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Rohit K. Dasgupta & Kaustav Bakshi

To cite this article: Rohit K. Dasgupta & Kaustav Bakshi (2023) Queer creative Indian city: queer film festivals, precarious cultural work and community making in Kolkata, Cultural Trends, 32:4, 348-365, DOI: [10.1080/09548963.2023.2212607](https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2023.2212607)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2023.2212607>



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Published online: 18 May 2023.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Queer creative Indian city: queer film festivals, precarious cultural work and community making in Kolkata

Rohit K. Dasgupta ^a and Kaustav Bakshi^b

^aSchool of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ^bEnglish, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

ABSTRACT

In this article, we offer a new concept of the “queer creative city”, through a critical examination of how a regional queer Bengali film culture has emerged in Kolkata as a result of the convergence of certain urban policies, queer political organising and cultural activism.

We explore two queer film festivals in Kolkata – the Siddharth Gautam Film Festival and Dialogues, both having a very significant impact in transforming LGBTQ+ lives in Kolkata. Through archival research, autoethnography and conducting extensive interviews with organising committees, venue sponsors and owners, and viewers, we show how these film festivals and a pre-existing Bengali film culture engendered the emergence of a prolific creative queer city, which became a site of resistance, and community building that created a solid base for queer counterpublics. Queer film festivals, we argue, are critical sites for charting the dynamics of the public sphere in contemporary India.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 July 2022
Accepted 7 May 2023

KEYWORDS

Queer film festivals;
community making; cultural
work; queer creative city;
India; ethnography

Introduction

In this article, we offer a new concept of the “queer creative city”, through a critical examination of how a regional queer Bengali film culture has emerged in Kolkata as a result of the convergence of urban policies, queer political organising and cultural activism.

We explore two queer film festivals in Kolkata – the Siddharth Gautam Film Festival and Dialogues, both having a very significant impact in transforming LGBTIQ+ lives in Kolkata. Through archival research, autoethnography and conducting extensive interviews with organising committees, venue sponsors and owners, and viewers, we show how these film festivals and a pre-existing Bengali film culture engendered the emergence of a prolific creative queer city, which became a site of resistance, and community building that created a solid base for queer counterpublics.

Film festivals are an important part of the cultural industries playing a key role in tourism, job creation, city branding and creating cultural value (Pederson & Mazza, 2011; Oakley & O’Connor, 2015). Film festivals can offer a lens to understand the role of

CONTACT Rohit K Dasgupta  rohit.dasgupta@glasgow.ac.uk

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cinema in global politics. Queer film festivals, we argue, are critical sites for charting the dynamics of the public sphere in contemporary India. Some scholarship on film festivals have also argued that they can occupy a position of power, acting as cultural gatekeepers (De Valck, 2017). Most existing studies on queer film festivals have focused on international festivals such as Frameline and BFI Flare with much less attention paid to more localised queer film festivals in South Asia despite their importance as a vehicle for change. Borrowing Banks (2007) theorisation of the cultural worker, we see festival workers (curators, programmers, festival designers, film makers) as individuals who are primarily taking part in the precarious production of queer culture navigating between public acceptance, financial viability and creating a forum for social change.

This article uses queer patchworks (Dasgupta, 2022a) as a methodological framework to address the fieldwork challenges of the past 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic. It attends to how these new realities have not only reshaped academic engagement and writing but also have acknowledged, accommodated and “queered” what counts as knowledge paying particular attention to the non-linearity of the research process. Queer sites offer us a place of opportunity and imagined futures. We undertook 2 years of engagement with cultural producers, curators, film makers and audiences to speak about their experiences and their engagement with queer film festivals. As Hall (1993) writes identity formation is a complex process with both cultural representation and the subject’s narration about self and identity best understood as cultural processes formed through power inequalities of every society. Both authors have also attended these film festivals for 10 years participating as audiences, volunteers and also had their film(s) screened there.¹ In total, we spoke to about 20 cultural workers and carried out an audience survey in which 50 queer film audiences participated in. We also derive our methodology from Halberstam (2005), who argues “queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence”. Many of those we spoke to are activists and artists with whom we have had affective encounters and organised alongside. Our queer patchwork methodology collapses the boundaries between ourselves and acknowledges these intimate entanglements and exchanges within which we are imbricated.

Kolkata: A creative city of *poriborton*

Kolkata is a city of *poriborton* (change) – *poriborton* being the catchword of the political transition in 2011 when the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) replaced the Communist Party of India (Marxist)/CPI(M) which ruled West Bengal for 34 years, uninterrupted. This *poriborton* was not merely a catchword; looking back on the city and its cultural transformations over the last one decade, an alert resident does see significant changes in the socio-cultural scene. When compared with the three and half decades of the CPI(M) regime, the current socio-cultural milieu of Kolkata appears more populist than elitist, as far as state-sponsored cultural events are concerned. Although traditions have been continued – the most pronounced cultural markers of the city such as the Kolkata International Film Festival and the Kolkata International Book Fair, and cultural hubs and venues – such as the Nandan–Rabindra Sadan complex – have been preserved, the high intellectualism and sophistication that commanded the state-backed cultural

events across the city during the Left era has given way to a less erudite, relatively more provincial than international cultural discourse, catering to the masses.

