (2009) states that Tamil cinema threats transgender community, used them to fulfill the humor scarcity of Tamil cinema and defaming them through curious representation in songs. She questions that, "Does the voice of transgender reach the industry people?" The literature of Transgender experience addresses that Tamil cinema significantly describes transgender through various derogative words and labels and directly causes violence, hate crimes and other forms of discriminations of transgender people in real life. Living smile *Vidya*, a Transgender activist and performer appreciates that films like *Bombay* (1995) and *Chithiram pesuthadi* (2006) had represented Transgender as genuine characters.

However, *Vidya* (2007a) clearly states that the reality presented about Transgender as sex workers is the view of dominant's entertainment reality. She adds that Transgender usually represented as roaming alone or group with brighter make-up, wigs, glittering costumes and as calling the heroes and comedians for sexual relation in Tamil cinema. While showing innocents suffered by Transgender, their social uncertainty does not represented in any film and Transgender people usually represented in songs, she points out. Particularly songs of the two films, *Thiruda thirudi* (2003) and *Thirupaachi* (2005) verbally abused transgender through derogative pronouns. Ironically, such films were gained more revenue and massive audience appreciation. Such misrepresentations in songs are considered as the entertainment element of an entertainment media, film.

Moreover, she strongly condemns that men are usually acting as transgender in songs of rogues by shaving the mustache then that song becomes famous as expected. She accuses that such representation proposes that Transgender are meant for discrimination and harassment and registers voyeuristic pleasure in the minds of viewers and fans of heroes.

Transgender people are simply naked even in the songs representing family events and this situation leads to state of guiltlessness among non-Transgender for abusing Transgender. Tamil films such as *Eeramana Rojave* (1983), *Thullatha Manamum Thullum* (1999), *Jayam* (2003) and *Thiruda Thirudi* (2003) have represented Transgender in farces on their mannerisms and costumes says Rose, a Transgender television host of Chennai. Tamil film *Appu* (2000), represented Transgender in villain character Maharani, a tyrannical pimp who murders anyone she perceives as threat, this menace sense carried away to the audience, ensuing in denied access to public toilets which is an essential need of a every human, says June a Transgender of Chennai. This becomes even more problematic when audience tends to relate these reel image characters into real life Transgender people. *Thenavettu* (2008), a benchmark movie threw special light on Transgender community, she adds.

Paruthiveeran (2007) national award winning Tamil film teased Transgender sexually through the song "*oorooram puliyamaram*" wrote by Snehana directed by Ameer. The director contradicts that policies and laws are indispensable than being a responsible mainstream filmmaker. He defends that his film represented Transgender which is equal to social reality as they speak and act correspondingly while *Vidya* (2007b) pathetically says that a ten-year-old boy urinated and thrown ice cream on her by singing this song and people stood watching, which is the consequence faced by a child by the representation. The roles, as well as Sarath Kumar's portrayal, were widely appreciated. Many consider Kamal Haasan's role in *Vishwaroopam* (2013) to be that of a trans person. However, he merely played a man who had effeminate characteristics and that does not necessarily make one a transgender. In the film, Haasan is rejected by his wife early on in the movie for his effeminate nature but once she finds out about his macho activities, falls for him. This hypocrisy was noted and criticized by some people.

Another major problem with all of the examples stated above is the fact that none of the roles were essayed by an actual trans person. They were all cisgendered, which in itself lacks an authenticity that can only be lent by trans people themselves. Having said that, there are a few exceptions, including positive portrayals and the role being played by a trans person themselves. This includes movies like *Narthagi* (2011) written and directed by *Vijayapadma*, *Paal* (2008) which was directed by *D Sivakumar* and *Appa* (2016) which was helmed by *Samuthirakani*. *Narthagi* captures the struggles and life of a transgender through the protagonist's journey; the protagonist was played by a trans person as well. The movie answered quite a few questions that the cisgender crowd usually has about the third gender and hence the director, *Vijaya Padma's* efforts were praised. However, there was criticism that the movie focused a bit too much on a sympathetic angle, while an empathetic angle might have been better to normalize their position in the society. In *Appa*, there

is a scene where one of the lead child artistes gets lost but is later found to be safeguarded by a trans woman who ensures the child gets back together with his father. A small, but powerful scene ensues when the child's father thanks the trans woman with folded hands.

