

India's 1st Best Trans Model Agency: Joy, ambition, love and dreams

Written by [Aiman Rahim](#)

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Welsh filmmakers are bringing diverse stories of transgender humans to screens, making history for Welsh cinema. India's 1st Best Trans Model Agency will be released on the 15th of November 2024. This follows other releases of trans stories with Welsh connections: Donna (2022), Unicorns (2023), and Trailblazers (2024).

Indian-Welsh director Ila Mehrotra spent seven years following the life of Delhi-based transgender activist Rudrani Chettri and her community. Rudrani, like most (but not all) people in her community, is part of a 'Hijra family', which is led by her guru Laxmi Narayan Tripathi. The documentary shows the complex inter-community dynamics of Hijra families, and the stories of individual transgender people. The movie was originally titled 'Hijras', but it changed over the years with Rudrani's determination to start the first trans model agency in India.

Ila's great interest in the transgender community in both her homes, India and the UK, inspired her to make this documentary. Rudrani and Ila formed a genuine friendship which allowed Rudrani's community to trust Ila with their stories. She treats the stories with sensitivity and openness, humanising them. The cast of India's 1st Best Trans Model Agency do talk about their traumatic and heartbreaking experiences, but not without their joys, ambitions, love, and dreams. I was particularly touched by Chandini, one of Rudrani's friends, and her relationship with her mother Sheela. Sheela is unconditionally accepting of Chandini's identity and lifestyle. Chandini connects with her beauty through a photoshoot which shows us the strong impact Rudrani's work has on individual lives.

It is important that we recognise the unique identity of genders that do not fall within the binary without casting them out as someone alien entirely. I work with the transgender community in Cardiff and I can see this documentary changing their lives. Anyone who has an interest in transgender community advocacy should watch India's 1st Best Trans Model Agency.

The current Hindu conservative government of India is intolerant of LGBTQIA+ identities. However, Hijra is one of the oldest cultural gender identities whose existence is not just legitimised but revered in Hinduism. This offers religion as a tool of advocacy for Laxmi, who is also an activist. She explains that religion has been the most effective route to acceptance for the Indian Hijra community. LGBTQIA+ advocacy is seen as more 'modern', which is favoured by younger activists but rejected by the religious and cultural mainstream not just in India but other parts of South Asia where 'third gender' identities have existed.

Tradition is a source of empowerment for the transgender South Asian diaspora in Wales as well. Alia Ramna, a Welsh-Pakistani transgender activist and performer, talks about finding empowerment through the historical status of Hijras in pre-colonial India in the documentary 'Trailblazers'. Education about historical transgender identities can progress trans rights in Wales and elsewhere.

The Hijra identity has survived countless wars, occupations, and British colonialism. However, despite their strong roots, the Hijra community is cast out and isolated in India. Rudrani starts the agency, 'Bold', because she wants transgender people to be accepted more into the mainstream, to expand their scope of work beyond sex work and begging. She wants people to feel comfortable in their skin and beautiful, as fashion is a huge uniting and empowering tool in the community. She wants the world to be able to view transgender models as professional, breaking the 'troublemaker' stereotype transgender folk are painted with. The documentary is filmed in New Delhi but holds up a mirror for us to examine the status of Wales' transgender community and explore how that status can be improved.

Welsh creators must continue to be supported, financially and otherwise, to sustain their vital, culture-shifting stories. Stories unite the seemingly separate identities of being 'Welsh', 'South Asian' and transgender, through the artists who embody multiple histories. This way Welsh cinema, in the words of former Made in Wales officer Radha Patel, "sends an important message to trans people, particularly young trans people, affirming their identities and their right to self determination."

India's 1st Best Trans Model Agency is coming to cinemas across the UK from the 15th November 2024 alongside Transgender Awareness Week (13-19 November).

India's 1st Best Trans Model Agency has various connections to Wales including director: Ila Mehrotra, who is based in Pembrokeshire along with the Production Company Spring Films. The film also received funding from Ffilm Cymu Wales.

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