As an erstwhile colonial city and at one time the capital of British India, Kolkata has been at the centre of global capital flow as one of the most important port cities of the eighteenth century. The city, with its 34 years of Left rule, was also one of the first Marxist cities in India. The CPI(M) became synonymous with not just sweeping agrarian reforms in the State but also in the arena of art and culture. There have been several criticisms how the left-front government used its State power to decide what kind of music, art and culture would be allowed in its state institutions. The cultural sentinel the CPI(M) government played, however, enabled high art to emerge and circulate within and outside the city – be it film, theatre, music or painting. It would be important to point out here that during the CPI(M) regime, the *bhadrolok* – a product of colonial high culture – dominated the cultural scene, as it did since its germination in the colonial period – with most of the party's leaders coming from this class.

The *bhadrolok*, dominating Bengal's cultural habitat, is the stronghold of its civil society, as one can understand. Notably, the LGBTIQ+ movement in Bengal has had its most significant activists from this class. The cultural work and activism in terms of holding a film festival catering to sexuality identities was and is still spearheaded by this class. although in the last few years, the LGBTIQ+ community has become visibly more intersectional than before. To make sense of these film festivals which were conceived to bring about social change concerning the perception of non-normative sexualities, they need to be located within a very intricate cultural history of the city of Kolkata – pre and post *poriborton*, essentially brought about by the historical defeat of the Left in the 2011 Legislative Assembly elections. Due to the limited scope of this article, we shall primarily focus on the cultures of queer cinema in West Bengal.

It would be important to clarify at the very outset that the creative city as a concept is widely contested and even queer scholars such as Oswin (2012) have argued that global and creative cities around the world use bureaucratic, hierarchical and heteronormative logic as part of their development process which has resulted in significant changes in sexual citizenship. The organisation of cities as we are aware is often a reproduction of capitalist values and servicing capital. Hubbard et al. (2015) writing about cities and sexualities argues that even when spaces are created where alternative forms of desire can be enhanced and contained this is channelled for corporate and capitalist ends. Sexual subjectivities and the growth of "gay villages" for example in the West can constitute a form of homonormativity geared towards a culture of consumption and spending. We thus argue that the queer creative city in India can also be seen as a construct that often relies on the negation of subaltern, working class identities in favour of a neoliberal upwardly mobile class.

Film and the bhadrolok intellectual: Kolkata's alternative film cultures as an enabler of queer film festivals

Film societies were responsible for exposing the Bengali intelligentsia to world cinema (Dasgupta, 1991). The emergence of Super-8 in Kolkata encouraged independent filmmaking in the 1980s with the formation of the Nandan and Rabindra Sadan complex as a site of high culture during the Left rule. The foundation of the Kolkata

International Film Festival (KIFF) by the West Bengal Film Centre under the Left Front government in 1995, enabled the proliferation of different kinds of world cinema anchored in an unfamiliar culture and radical liberal worldviews thus creating a space of acceptance for queer cinema to be exhibited in the city in public venues. The film societies and later the international film festival prepared its audience, albeit of a certain class with access to a certain degree of cultural capital, for non-normative sexualities, coupledom and queer relationships.

Mitra (1983) writes 6 years into its reign the Left-front government had already started to gatekeep the state's vast output of art and literature and making decisions on artistes who could perform in the state-run cultural centres. This continued for much of its reign where state-sanctioned art and culture was strictly monitored. Nandan, which acquired "symbolic value" in the city's cinephilic cultures, was founded with a similar objective of creating an educated film audience, not necessarily a commercial film market (Nag & Bhattacharya, 2021). Till about the time the AITMC came to power in Bengal, Nandan remained a fiercely protected site of an exhibition of "quality films" – not necessarily made for a commercial market – that automatically attributed a high status to any film showcased in one of its three screens.

Kolkata, like many other cities of the world, has had a vibrant culture of film societies, dominated by the *bhadrolok* intellectual. Shuvendu Dasgupta's work (1991) on film societies brings to the fore this "alternative" and "niche" culture of cinema appreciation. Dasgupta underlines the elite-centrism of the film society movement, territorially confined to some select venues of the cities and small towns, which rather than challenging the dominant authority (read, the state), ended up being integral to it. The revolutionary potential of this movement was to a great extent lost during the leftist rule, for the movement spoke in similar ideological lines, seldom critiquing the state. Elitist and confined to a particular class, this cinephilia that originated in the city also became a marker of one's access to cultural capital dependent upon to what extent one was associated with it. This could be identified as a starting point that would later enable the organizing of queer film festivals. It is important to note here, Raju Raman, the erstwhile Programme Director at the Goethe-Institut, Kolkata, an office-holder at the Calcutta Film Society, a close friend of Satyajit Ray, a member of the selection committee of films for KIFF (both during the Left and AITMC rule) was instrumental in inaugurating Dialogues, one of the longest running LGBTIQ+ film festivals of India at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata.

As Raman told us in an interview, the way films are largely sourced for queer film festivals is remarkably similar to how these film societies functioned. Ajay Kumar De's article, "Satyajit Ray and the Film Society Movement", while deliberating on the failure of the movement, quotes from Ray extensively to underscore how the filmmaker constantly appealed to the central government to sponsor good cinema and cinephilic cultures (De, 1994), highlighting how accessing good international cinema was becoming an uphill task, the source of which being predominantly foreign embassies. It is therefore not surprising that Dialogues, organised jointly by Sappho for Equality and Pratyay Gender Trust, started its journey on the premises of one such embassy, the first Goethe-Institut in India, founded in 1957, housed at the Max Mueller Bhavan. This film festival, in its initial days, catered mostly to an urban-centric English-educated crowd, which, however, diversified, as the festival became a space for socialization and community-

building – a free space for exhibiting and living out freely one’s sexual identity. Raman in a candid interview with us, corroborated with our argument that the Kolkata Film Festival, and, the film society movement which had begun in the 1940s, indeed facilitated a film festival like Dialogues to emerge. It is undeniable that Kolkata’s cultural environment, dominated by a left-leaning intellectual class, provided a fertile ground for Dialogues to take shape and gain popularity over some time.

