

Arekti Premer Golpo [Just Another Love Story]

Dir. Kaushik Ganguly

Bengali; 2010

Pritha Chakrabarti

Arekti Premer Golpo [Just Another Love Story] is a Bengali film directed by Kaushik Ganguly starring director-actor Rituparno Ghosh and veteran theatre actor Chapal Bhaduri. Bhaduri, popularly called Chapal Rani, reigned over the *Jatra* (indigenous Bengali folk theatre) stage since the 1950s as a man playing women roles, his most famous act being that of the role of goddess Shitala (the god of Chicken Pox). The first self-proclaimed transgender and gay theatre actor of Bengal, Bhaduri has been a subject of many a documentary films, but never has his personal life been highlighted so tactfully. In the director Kaushik Ganguly's words, "It's a love story between two men. A filmmaker and his cinematographer. The story revolves around a team which comes down to shoot a documentary on the life of Chapal Bhaduri, a stage veteran who used to essay roles of women in twentieth century Bengali stage."¹ The film has been hailed by the media as "unusual," "brave," "unconventional" and even "disturbing" and has been screened at the 60th Berlin Film Festival.

Delhi-based filmmaker Abhiroop (Rituparno Ghosh) decides to shoot a documentary film on veteran theatre actor Chapal Bhaduri and comes down to Kolkata with his partner Basu (Indraneil Sengupta). Through intersecting narratives the film draws parallels between the lives of Bhaduri and his partner Kumar, played by the same actors, and Abhiroop (Roop) and Basu. Bhaduri plays his elder self in a guest appearance in the film. Interrogating contrasting relations between a transgender and his bisexual lover, a bisexual man and his wife, a woman and a transgender across two generations, Ganguly manages to tread a rocky ground with utmost care and sympathy. Rituparno Ghosh plays the role of younger Bhaduri with the sensitivity deemed fit for it and the relation between Bhaduri and Roop is beautifully developed to create an overwhelming sense of empathetic bonding.

Released soon after Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was decriminalized by the High Court of Delhi in 2009,² *Arekti Premer Golpo*, traces the journey of a transgender and gay theatre veteran, Chapal Bhaduri, through the lens of another transgender documentary filmmaker. Section 377, which was introduced during the colonial rule in 1861 criminalizes all non-normative, non-heterosexual sexual acts terming them as "against the order of nature." This film, also a meta-cinema (film within a film) successfully grasps the nuances of gender and sexuality, may be for the first time in the history of Indian cinema.

¹<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/we-have-treated-it-like-a-heterosexual-love-story/737639/>. Accessed 08 November 2015.

²This historic judgment was, however, revoked and overturned by the Supreme Court of India in December 2013.

Dealing with a variety of perceptions around gender and sexuality, what the film highlights is not just the discrimination that people having non-normative sexual choices face in their everyday lives, but also the fluid ground of queer movements in general. For instance, a reporter asks the director Roop about whether he was going to focus on the “sexuality” of Bhaduri. The director is quick to correct him that what he perhaps wanted to know was whether Bhaduri’s “sexual preference” will be dealt with in the film. Similarly in another scene we see Bhaduri and Roop discussing about how they feel differently about their gender identities. While Bhaduri tells Roop that he feels trapped within a man’s body, since he is most comfortable in the performance of the female role, Roop says that he feels that he belongs outside the boundaries of men and women, in the realm of the Third Gender.

However, a difficult topic like this requires a master script, in which, Ganguly seems to have faltered at places. Even while talking of gender sensitivity, both the bisexual characters in the film, Basu and Kumar, have been portrayed as confused and weak men, border-line aggressive. The script is unnecessarily judgmental about the character of a starlet (played by Raima Sen) whom Kumar brings home where he lives with his diseased wife, two adolescent children and his lover Bhaduri, who was reduced to the role of a domestic help. Even Basu’s wife Rani, a modern woman who finds herself in competition with the “extraordinary” aura of the filmmaker Roop, says, after she finds out about Basu and Roop’s relationship in the aftermath of being tested positive for pregnancy, that she can’t leave Basu since she needs him to raise the kid. In trying to valorise the transgender, the film somewhere falters in its treatment of other genders.

Yet the film marks the beginning of a series of films dealing with the question of LGBTQ in Bengali cinema, almost all by Ghosh himself: *Memories of March*, *Chitragada*, etc. It knocks on closets yet unopened and builds a space for articulation against the continuing discriminations against the transgender people in our society. In that respect, *Arekti Premer Golpo* is nothing short of a “timely intervention” at a time when all doors are closing down upon people with what the law calls “unusual” sexual preferences.