CHAPTER 12

Precarity, Innovation, and Survival in the Indian Film Festival Sector

Tilottama Karlekar

Film festivals have emerged as vital, thriving cultural and political spaces in twenty-first-century India, with a vast range of new festivals displacing the decades-long dominance of the state-sponsored International Film Festival of India (IFFI). Ranging from corporate-sponsored, industry-centric film festivals like the Jio MAMI festival in Mumbai to small, grassroots festivals in remote rural regions like the Jharkhand Film Festival, this festival expansion parallels global trends (De Valck 2007; Iordanova and Rhyne 2009; Wong 2011). Alternative, community, and activist film festivals have become significant and visible, engaging new audiences not just in the big cities but in smaller towns and remote rural regions (Rangan 2010; Kishore 2018; Basu and Banerjee 2018). In a deeply divided India marked by intensifying authoritarianism, this increased visibility has engendered controversy and, often, censorship. With scarce financial support, alternative festivals also contend with differing forms of state and mob coercion. Despite their vibrancy and visibility, then, activist festivals remain

T. Karlekar (✉)
Klein College of Media and Communication, Temple University,
Philadelphia, PA, USA
e-mail: tilottama.karlekar@temple.edu

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financially and politically precarious (Rangan 2010; Battaglia 2017). Over and above this, the Covid-19 pandemic has posed almost insurmountable challenges.

At the time of writing, in spring 2021, India is experiencing a devastating second wave of Covid. The medical system has collapsed, and casualties are mounting. The current crisis comes after a year of political turmoil. The year 2020 began with widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which discriminated against Muslims. It ended with an unprecedented farmer's movement, against farm laws enacted by the Modi government. The pandemic came between these two large-scale movements, casting into sharp focus the country's already striking social and economic disparities.

In a year of crises upon crises, Indian film festivals struggled to find ways to remain viable. But at the center of utter devastation, they also faced the bigger challenge of rethinking and reshaping the role film festivals could play, or should play, at critical historical conjunctures. As De Valck and Damiens (2020) have argued, "Covid-19 cannot be understood apart from other crises," as it had exposed the deeper fault lines within societies. In the context of a contentious national politics that scholars have described in terms of a national emergency (Virdi 2019), were festivals even necessary? If so, what role should they play for a population facing such formidable challenges? Now, more than ever, it seemed impossible to delink festivals—and the study of festivals—from ongoing social movements.

How did Indian film festivals respond to these challenges? What strategies did they use to reach their audiences, show new films, and remain financially viable? More importantly, how did they reframe their identity and purpose at a time when the challenges faced by so many eclipsed any challenges that film festivals, or the film industry, may face? In this exploratory chapter, I address these questions by focusing on the strategies of three distinct activist/community-based festivals. Two of the festivals I focus on had successful online versions, while the third refused to go virtual. I draw on archival material from film festivals, interviews with film festival organizers, and participation in an online version of one of the festivals to offer a preliminary assessment of the "frontline" strategies adopted by these festivals. I also explore what this may mean for festivals in India, and beyond, even in a post-pandemic world.

Film Festivals and the Pandemic

The pandemic challenged the central paradigms by which film festivals operate (De Valck and Damiens 2020). As festivals became virtual, they lost both their distinctive temporal intensity and their rootedness in a specific physical place (see Turan 2003; De Valck 2007; Iordanova and Rhyne 2009; Wong 2011; Stringer 2016).

The live, communal experience of the film festival has its roots in the idea of festivals as a kind of "collective effervescence," or an "intensification of the collective being," dating back to early folk festivals that acted as channels of community consolidation (Giorgi 2011). Traces of the sacred/religious dimensions of early folk festivals remain in a more secularized era, primarily through what Giorgi describes as a "sociability function." The vibrant, communal gathering of like-minded people sharing the intensified time/space experience of the film festival accounts for the immersive appeal of the contemporary film festival.

As specialized, live interfaces with film in a time of what Reiss (2013) calls "digital overabundance," film festivals can come as close as audiences can get to the rarefied experience of an "original" work of art in an age of digital reproduction (Benjamin 1968).[1] In the Indian context, this auratic encounter takes on culturally distinct resonances because of the ways in which film viewing has been conceptualized as taking on a "darshanic" quality, evoking a devotional encounter between viewer and screen (Vasudevan 1995; Rangan 2010). Film festivals, because they concentrate viewing in time and space, intensify this "spiritual" dimension of film viewing.