Kolkata as a (Queer) creative city

The idea of the creative city developed in 1988 by Yencken describes it as one committed to fostering creativity amongst its citizens. It was an aspirational concept to describe the various ways in which cultural or creative industries and cultural regeneration have been placed more centrally at the heart of urban life and policymaking.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)’s Creative Cities Network has six Indian cities in it. In November 2021, Srinagar was named a creative city, the latest addition to the list of five cities, Mumbai, Varanasi, Hyderabad, Chennai and Jaipur. Kolkata too was in the running, but, its application did not reach UNESCO, because the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, found the application “incomplete”. (Masood, 2021). Although Kolkata still lacks this prestigious official label of a “creative city”, Kolkata’s potential to become one, or as it is at this moment, is unquestionable. Charles Landry visiting Kolkata in 2015, identified the city’s abundant intellectual capital (Niyogi, 2015). In his book, Landry (2000) talks about “drawing powers” of cities to uplift their global image and to enter the network of productive cities. One important aspect of elevating a city’s drawing power is to make it appear inclusive and accepting of diversity. One reason for bringing in this idea of the creative city in the context of discussing queer film festival networks in Kolkata is to highlight how such festivals catering to a marginalised and much-oppressed group with tremendous creative potentials can actually mobilise a cultural currency, which Landry believes, immensely helps a city’s economic makeover by allowing sexual minorities to live without fear of discrimination and bullying.

Policies and agendas of creative cities are not easily transferable to South Asia with issues around translating those models and approaches given the complex social, political cultural conditions of the region. Datta (2015) citing Moser et al describes “a world of new cities” emerging in the global South with China and India leading this urban revolution. These new cities project themselves as the urban futures of the region. The interconnectedness and differences within the South Asian region have long demonstrated an ongoing modernity, characterised by distinctive combinations of traditionalism and neo-liberalism (Begum & Dasgupta, 2015; Tarlo, 1996), shaping the cultural industries and creativity in South Asia.

In arguing why Kolkata deserves to be recognised as a creative city, it is difficult not to read it as a queer city as well, though we use the adjective “queer” a little guardedly. Kolkata’s queerness, besides all its epic political organising on the streets, expressed itself more through creative activities to begin with. The formation of a queer discourse in India, through the print media, happened in Kolkata, back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the country was yet to wake up to the need for queer political and cultural movements: the newsletter, *The Gay Scene* began to be published in the late 70s, but, was

discontinued after a point. A decade later *Pravartak*, later rechristened *Naya Pravartak*, began to be published by the Counsel Club, which, though circulated within a small circuit, has now gained tremendous historical value as cataloguing the beginnings of LGBTIQ+ organising. Pawan Dhall, recalling his journey as a queer activist in Kolkata, gives a detailed lowdown on how print media played an important role in making the queer community in Kolkata visible since the early 90s.

There are a very few cities in India that can boast of publications in the regional language on queer lives, cultures and identity politics as can Kolkata. Recalling his formative years in Kolkata, Bakshi (2021) recalls how the city was gradually opening up a space for him to “belong”. Remembering the cultural impact of the Friendship Walk – the first ever Pride March that took place in Kolkata back in 1999 – and later, the publication of *Swikriti* and *Swakanthey* – two LGBTIQ magazines and a newsletter respectively, Bakshi writes, that these “created for me and many others a sense of community when I was not out and about” (10). Bakshi also recalls the emergence of the filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh as a household name in 1994 which in a way introduced into the mainstream heteronormative culture of Kolkata a subtle queerness, exhibited by the much-revered director, who dressed androgynously and spoke and gestured in a way which was not strictly “masculine”.

Living in Kolkata around that time, both the authors of this article, saw how, Ghosh, despite being non-committal about their sexuality in the initial years, became an icon for feminine queer men, whose name, ironically, replaced “ladies” – a derogatory term used to tease feminine men in Bengal. The “*Fire* controversy”, around Deepa Mehta’s 1998 film, as is well known now, brought female homosexuality out of the closet much to the ire of the right-wing fundamentalists who ransacked theatres and disrupted the screening of the film. *Sananda*, a glossy magazine targeting the upper middle class and middle-class Bengali women, in its 15 January 1999 issue, published a cover story on the film and its reception. Condemning the vandalism that led to the withdrawal of the film from public theatres, *Sananda* “true to its ideologies of women’s liberation”, introduced its readers to the controversy the film generated, thereby “taking a very important step towards accommodating lesbianism in the consciousness of its less informed readers” (Bakshi & Dasgupta, 2019, p. 193). Bengal’s middle-class women, having access to *Sananda*, saw a glimpse of a world of which many were not aware. This was also the time when Sappho for Equality was founded, which then went on to become one of the primary organisers of the LGBTIQ+ film festival Dialogues in 2006, with the backing of the Goethe Institut.

