

ChanthuPottu¹

Dir: Lal Jose

Bengali; 2005

[Muraleedharan Tharyail]

The protagonist [main character] of the Malayalam film, *ChanthuPottu*, is a young man, Radhakrishnan, who is effeminate [girlish]. People call him Radha. We learn that Radha became like that because his grandmother, unhappy that there were no girls in her family, brought him up like a girl. The first half of the film explores his life as dance teacher in a fishing village, his affair with a young woman named Malu. The villain, who has an eye on Malu, convinces the villagers that famine has struck the village because Radha brings in bad luck. Later, he attacks Radha at night and throws his body into the sea assuming him to be dead. He is rescued by a young man named Freddie and taken to a beach resort in Goa where his new friends try to turn him into a “real man.” But Radha returns to his village and defeats the villain in a fist fight. He takes charge of Malu and the little baby boy born to her. He then joins a band of fishermen and goes out to sea to earn a “manly” living.

There were a number of very interesting critical responses to the film, many related in some way to the debates about gender and sexuality. A Kannur-based queer group filed a case against the film, claiming that since the film came out, members of the group faced harsher discrimination from society. They alleged that, taking a lead from Freddie and his friends in the film, people had started ill-treating and even physically assaulting them to “cure” what was perceived as effeminacy. P Geetha, a well-known feminist film critic, accused the film maker of probably “lacking the courage” to portray his protagonist as a gay male. Jereena, a Malayali transwoman wrote in a leading literary journal that the film did not address any of the discriminations or violence that the “real” transgender people in Kerala regularly confront. Responding to these diverse reactions, the film maker Lal Jose commented in a televised interview that there should not be any discrimination against transgender people or those with homosexual orientation. They should be allowed to exercise choice and live the way they like. He clarified that the protagonist of his film was not a homosexual. Radha was just “an effeminate” male and his “effeminacy” was the product of his faulty (!) upbringing. He added that the film did not suggest that one’s personality could be drastically changed. Even in the last scene of the film Radha was shown as NOT having “lost” his effeminacy. All that he did was to become a “responsible” father and husband. These social and political responses clearly indicate the diverse ways in which Radha appeared to different individuals and communities in Kerala.

¹ Before the arrival of the new sticking Bindis, women in Kerala used to make the red mark on the forehead using Chanthu, which is kumkum in the form of a thick liquid. Chanthu was often considered as symbolic of “feminine power” and some temples, especially those of the Mother Goddess, used to provide it as part of the *prasadam*. In the film, the grandmother makes such a mark on the infant Radha’s forehead in the beginning of the film, and Radha continues to wear this mark till he reaches Goa.

ChanduPottu finally turned out to be one of the biggest commercial successes of the Malayalam film industry in 2005. The highlight and main attraction of the film, according to the publicity campaigns and popular response, was the performance of popular actor Dilip as Radha. Following the success of the film, the character became extremely popular and started appearing in other media as well—like advertisements for consumer products.

Yet, immediately after the commercial release of the film, there were rumours that the film was not doing well. In the second week after its release, a poster appeared everywhere that declared: “Radha is certainly a spirited Young Man.” But the visual in the poster was of Dilip as Radha in a typically “feminine” pose. A few weeks later, when the film had been declared a super hit, there appeared a new poster in which Kunjikoonan (little hunchback), a character played by Dilip in an earlier hit film, congratulates Radha saying, “Dear girl, you have outdone me!”

Despite its evasions—and the confusions it gave rise to—the film was important because it drew public attention to some of the issues that touch on gender identities and transformations. Notable also is the way in which the publicity material traversed the character of Radha, thereby endowing him/her with a fluid gender identity.