The immersive, collective experience that defines the festival can also infuse it with a sense of solidarity, mobilizing festivals as potentially vital public spheres organized around specific causes or issues. The intense materiality of the encounter seems critical. The festival space exemplifies the idealized Habermasian formation of the public sphere where citizens can engage in public debate. Festivals can be places for the convergence of publics and counterpublics of various forms (Warner 2002; Wong 2011). Activist film festivals, Leshu Torchin suggests, operate as "testimonial encounters," where "the transformative power of testimony is not something eternal or enduring, but is enabled through *situated*

[1] The "cinephile" film viewing experience has often been described in quasi-mystical terms: see Bazin's (1955) description of the film festival experience as a "monastic retreat" (quoted in Porton 2009, 10).

encounters" (2012, *italics mine*). Moreover, in activist film festivals, building context around the films is as important as the films themselves.

For documentary, activist, and community festivals in India, this face-to-face encounter becomes even more critical. In postcolonial India, film festivals were sites for the formation of the ideal spectator-citizen: rational, discerning, and appreciative of "good cinema" as opposed to the uneducated and prerational "mass" audience that preferred the melodramatic "bad" cinema produced by the popular Hindi film industry (Ganti 2012). The Indian Film Festival of India (IFFI) was set up as a part of state initiatives designed to promote "good," realist cinema. However, IFFI remained limited to the cities, as was the film society movement that emerged alongside it, which also drew middle-class, cinephile audiences. Beginning in the 1970s, activist filmmakers sought to change this by building a grassroots screening circuit, showing their films in working-class neighborhoods, public spaces, riot-torn small towns, and remote rural regions. This building of an *infrastructure* for engaging with films was central to the work of activists who sought to take screenings beyond the cities and engage new cinema audiences instead of simply "preaching to the converted" (Butalia 2012; Sen 2011; Gangar and Heredia 2011). The vitality of alternative film festivals in India in the 2000s was in part the result of decades of such activism and infrastructure-building, as I have written elsewhere (Karlekar 2019).

The pandemic posed challenges for this form of community-building and activism. At first, it seemed to make festivals impossible (Jones 2020). Around the world, as film production screeched to a halt, as theatrical releases were postponed or replaced with streaming releases, film festivals were forced to rethink their central identities, find new ways of functioning, or simply, wait till the pandemic ended (and risk extinction). If mainstream film festivals like Cannes, or even Mumbai, struggled with keeping the "business of film" going, for smaller community-based festivals, the challenge was of a different kind. When the lockdown made the face-to-face encounter with neighborhoods and grassroots communities impossible, they were forced to reconfigure their relationship to community-building and activism.

Film Festivals After the Lockdown

On March 24, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi abruptly ordered a nation of 1.3 billion people to shut down completely—"the biggest and most severe action undertaken anywhere to stop the spread of the

coronavirus" (Gettleman and Schultz 2020). The middle classes retreated to their homes in relative comfort. The poor, including thousands of migrant workers, were left completely stranded. Over the next few weeks, images of workers traveling on foot for days to get home, many dying on the way, saturated the media. Images of despair and death were searingly contrasted with Instagram feeds of middle-class home cooking and baking experiments. The lockdown also exacerbated an ongoing economic and political crisis—and the economy plummeted (Bharali et al. 2020; Roy Chowdhury 2020; Llamas-Rodriguez 2020).

Most major film festivals in India take place between November and February, peak tourist season, a time when the weather is pleasant and mild in most parts of the country. They could, therefore, "watch and wait" as global festivals experimented with four different options: cancelation, postponement, a hybrid festival if local conditions permitted, or a fully virtual event. Faced with uncertainty, several major festivals decided to postpone at first. Among these were the Kolkata International Film Festival, the International Children's Film Festival, the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), and the Chennai International Film Festival. Eventually, these festivals held hybrid or scaled down physical events in the early months of 2021, when restrictions were eased on public gatherings and film screenings. The International Film Festival of India (IFFI), the biggest international film festival in the country, held a hybrid festival in Goa in January 2021. Since these mainstream film festivals all receive varying degrees of national or state government support, organizers could postpone without a great deal of financial hardship (Majumdar 2021).

The stakes were different for private film festivals and smaller festivals with less security and stability. Waiting *until* they could offer a viable physical festival wasn't the best option. The Jio MAMI Film festival in Mumbai, the biggest private film festival in India, had to cancel in part because the pandemic's economic fallout affected its sponsors severely. Moreover, Mumbai quickly became the epicenter of the virus in the country. Following the Cannes model, MAMI released its official selection list and focused on building its year-round digital programming, realizing that they could reach a much wider audience (Kiran 2020).