Emergence of minority identity politics and LGBTIQ± organising in Bengal

It will be interesting to note that minority politics in Bengal, particularly, communal and caste minority politics, began to make its presence felt in the early 1990s. Within a decade and a half after coming to power, the CPI(M)-led Left Front government had gradually begun to lose traction as it was alienating itself from its traditional working-class support base. Chatterjee and Basu (2020) in their nuanced analysis of the political *poriborton* in Bengal, note that, identity-based politics automatically became more strident with the “overall decline of class in the arena of constitutional politics” (127) in Bengal. This,

coupled with the “cultural logic of market fundamentalism under neoliberalism, with its stress on freedom and individual independence” (p. 127), which became more and more prominent with the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, made way for an identity-based politics.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the LGBTIQ + movement would also begin to acquire momentum around this period. The death knell of Nehruvian socialism was sounded with India opening its economy in 1991 ushering in a new era of globalisation and neoliberalism. Whilst queer activists and theorists have recognised the impact of globalization and neoliberal ideologies that penetrated Indian society along with it as one of the primary causes behind the rise of the LGBTIQ + movement, in Bengal, and, elsewhere, other kinds of identity politics – caste, community, ethnicity, etc. – were buttressing the LGBTIQ + movement, which, was, as it goes without saying, remarkably intersectional to begin with. It is because of this wind of change sweeping across India’s socio-political landscape, that the Hijra community (still not categorised as transpersons at that point of time) acquired voting rights in 1994. It took a few more years for the queer sexual citizen subject – rights demanding and rainbow flag wielding, deprived citizen– to make a mark for as a potential voter whose sexual identity is more important than their caste, class, religion or ethnic identities (Boyce & Dasgupta, 2019). As a backlash to the Supreme Court’s description of the LGBTIQ + community as a “miniscule minority” in their 2013 judgement (which read up Sec. 377 of the IPC previously repealed by the Delhi High Court in 2009), the community “came out” in large numbers, to a great extent supported by the emergence of social media (Dasgupta, 2017).

By 2021, the LGBTIQ + movement had come a long way from the Friendship Walk of 1999, in which only 15 gay men participated. LGBTIQ + -identifying citizens were now a recognizable vote bank, even though no census report exists to determine their precise number. Even when no statistics is available, the unprecedented visibility of the LGBTIQ + community in Bengal’s (particularly, Kolkata’s) public sphere, has led the CP (I)M to cash in on its growing expanse, as one can undoubtedly contend. The political backing, whatever its overarching ideology may be, is gained through decades of activism, of which cultural work is pivotal (Bakshi & Dasgupta, 2019). Of a wide range of cultural work that the queer community has been instrumental in, organising film festivals, was of cardinal importance.

Queer film festivals as cultural work: the Kolkata scene

Queer Film festivals in India is not an entirely new phenomenon. As Pawan Dhall, a community activist and one of the curators of Siddharth Gautam Queer Film festival told us that community screenings were part of the services that many NGOs provided as a way of bringing together LGBTIQ + people across the city (see Figure 1). Whilst several festivals such as the Bangalore Queer Film Festival (started in 2008); Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival (started in 2010) are more well known and popular, two of the earliest film festivals are Siddharth Gautam Film Festival named after the pioneering AIDS activist and lawyer was started in 2004 whilst Dialogues started in 2007 is the oldest and continuous running.

Mokkil (2018) argues that whilst writing on queer film festivals in India has mostly seen these as another site for LGBTQ + politics and activism these spaces can further

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Santi Seva, Bhadrak
Saraswati, Betaligaon
Laxminarayan Group, Balangir
Rajendra Yuvak Sangh, Balangir
Maa Manikeswari Group, Titlagarh
Northern Black Rose, Siliguri

Film Festival Schedule

Contacts:
Bhubaneswar:
Mayadhar Rath - 0 99370 24014
Kolkata:
Soma Roy Karmakar - 0 98307 19020;
Overall:
Anupam Hazra - 0 94331 56951
Pawan Dhall - 0 98312 88023

With technical and
funding support from

DFID-Civil Society
Challenge Fund, Glasgow

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for safer sex...for reproductive health...for people

Siddhartha Gautam
Film Festival 2009

Remembering Siddhartha and his work
through films and dialogue on
gender, sexuality, human rights,
sexual health and HIV

January 24-29, 2009

Bhubaneswar, Bhadrak,
Titlagarh, Balangir,
Siliguri, Kolkata

Entry for Two Persons by Invitation only

Figure 1. Siddhartha Gautam Film Festival 2009: poster and ticket. Personal collection.

complicate visibility and cultural practices as sites of erotic circulation and reception of world cinema. Whilst we agree with this argument and many of our interviewees attest to this sentiment, we are more interested in the issues of queer labour and the role of film in social change that these sites offer. Not all queer film festivals explicitly claim a social change agenda; but, as the uneven history of queer film festivals in India attest, at the heart of it was the desire to provide a “safe space” for people of queer identities to meet and connect with others. As one audience member, Rakesh (36), based out of Kolkata, told us:

There were no queer spaces in the city for people like me to meet when I was growing up. You had cruising places that we heard about or you could go to NGOs which were doing work on sexual health for help. But in terms of finding a place to connect with the wider community was missing. Festivals like Siddhartha and Dialogues suddenly provided that space where we could meet with other members of the community and be ourselves, while also enjoying a “gay” film openly.