In director Shankar's magnum opus *I* (2015), Transgender Ojas, a make-up artist lusts over the hero. Transgender people demanded public apology from regional board of censor for humiliating Transgender community also for removal of certain objectionable scenes. Whereas, Ojas defended her character, as the director didn't try to misrepresent. In fact, he made the character aesthetically as the story of the film demanded it and it does not offend anyone, including the Transgender community, she said. While the film has already released in number of screens all over the world, banning of the film was not an option. Pakkirisamy, regional officer of the Central Board of Film Censor (CBFC), backs as Transgender character in the film *I*, as the film depicts only the view of the society towards Transgender community, also story demanded the character.

However, most Indian studies on sexual minorities analyzed their representation in the film content other than Tamil Cinema (*Navaneetha Mokkil* (2009), *Shalmalee Palekar* (2012)). Even some of the studies concentrated on Transgender specifically (*Sucheta Mallick* (2009), *Sonali Pattnaik* (2009)) are also studied film content alone. However, the reception perspective of Tamil Cinema and analyzing with social exclusion issues of Transgender community of Tamil Nadu is still unexplored academically.

4. Social Exclusion of Transgender ni Tamil Nadu

Social exclusion originated in French and briefly defined as "rupture of social bond" (*Haan & Arjan de* (2001)a, *Silver* (2011a)). The "social bond" encompasses the social relations, institutions, and imagined identities of belonging, constituting social cohesion, integration, or solidarity. The rupture of the social bond will take several forms: elimination, abandonment, segregation, assistance, marginalisation, and discrimination. Social exclusion generally defined as the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live (*Silver* (2011b), *Haan & Arjan de* (2001b)). These dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across four main dimensions - economic, political, social and cultural and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global. However, the conception of social inclusion varies across integration, cohesion, solidarity and other ideological paradigms *Silver* (1994). As *Sen* (2000) emphasises, "social exclusion can indeed arise in a variety of ways, and it is important to recognize the versatility of idea and its reach."

Tamil Nadu was pioneer in the country for forming Transgender welfare board in 2008 under state department of social welfare to implement schemes for socio-economic progress of Transgender community. However, the transgender welfare board is incompetent primarily in governing the census of transgender people as they are disseminated across the country for livelihood that makes them hidden (UNDP 2010b), Kalra 2012b, Bhugra et al. 2011). Hence, governing and policymaking towards empowerment

and ensuring the rights of transgender community remain impossible in Tamil Nadu.

Conversely, Transgender recognized as "third gender legally and scheduled under „Socially and Educationally Backward Classes" by the Supreme Court of India (G.O. 2015), besides socially excluded (NDTV 2015, *Puthiya Thalaimurai*, 2015). Further, Transgender individuals filed plea for mercy killing as their gender identity had affected by begging and commercial sex work, generally associated with Transgender community (*Sanjana* 2015b). While the legislative developments of transgender suggest the modes of Transgender visibility, yet the conflicts with their social and cultural issues necessitate social and cultural inquiry of Transgender in contemporary Indian society.

5. Conclusion:

The perception of the Transgender community clearly describes that representation of Tamil Cinema propagates and maintains the dominant ideology about MtF Transgender in society and significantly affect the lives of Transgender community. The transgender representation of cinema directly affects the attitudes of viewers, result transphobia and other forms of social exclusion. Consequently, there is a fear of social exclusion among Transgender people and many are not ready to come out and identify as Transgender. Relatively family exclusion leads to lower level of education, occupational hazards and less income happened only for those who are identified as Transgender. However, male-identified transgender have higher quality of life while more than half of the Transgender are involved in sex work and begging for their livelihood. Thus gender identity and family exclusion plays a key role in the education and occupational level of a Transgender individual as the cinema has more impact on Transgender and non-Transgender people. When Transgender people encounter various social exclusion issues, largely believe that due to transgender representations of Tamil Cinema. Thus, the transgender representation of Tamil Cinema reflects the view of the dominant group and ignores the expressions and lives of transgender community. Such control of communication makes the Transgender community to be muted. Consequently, this unequal power relationship drives to the multidimensional social exclusion of transgender community in Tamil Nadu.

Protests against misrepresentations of Tamil Cinema were not initiated against any of the films released while Transgender people were voiceless, treated as an object, survived a hidden life, scattered, and not registered in CBOs. However, time has been changing since the Transgender people gather in streets to protest when a film released with offensive misrepresentations and start to seek justice through law. However, the state welfare board of Transgender and other Transgender welfare organizations need to take up immediate grievances against negative representations of Transgender. Subsequently as most Transgender say, special law could be formed or the censorship could be reformed to ensure the fair and neutral representation of Transgender people in Tamil Cinema. However, filmmakers should take up the responsibility for an affirmative representation of transgender to include them to acquire social recognition and

equal participation in social and cultural life, economy and politics and decision-making processes.

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