Smaller festivals needed to remain relevant for their audiences and maintain connections with sponsors and filmmakers until the situation returned to normal. Many decided to go online, including the mid-sized Delhi International Film Festival (DIFF), the independent/grassroots Madurai Film Festival, Dialogues in Kolkata, and KASHISH Queer Film

Festival in Mumbai. Smaller screening series continued online, like the Vikalp @ Prithvi screening series, Auroville, and Kriti Film Club. Other community film festivals, notably the Kolkata People's Film Festival (KPFF) refused to do so, preferring to wait for a physical edition. In the next sections, I map the strategies and experiences of two distinct, successful online film festivals. KASHISH became the first Indian film festival to hold a virtual edition with a completely new selection of films; Kriti Film Club expanded its online film series. I also briefly consider the position of the Kolkata People's Film Festival, which argued that going online ran counter to the spirit of their grassroots identity. In the different strategies adopted by these festivals, I argue that definitions of "community" on the one hand and the relationship of the film festival to a specific nation and location in time and place—concepts central to critical theorizations of the film festival—were at stake.

KASHISH: "The World Must See Us in Our Splendid Colors"

KASHISH is an identity-based film festival bringing diverse LGBTQ+ communities and narratives to mainstream spaces. It has combined its niche identity with film industry support and corporate funding and created a deliberately "apolitical" stance (Sridhar Rangayan, Personal Communication, 2019). It is India's largest and most visible queer film festival and has received sizeable scholarly and critical attention (e.g., Schoonover and Galt 2016).

KASHISH's founder-director Sridhar Rangayan had traveled the world showing his films at LGTBQ+ film festivals. When the Delhi High Court overturned Article 377 of the Indian Constitution in 2009, decriminalizing homosexuality for the first time, it seemed possible to do a LGBTQ festival openly in a public theater, unlike previous LGBTQ screenings which were held in colleges, embassies, or community spaces (Sridhar Rangayan, Personal Communication, 2019).[2]

[2] This was a brief period of legality, for in 2013, the Indian Supreme Court reversed the decision and effectively recriminalized homosexuality. However, during this period LGBTQ+ communities became much more visible, and LGBTQ+ movements flourished and the mobilizations against 377 continued, finally leading to the Supreme Court's definitive overturning of the law in 2018 (Pokharel and Abrams 2018).

Even then, it wasn't easy to find a mainstream theater that was willing to become a venue partner. PVR Cinemas agreed to take the risk, and the first KASHISH film festival in 2010 took place in a 123-seater PVR theater and at the Alliance Française du Bombay (Sridhar Rangayan, Personal Communication, 2019).[3] The response to the first festival exceeded expectations, and the festival continued to grow, even after the Supreme Court reversed the decision on Article 377 in 2013. KASHISH does not sell tickets, but if it did, around 9600 tickets would have been sold in 2019.

In terms of its organization and funding, KASHISH has embraced the model of the "neoliberal mainstream film festival" (Schoonover and Galt 2016). Its funding comes from a mix of global and national sources, and a larger part of its founding was underwritten by the United Nations Development Program in India.[4] It has also been embraced by Bollywood, with actors and celebrities like former Miss India Celina Jaitley acting as a spokesperson for the festival.

Traditionally, many community-based film festivals in India have resisted funding from corporate sources and international development agencies, seeing these as forms of possible co-option into the neoliberal world of film distribution and exhibition (Basu 2021). KASHISH's role and politics therefore are not easy to classify, straddling as it does both the worlds of neoliberal mainstream film festivals and alternative/activist film festivals. Its showcasing of diverse queer films in mainstream spaces, its inclusion of local LGBTQ communities and identities can on the one hand be seen as a form of commodified queerness. Yet this somewhat generic mainstreaming of queerness has also done important advocacy work at a time when homosexuality was still criminalized in India. The amplification of LGBTQ+ voices enabled by this strategic coalition between grassroots groups, corporate entities, international donors, film industry figures, and government officials was an essential roadmap for the festival to thrive.

As KASHISH planned for its 2020 edition, it had to contend with these ongoing divisions, and it was no longer as easy to project a seamless, universalizing narrative as it had done before Art. 377 was struck down.