Rakesh’s point about the potential of queer film festivals providing a space for community making is important. The beginnings of most queer film festivals are rooted in community organising groups – Dialogues being organised by Sappho for Equality, Siddhartha Gautam organised by Solidarity and Action Against the HIV/AIDS Infection in India (SAATHII), Bangalore Queer Film Festival organised by Good As You (GAY) and Kashish: Mumbai International Queer Film Festival organised by Humsafar Trust alongside commercial partners. Most of these festivals rely on funding and donor sponsorship allowing the screenings to mostly remain free and open to community members. As the Senior Programme Officer of Sappho for Equality, Sreoshi, who has played a significant role in organising Dialogues (see Figure 2), told us:

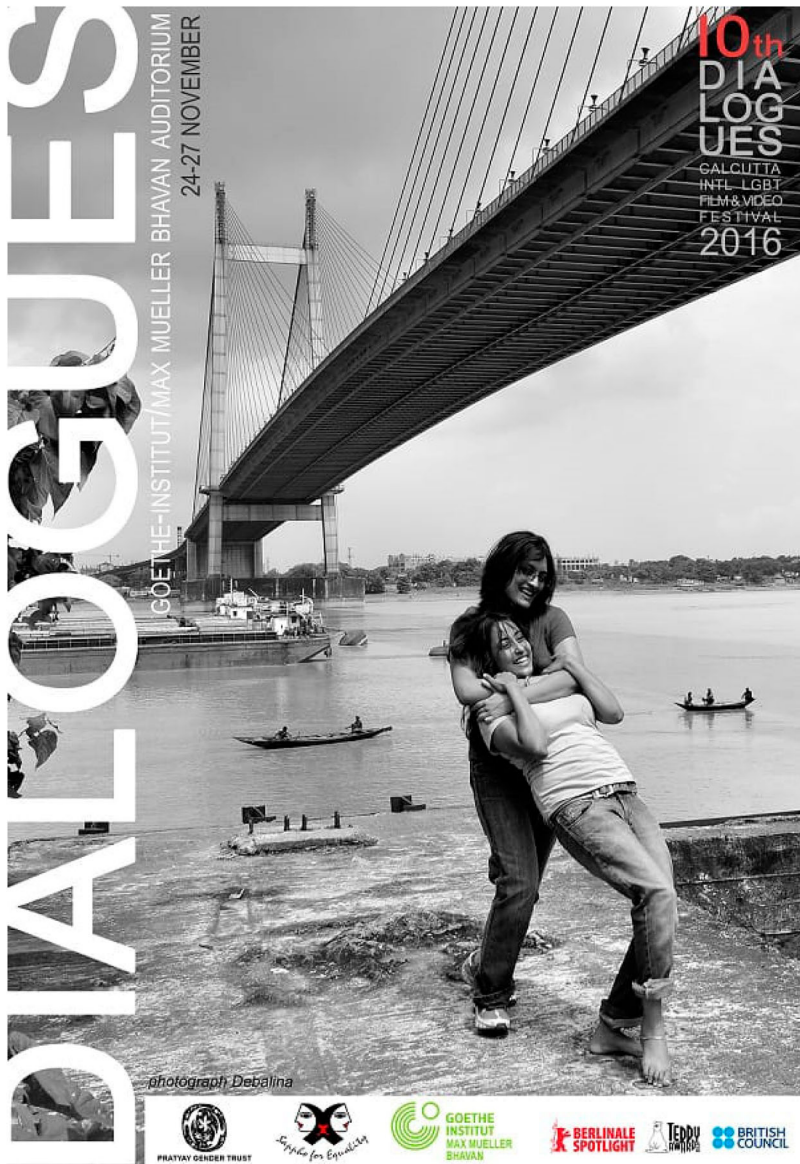


Figure 2. Dialogues Film poster 2016. Personal collection.

Our community suffers from the twin issues of social ostracization and economic ostracization making it difficult for many visibly identified queer people from getting jobs. Unlike what people might think not all of us have disposable income. Being able to socialise without having to rely on paying huge amounts of money for a party venue is important and festivals like Dialogues provide that free space for LGBT people from all strata of society.

As we spoke to Sreoshi in the office of Sappho for Equality in a South Kolkata neighbourhood, a bunch of young college students arrived. They had a project on gender

and sexuality on their hands, and, Sreoshi, while speaking to us, introduced them to some basic ideas of the spectrum of sexuality. As we interviewed Sreoshi, the passion with which she spoke about the organization of the film festival, it appeared to us, that for her, it was not just a job; rather, a community work, which she thought was necessary for others like her, and for herself as well.

Filmmaker Debalina Majumder also spoke with the same passion in an elaborate interview with us, recalling the foundation of Dialogues in 2007, in which she played a pioneering role. Majumder's film ... *Ebong Bewarish* (And the Unclaimed, 2013), produced by Sappho for Equality, and premiered at Dialogues, made quite a stir in India and elsewhere, as a sensitive dramatization of the suicide of a lesbian couple in a small village in Bengal. Majumder told us how this double suicide impacted her emotionally, leading her to revisit the topic over and over again. It was, as if, she, while trying to decode the suicide, almost wished to give the two lesbian women a fictional life, after their death. She returned to the same incident in *Abar Jodi Icche Karo* (*If you dare Desire ...*) 4 years later, which gave a relatively positive ending to the real-life story of the two women who took their lives. The three dots in both the titles, if read semiotically, underscore the filmmaker's unending emotional investment in the two deaths, as a way of empathising with the women, and also, making sense of her own life as a queer person. That Majumder revisited the same story twice, and is still considering retelling it from newer perspectives, is significant in this context of affective cultural work, which queer filmmaking involves. Despite a severe paucity of budget which independent filmmakers struggle with most of the time, Majumder's passion for that one incident – the suicide of two women in love with each other – which made her revisit the story more than once speaks volumes on how it is not commercial currency, but, emotional currency which is the driving force in queer filmmaking. Responding to both these films under discussion, Nikhil, identifying as genderqueer (36), who watched the films at Dialogues, said, "I don't know why I kept crying while watching these films. I have no idea. But, I felt so relieved in a strange way after watching these films". This was also the reaction of the authors of this article, for whom, both ... *Ebong Bewarish* and *Abar Jodi Icche Karo* were discomfiting reminders of their privilege, unavailable to the two women madly in love with each other living in rural India. The two films were cathartic too; giving a release to pent-up emotions, thanks to Majumder's intense storytelling skills, which were raring to come out for a long time.

