

Ek Aasha

Review by Martine Delaney

Martine Delaney is a long-time Tasmanian transgender advocate, who's recently come out as a screenwriter.

She's possibly better known as the Sex-Change Soccer Star Cyber-Tranny Granny.

In 2016, the Indian government added transgender people to the official Other Backward Class category, theoretically opening the door to a quota of public sector jobs for some of the approximately 5,000,000 transgender people – known as Hijra, or Kinnar – of India. Except, there's still a huge problem.

Indian society at large tolerates Hijras, allowing them to survive as prostitutes and beggars who bless auspicious events, such as weddings or the birth of a child. But it only tolerates them, in reality, while they know their place and stay in it. To be able to gain one of those identified public sector jobs, a Hijra needs an education; but there's almost no support or acceptance of the notion of Hijras attending school. To make it harder, few of the guru-controlled Hijra households and communities condone the idea of moving away from tradition. To do so will lead to ostracism from their community, when they're already ostracised by the rest of Indian society. So, cue the creators of *Ek Aasha* (One Hope).

Writer/director/co-producer, Mayur Katariya, and co-producer, Jasmine Evans - together with a creative team out of both India and Australia – made *Ek Aasha* as part of a larger project aimed at ensuring Hijras have the chance to fill those identified government positions. Their project's initial intent is to support 101 transgender Indians to complete tertiary education and fill those jobs, then to support them to keep their employment.

Fictional, but based on the reality of life for transgender Indians, *Ek Aasha* is the story of Aashish, born and raised a boy in a Brahmin family, who dreams of a career as a teacher; a female teacher. Rejected by family as a teenager, Aashish joins a Hijra community. Aasha (played by *Disha Yadav*) becomes reality, with the support of her Hijra guru, Nani (*Annu Akade*). But Aasha's dream of becoming a teacher faces opposition from both society and the community she now calls family.

Although my transgender life's not exactly been easy, *Ek Aasha* makes me very glad I was born in Australia, and not India. While the Hijra characters find the funny side of most situations, and laugh often at Life, they're smiling at a world where, daily, they are confronted by societal rejection, discrimination, Catch-22 government support and the ever-present threats of physical and sexual violence. Some of them would like to change this world.

Mayur Katariya and company have achieved something quite special with *Ek Aasha*. With the smallest of budgets, they've created a realistic and gritty drama about

transgender life in India. And, they've done it in the face of some other serious obstacles; no hotels willing to accommodate the actors, some neighbourhoods on edge, and two locations denying access for the shoot - because the film was about Hijras. As well, there were difficult dialogue and acting restrictions imposed by those Hijra gurus who'd have an influence over aspects of the project.

But, the *Ek Aasha* team's most significant achievement lies in their absolute commitment to authenticity in casting. They eschewed established names and actors, with all eleven Hijra characters portrayed by members of Hijra/Kinnar communities. Of these, I think only one – Annu Akade – has ever been on a screen before. Just transgender Indians, telling a trans story. We trans people have grown up knowing cisgender actors do the trans roles – think Felicity Huffman in *TransAmerica*, *The Danish Girl's* Eddie Redmayne, even Scarlett Johansson's initial 2018 decision to play a trans character in *Rub and Tug*. It's so damn wonderful to find filmmakers enabling trans people to not only guide the making, but to represent themselves on screen, filmmakers putting authenticity at the top of the list. In doing so, they've also uncovered Disha Yadav, who seems so completely at home in front of the camera.

Ground-breaking, challenging and made for a purpose. *Ek Aasha* is well worth your Saturday afternoon.

Ek Aasha

(Hindi, with English subtitles)

Australian Premiere –

Saturday August 17, 12.00pm

HOYTS District Docklands, Melbourne.