[3] PVR Cinemas has been a leader in the multiplex market in India since the 1990s, calling itself "the market leader in terms of screen count in India." As of writing, it operates "845 screens in 176 cinemas in 71 cities in India and Sri Lanka" (PVR Cinemas 2021).

[4] For example, has received support from Alliance Française, the Arts Network of Asia (linked with the Ford Foundation), Movies that Matter, the British Council, as well as a great deal of advertising. Its donors include corporations such as Barclays and IBM, UNAIDS, gay clubs, queer film festivals in North America, and a diverse array of interests (KASHISH 2019).

The festival's broadly inclusive and largely apolitical stance had become hard to maintain in India's increasingly fractious political context. The social movements that expanded across the country made it necessary for KASHISH to forge a new identity. While the pandemic was a disaster, it also provided an opportunity for a reconfiguration.

KASHISH is typically held in June, so when the lockdown took effect, the festival committee had completed its selection process for the 2020 edition. The organizers felt that they had a commitment to the filmmakers who had submitted to their film festival, and therefore decided on a full-scale online festival. Announcing "KASHISH VIRTUAL 2020," the festival committee wrote:

> These are challenging times and we at KASHISH love challenges and take it head-on. Considering the safety and well-being of everyone, this year we have decided to hold the festival online. We are committed to bringing out LGBTQIA+ stories to the world, as a means of healing and empowerment. The world must see us out there, in all our splendid colors, and the show must go on! (Rangayan, cited in Awasthi 2020)

KASHISH became the first Indian film festival to go online with a completely new lineup of films. Significantly, it decided to embrace the global, opening the films to an overseas audience (Rangayan 2021). It was well positioned to do so, as the festival was in fact one of the best-known Indian festivals globally and had established a presence in a global network of queer film festivals. As Patankar, the festival's marketing director wrote: "I believe this is a great opportunity for the festival to use a technological platform and bring Indian queer content to international audiences … In a post Covid world, it is important that we push borderless communication in a world that is poised to bring back borders" (cited in Pillai 2020).

KASHISH Virtual 2020

Once the decision to move online was made, KASHISH Virtual came together quickly. The festival was scheduled between July 22 and 30 and featured 157 films from 42 countries.

Fortunately, most filmmakers agreed to show their films online, due perhaps to the relationships, networks, and reputation KASHISH had built over 11 years (Rangayan 2021). The second challenge was to find an affordable platform to host the films. Most high-quality film festival

platforms come with a price, but for KASHISH, low cost was imperative. There were logistical challenges too, as the KASHISH team worked from different cities. Festival organizers eventually selected Mexico-based streaming service Xerb.TV, which offered a viable package. Indian viewers paid INR ₹600 for a festival pass, while international viewers paid USD $30.

The films were streamed on the Xerb streaming platform, structured into 52 programs, of which 32 were open to international audiences. Panel discussions and filmmaker Q&As, as well as the opening and closing ceremonies, were on KASHISH's regular, free-to-watch social media. The films featured a diverse range of queer stories from 42 countries, with the highest number of films coming from the United States, followed by India. The opening film, *Shiny Shrimps* (*Les Crevettes paielletées* dir. Maxime Govaro and Cedric Le Gallo, France, 2019) a sports comedy about a homophobic swimmer trying to coach a gay water polo team in Croatia, became one of the best-liked films at the festival. The festival closed with the premiere of an unusual Indian film—*Hum Bhi Akela, Tum Bhi Akela* (I am alone, and so are you, 2020, dir. Harish Vyas): a story about a gay man and lesbian woman who bond on a road trip and form an unusual friendship.

The panel discussions were lively. *The Sporting Divide* focused on issues of homophobia and trans inclusion in sports, while *Moving Forward Together* featured prominent Indian LGBTQIA+ activists discussing the past and future direction of the LGBTQ+ movement. The third panel was particularly relevant for this project, as it featured film festival organizers from different parts of the world discussing *The Future of Film Festivals in the Time of Corona* (Fig. 12.1). The discussion featured Smriti Kiran of the Jio MAMI Film Festival in Mumbai, Cary Rajinder Sawhney of the London Indian Film Festival, Aseem Chhabra of the New York Indian Film Festival, Paul Struthers of Frameline San Francisco, and Andrea Wilson, of Inside Out Toronto. In a wide-ranging conversation about the challenges they had faced during the pandemic, all participants came back again and again to the realization that they could draw new audiences beyond typical geographical barriers. Though none of them wanted to replace the physical festival event, they wondered why they had not seriously considered exploring the online audience before the pandemic.