Independent filmmakers, social activists, health workers, academics, and other queer civilians joined hands in curating, organising and publicising both Siddharth Gautam and Dialogues, which are examples of activist film festivals which had a broad aim of social change. Tascon (2017) notes that film festival spaces aid in the transformation of audiences into responsible subjects through the negotiation of films, spectator and the festival. Speaking to organisers, audience members, and from our own experience of attending these film festivals in Kolkata for the last 13 years, we realised how these festivals, whilst opening up a space for queer camaraderie, also, allowed queer persons to bring their family and friends to watch these films to get them to accept them. Again, as Dhall told us that Siddharth Gautam would engage health care providers, in particular, to sensitize them to sexual and reproductive health concerns of sexual minorities and those infected or affected by HIV. These were part of a larger agenda to tackle stigma and discrimination faced by queer people in the city.

Doing queer cultural work

In this section, we will explore the actual operation behind queer film festivals in India and labour and precarious work condition that goes behind such productions. As we have explained earlier, queer film festivals perform a dual function as a site for community making and activism and also a space for showcasing queer narratives and stories which are not always easily available. Festival organisers and workers play a crucial role in working under often precarious funding and social landscape making these festivals possible (Loist, 2011). This kind of cultural work to borrow Mark Banks' (2007, p. 3) definition is "the act of labour within the industrialised process of cultural production". Taking this forward, we introduce the term "queer cultural work" to refer to a set of features and conditions of cultural work creating different modes of critical thinking and production of activist scholarship and production as a counter reaction to the global capital and neoliberal forms of working.

Rahul (name changed) an activist who has volunteered for queer film festivals tells us:

It is often hard work. From checking in people from morning to evening and setting up the venue before the screening starts and often the last to leave. I know the NGO that organises this festival gets some funding but I have never asked for any money. I don't think that they do but also I almost feel like this is one way of giving back to my community. I have the time so why not.

Gates et al. (2016) note that in many social justice organizations but especially LGBTIQ+ ones, the contributions of volunteers are vital to accomplishing the mission of the organization. Yet, little is understood about what motivates them. Rahul's motivation to offer his labour is entirely altruistic about wanting to give back to the community. As we have discussed earlier, queer film festivals offer a unique form of community making that is especially important for bringing people across different class/caste divides into one place. The "free" screenings offer a space especially for younger queer people to socialise who often have little access to social spaces that are not expensive. As Rahul further elaborates

I started volunteering from a very early age- when I was 16 I think. I was still in school. My parents did not give me any pocket money so it was difficult to go out to meet people. Cafes are so expensive. These events were a way for me to meet other people and feel like I was part of something. Also in school we never read or watched anything remotely LGBT. By getting involved it was also a cultural education for me.

Whilst socialisation and opportunities to meet others were a strong motivation as Rahul noted, he also interestingly makes two other very important points here – about how queer film festivals provide a safe queer space for him as a young gay person with limited means to inhabit and to also get what he calls a "cultural education". Anirban Ghosh, a young designer and filmmaker, got associated with Dialogues in 2013, when he was approached by the organisers, Pratyay Gender Trust and Sappho for Equality to design their mascot, which was a crow. Ghosh told us:

I was inspired because the team worked really hard to get the best of queer and alternative cinema from across the globe to us and created a safe space. Additionally, I really enjoyed the creative collaboration with the team, especially with Anindya Hajra who brought to the table unique, unconventional ideas and a brilliant sense of aesthetics. I think the key word here is

“empathy”. The team really had empathy while working with creative collaborators and walked the talk on inclusion by embracing us and making us feel valued.

Looking back I’d have come on board with equal zest and enthusiasm even if the festival didn’t have a budget for designers. Dialogues created a great collaborative space where like-minded creatives came together. It exposed us to the best of contemporary queer cinema as well as rare old finds. These broadened our understanding of the craft of filmmaking in general and then on top of that queer narratives and nuances from world over.

Ghosh brings to the table a very important aspect of cultural work: empathy. Also, what comes out in Ghosh’s interview is how queer film festivals are instrumental in disseminating knowledge, not just about the history of queer cinema, but about creative possibilities, that inspire filmmakers like him.

When it comes to representations of Dalit queer narratives there is very little and it has rightly come under criticism even within progressive film festivals such as these. Prakash (2023) discusses the work of Jayan Cherian whose films *Papilo Buddha* and *KA Bodyscapes* are representative of a very small body of cinematic work looking at the intersection of queerness and caste. Prakash argues that there is a culture of silencing when it comes to Dalit representation, and this becomes even more disempowering when it comes to queer Dalit voices facing casteism and homophobia. This harkens back to our earlier point that queer creative spaces can continue to uphold structures of casteist homonormativity. However, as the panels we have attended and conversations we have had with the curators, they are well aware of these intersectionalities and are actively involved in addressing these biases.

Browne (2006) in her critique of gay and lesbian spaces argues that these do not necessarily transgress the normative or challenge it creating spaces of respectability. Studies about queer nightlife by scholars such as Khubchandani (2020) confirm the class and normative bias of Indian queer spaces. At the core of this is also a consideration of what queer liveable lives look and feel like (Banerjea & Browne, 2018). Building on Judith Butler’s (2004) premise that liveability is more than just survival, Banerjea and Browne ask us to rethink struggle and resistance, charting queer lives both through and against hegemonic orders and normativities. For Rahul liveability can be interpreted as a struggle for meaning and fulfilment across shifting time and space in relation to Kolkata as a site of socio-sexual possibilities and problems (Boyce & Dasgupta, 2020). For Anirban, the space of Dialogues solidified a community life for him, but, also, encouraged him to pursue a career which he would not have if not introduced to the festival in his formative years (see [Figure 3](#)).

Raju Raman, who was also responsible for curating films for Dialogues, mentioned the emotional labour that goes into programming. He told us how his introduction to the queer activists of Kolkata, namely, Malobika and Akanksha (Sappho for Equality), Anindya Hazra (Pratyay Gender Trust), and Pawan Dhall (Varta) made him realise how an LGBTIQ+ politics and community-building was underway in Kolkata, of which he was not aware at that time. Raman helped in curating films for Dialogues, particularly, from Germany, where an LGBTIQ+ film festival under the name Teddy Bear Film Festival was already quite popular. The involvement of the Goethe-Institut, India, in a way, placed Dialogues within an international network of film circulation, enabling local audiences to



Figure 4. DIALOGUES Poster outside Basusree Cinema. Courtesy Debalina.

Hindi films. The move was deliberate – to include more people, informed and uninformed ones, into the space of the film festival which was, within the walls of the Goethe Institut, an exclusive affair, catering to like-minded people (see Figure 4). With this move, we argue, Dialogues, took upon itself a huge social responsibility (and also risk) of sensitizing an unsuspecting mass of people who may just drop by at Basushree expecting to watch a mainstream popular film, which is a regular fare at this theatre.

Pawan Dhall who programmed Siddharth Gautam talks about the festival's responsibility towards the audience but also society at large and sends a serious message about sexuality and society (see Figure 5). There is a diversity of queer films- some positive and others quite negative. Dhall says:

Making a mark in the Bollywood or Tollywood film industries, which shape and reflect larger social opinions, would also be important for the Kolkata and Indian queer movements. Unfortunately the commercial diktats would be such that for every burning *Fire* there would be a derogatory *Girl Friend*, for every loving *My Brother Nikhil* and the late Rituparno Ghosh's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Just Another Love Story) there would be an insipid *Student of the Year*. The answer perhaps lies in picking up the camera and making more and better films of the *Piku Bhalo Achey* (*Piku is fine*) kind. (Dhall, 2017)

Dhall here is referring to Dr Tirthankar Guha Thakurta's film *Piku Bhalo Achey*, a semi-autobiographical story of a young gay man and his journey towards self-acceptance. The film was made on almost zero budget by the director with the help of his friends. Guha Thakurta tells us:

The urgency to narrate LGBTIQ stories came first. Had I not made a film, I could have written a book or staged a play - the story was always the motive.

Jan 24, **Bhubaneswar**: Film shows, panel discussion on gender, sexuality, human rights and HIV, interaction with filmmakers at IDCOL House, Ashok Nagar, 1.30-5.30 pm



Ame Chari, Oriya, Pranab Das, Docu-feature, 22 min, 2007

Mamata Ra Phula, Oriya, Sritam Das, Docu-feature, 25 min, 2008

What Kind of Man are You?, Hindi, Breakthrough, Spot, 12 min, 2004

68 Pages, Hindi (English sub-titles), Sridhar Rangayan, Feature Film, 90 min, 2008

Jan 25, **Bhadrak and neighbourhood**: Mobile film shows at Charampa (Railway Station), Atadi and Betaligaoon, 10.00 am to 6.00 pm

Ame Chari, Oriya, Pranab Das, Docu-feature, 22 min, 2007

Bhul Re Bhul Karani, Oriya, Ranjit Barik, Documentary, 32 min, 2008

I Am That, Hindi (English sub-titles), Madhusudan Agrawal, Documentary, 8 min, 2008

Mamata Ra Phula, Oriya, Sritam Das, Docu-feature, 25 min, 2008

Andhari Aalua, Oriya, Sritam Das, Docu-feature, 25 min, 2008

Jan 27, **Titlagarh**: Mobile film shows at **Hatpada, Chhak**, 9.30 am to 12 noon

Same films as in **Bhadrak**

Jan 27, **Balangir**: Mobile film shows at **Beharapalli Club**, 2.30 to 4.15 pm

Same films as in **Bhadrak** and **Titlagarh**

Jan 27, **Siliguri**: Film shows and panel discussion at **Mitra Sammlani**, Hill Cart Road, 5.00 to 9.00 pm

68 Pages, Hindi (English sub-titles), Sridhar Rangayan, Feature Film, 90 min, 2008



Antabeen, Bengali (English sub-titles), Avijit Kundu, Short, 7 min, 2008

What Kind of Man are You?, Bengali, Breakthrough, Spot, 12 min, 2004

Being Positive, Bengali, **Tirthankar Guha Thakurta, Kallol Nath**, Docu-feature, 5 min, 2007

Magic, Bengali, **Tirthankar Guha Thakurta, Kallol Nath**, Docu-feature, 7 min, 2008

Isolation, English, **Sangbit Samaddar**, Feature Film, 30 min, 2008

Jan 28, **Kolkata**: Film shows, panel discussion, interaction with filmmakers at **Gyan Mancha, Pretoria Street**, 6.00-9.00 pm