Fig. 12.1 "'The future of film festivals' panel at KASHISH 2020." (Courtesy KASHISH Arts Foundation)

Embracing the Global

As a festival that already had strong global connections and resonances, KASHISH was well positioned to reach an audience beyond India's national borders. The festival embraced a positive, even utopian vision of the virtual global village. The festival trailer showcased this global content and focus of the festival, featuring a fast-paced montage of faces and moments from the films, juxtaposing different skin colors, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, ages, captured in moments of joy, celebration,

Fig. 12.2 "Still from KASHISH Virtual 2020 festival trailer." (Courtesy KASHISH Arts Foundation)

despair, loneliness, exuberance. From an image of two elderly white men kissing to the performances of drag queens in an Indian village and the passionate embrace of two Asian women, the trailer showcased a form of global diversity in which difference existed seamlessly within a universalizing humanitarianism. Words such as "multigenerational" and "multi sexualities" flashed across the screen, edited to fusion music with an Indian beat. This music grounded the festival in India somewhat, but other than that, this could be a queer film festival anywhere (Fig. 12.2).

This strategy, by all accounts, was very successful. The virtual festival attracted a similar audience in terms of size—1750 festival registrations, around 9280 tickets issued. According to audience polls, 53.7% were returning audiences, while 40.3% were attending the festival for the first time. This meant that a significant number of new viewers discovered the festival, many of them from outside Mumbai and many from outside India.[5] But significantly, KASHISH lost much of the local LGBTQ+ community, many of whom were working class and lived on the city's margins. These were often deeply closeted people or those who lived in spaces where it would be simply dangerous to come out. Nor could these same people attend KASHISH Virtual from home. Even if they had Internet access, watching a queer film festival at home would mean outing themselves. Besides, many were trying to survive through sex work and menial labor. Film festivals were a luxury they could ill afford. Acknowledging this inequality, KASHISH reserved much of the proceeds from the festival

[5] The numbers were impressive. Around 18,000 people watched Opening Night on Facebook, and there were 30.9 K views on social media. Among the downsides, viewership among non-LGBTQ+ audiences dropped, with 79.2% of the audience being LGBTQ+ community members. As the KASHISH team accepts, the numbers are unreliable and incomplete, but they do give an overall sense of the virtual audience (Rangayan 2021).

for helping LGBTQ+ community groups, especially those who were engaged in Covid-19 relief work (Rangayan 2021).

The festival showcased a global queerness that could be anywhere. Or nowhere. If the same selection of films were being shown in the physical event, it would have been impossible for audiences to attend without a tangible sense of the location of the festival, Mumbai. The experience would have been inseparable from the city's interminable traffic jams, the July heat and humidity, the monsoons, the stark contrasts between glamor and squalor, and the multilingual, multisensory embodiment in the city. The disembodied experience of KASHISH Virtual seemed to move KASHISH toward a somewhat different identity, a global LGBTQ+ film festival with South Asian roots. Because the festival was already networked well with global queer organizations, it made the online switch seamlessly. But without the embodiment and affect central to queer film festivals (Brunow 2020), did it really matter that KASHISH was "South Asia's largest film festival" or "India's most visible?" Undoubtedly KASHISH reached a new audience, perhaps a different kind of community, including those who could not physically travel to Mumbai because of costs or health issues and so on. But it lost much of its distinctive grassroots identity, even as in this new, geographically unmoored festival community, queer film festivals (and identity-based festivals such as South Asian film festivals in the United States) talked about collaboration instead of competition (Rangayan 2021; Chhabra 2020).

Kriti Film Club and the Lockdown Film Festivals

For twenty years before the pandemic, Kriti had been a small film club, regularly screening documentary and alternative films at the India Habitat Center in New Delhi. Kriti had emerged as part of a set of initiatives by filmmakers and activists in the late 1990s/early 2000s to create a vital, alternative screening culture for documentary films (Sengupta 2008; Sen 2011). Removed from Mumbai's film industry glitz, Kriti was unmistakably rooted in the documentary film, developmental communication, and non-profit media worlds of the capital city, New Delhi. Aanchal Kapur, Kriti's founder and director, had been trained in development communication and was driven by a strong commitment to the role of film in education, community-building, and social change. The idea behind the film club, therefore, was to "place thought-provoking cinema in a discussion group that will help to deepen understanding on social and developmental

issues among viewers" (Kriti Team 2021). Kriti began as "a labor of love"—a volunteer-run effort put together by people who held other jobs as their main source of income.