Theme of the day: Queer and HIV activism on the campus through films

Fiku Bhalo Aachhey, Bengali (English sub-titles), Docu-feature, 48 min, 2004

Isolation, English, **Sangbit Samaddar**, Feature Film, 30 min, 2008

Antabeen, Bengali (English sub-titles), Avijit Kundu, Short Film, 7 min, 2008

Crimson, English, Rohit Kumar Dasgupta, Docu-feature, 8 min, 2008

Panel Discussion: Exploring formation of a queer and HIV campus activism forum. **Panelists**: Avijit Kundu, Rohit Kumar Dasgupta, **Sangbit Samaddar, Tirthankar Guha Thakurta**. Chair: **Saptarshi Mondal**

Shuru, Bengali (English sub-titles), Debasish Ghosh, Roy, Feature Film, 38 min, 2008



Jan 29, **Kolkata**: Film shows and interaction with filmmakers at **Gyan Mancha, Pretoria Street**, 6.00-9.00 pm

Rupantar, Bengali (English sub-titles), **Amlava Sarkar**, Docu-feature, 26 min, 2008



Where is There Room?, English, **Sonali Gulati**, Docu-feature, 8 min, 2008

Ehong Amra, Bengali, **Saikat Das**, Feature Film, 54 min, 2007

Bewaqat Barish, Hindi (English sub-titles), **Sumitra Bhaye, Sunil Sukthankar**, Feature Film, 62 min, 2007

Figure 5. Siddharth Gautam Film Festival 2009 Screening Schedule. Persona Collection.

Thatagata Ghosh whose film *Miss Man* opened to a large audience at Dialogues in 2019 tells us that, although he does not identify as a queer person, he considers himself an ally of the community; elaborating on the making of *Miss Man*, he said he was motivated to tell the story after having experienced a gay friend's struggles very closely. Ghosh, like Guha Thakurta, made *Miss Man* from an emotional need to tell the story; somewhat like Majumder, Ghosh, deeply sympathetic towards his friend, gave him a life that he thought his friend deserved in the fictional narrative – a life which was unavailable to him in reality.

Another anonymous filmmaker we spoke to also discussed how queer film festivals were instrumental in giving them space to make films and initiate dialogue. These films were often made with no budget as a labour of love that would not have otherwise found a screening home.

I have no experience of making films but I just wanted to tell a story. In one of the screenings I was speaking to the film programmer and they encouraged me to make try and make a short film which told that story. I was surprised but encouraged by this ended up making a short film which was screened at the festival the next year. Unlike some of the other films which had funding, I made my one just using a cheap handycam.

Film programmers often also have to do this additional work of trying to not just source films but also encourage those from within the community to make short films to get diverse perspectives and voices and counterbalance the high budget films submitted with stories that focus on local issues. As Colta (2019) describes film programming is subjective and instinctual but this act of curation is also political and ethical programming which focuses on the responsibility to create awareness and representation diverse voices is key.

Coda: community making

In 2021, Dialogues moved its programming completely online offering complimentary tickets to its regular audiences. In addition to 55 documentaries, feature films, activist shorts it also included several talk sessions and seminars. One such talk was titled “Cinema as a collective social act”. The panel spoke at length about the collaborative process through which these filmmakers approached filmmaking and the issues of “inclusion”. At the very heart of it as the panel made clear was thinking about the potential of festivals and queer films acting as vehicles of social change and community making. Rakesh elaborates:

COVID was devastating for our community. It took us away from our families of choice. Not being able to go for the annual film festival felt like a huge blow. I was so glad that the festival was at least online. I was able to just watch films but also be part of panels and listen to different members of the community. It was also the first time queer Bengalis from across the globe could join in.

In this article, we have used queer patchwork to recognise the temporality of doing queer ethnographic work and the fragmentary nature through which knowledge is created and disseminated. For us, the “home” has been our “field” within the context of the precarious nature within which queer cultural research in the non-western context is carried out. In the process of querying Kolkata as a queer creative city, we focused not only on human social actors but also attention to objects, places and other entities for their capacity to query social and material worlds (Manalansan, 2015). Architecture, infrastructures, city landscapes can be read for their often saturate and covert queer experiences; cinema halls and in the case of the film festivals- embassies and foreign diplomatic sites offer a space for same-sex community making and intimacy; and the role of the digital – a medium through which queer life-worlds are expressed and performed, within and across urban and suburban landscapes in ways that may be deeply present but empirically intangible (Boyce & Dasgupta, 2017; Dasgupta, 2017).

De Valck (2017) argues that festivals can play an important role in the process of urban regeneration and providing people with the opportunity to experience a distinctive cultural form. This is sustained through the participation of the local communities. In this article, we have shown that festivals play another important role in sustaining, supporting and celebrating oft marginalised communities. Kolkata is not a global city in its neoliberal sense, in fact some might even characterise it as aspirational with a sense of decaying capital (Boyce & Dasgupta, 2017). What we have proposed in this article is how a new form of queer futurity is being crafted which need not be dictated by neoliberal policies. As Jones (2013, p. 2) argues that queer futurity is not “just about crafting prescriptions for a utopian society ... but making life more bearable in the present, because in doing so we create the potential for a better future”. Kolkata emerges as a queer creative Indian city through this assemblage and queer people insisting on the “right to the city” as Harvey (2003) so eloquently put it.

Note

1. Both authors volunteered for Dialogues and the Siddharth Gautam Film Festival. Dasgupta’s co-directed short film with Monidipa Mondal, *Crimson* (2008) was screened at the Siddharth Gautam Film Festival in 2009.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Rohit K. Dasgupta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5837-0088>

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