Kriti realized the potential of the online screening space for community-building early on in the pandemic. On March 21, 2020, as people retreated to their homes, Kapur began to share films from Kriti's extensive archive of unusual and hard to access documentary films and shorts. Kapur had been revisiting the work of environmental filmmaker Nitin Das, whose nature films seemed to exude a sense of much-needed peace in difficult times. She decided to share Das's film, *Lake of Peace*, "to give you calm." Over the next few days, Kapur recommended documentary films about nature, healing, connection, and harmony. These films struck a chord with many people who were stuck at home. These otherwise obscure films reached an audience that would not have sought them out in pre-pandemic times. The "lockdown recommendations," as they came to be known, gained widespread popularity in the early weeks of pandemic restrictions (Kapur 2021).

As the "lockdown recommendations" took off, old and new volunteers reached out to Kapur, offering help. What had started as one woman's "whim" became a team effort that took on different forms through the year. Kriti showed 113 films in 102 days as part of the "lockdown series," including "mini festivals" on Earth Day, World Environment Day, and so on. Kriti also inspired others to follow, including Sanjay Joshi of the Cinema of Resistance festivals, the Madurai Film Festival, and Vikalp@Prithvi. The Auroville Film Festival also began to post film recommendations and resources (Kapur 2021).

The success of the lockdown series led to more festivals, and Kriti went on to organize two larger festivals through the year: the South Asian Feminist Film Festival in November 2020 and The Rising Gardens Film Festival between January and April 2021 (Kriti 2020).

South Asian Feminist Film Festival

As the lockdown film series wound down, well-known feminist activist, the late Kamla Bhasin of the Delhi-based feminist network Sangat asked Kriti to curate a South Asian Women's Festival. Realizing that more professional execution was needed, Kapur recruited Rahul Sharda, who had recently helped run the virtual Delhi International Film Festival. They hosted all films on Vimeo and embedded them on "Doculive" (Kriti 2020; Kapur 2021).

The South Asian Feminist Film Festival (SAFFF) ran for three days between November 27 and 29, and screened 29 short and feature-length films, both fiction and documentary, focusing on issues related to women from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Israel, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. Taking an intersectional approach, the festival explored the meaning of feminism in South Asia by engaging with multiple forms of difference and inequality (Gupta 2020).

Kapur initially wanted to create a “live” feeling. The films would be shown as in a movie theater—with different show times, and she envisioned live Q&As with filmmakers alongside or right after the “show.” However, her colleagues argued that people needed more flexibility to watch the films and it would be an impossible amount of work for the small team. So, they ended up compromising: films were shown at specific times on the “now showing” page. If they missed the screening, people could go to the film festival schedule and watch the films for a specific period. Filmmaker Q&As took place separately on Zoom. The festival also featured panel discussions on “Minority and Queer Narratives” and “What it means to be South Asian Today.”

SAFFF featured films that achieved a great deal of popularity, including *Bebaak* (2019), *If You Dare Desire* (2017), *Have You Seen the Arana* (2012), and *Ask the Sexpert* (2017). While these films were not “new,” as many had traveled to festivals and won awards, they seemed to achieve a wider, and perhaps more diverse viewership at SAFFF during the pandemic.

The Rising Gardens Film Festival

SAFFF’s success established the existence of new, online audiences for documentary films. It led to more partnerships between Sangat and Kriti and another festival that would take place over the course of four months, the Rising Gardens Film Festival (Meenal Manolika, Personal Communication, 2021; Kapur 2021).

The Rising Gardens Film Festival was curated by well-known documentary filmmaker Reena Mohan (who had also curated the South Asian Feminist Film Festival). Rising Gardens emerged as part of One Billion Rising, a global campaign against gender violence, whose 2021 theme connected violence against women with violence against the environment. The festival spanned four weekends, four months, four themes. These themes were Cosmic Connections/Women and Nature (January 15–17, 2021), Fields of Sorrow, Fields of Hope/Women and Agriculture (February 12–14, 2021),

Fig. 12.3 "4 weekends, 4 months. The Rising Gardens Film Festival." (Courtesy Kriti)

Community and Sustenance/Women and Food (March 12–14), and Moving Mountains/Women and Solidarities (April 16–18, 2021) (Fig. 12.3).

The films at Rising Gardens were not geoblocked, unlike many films at the bigger, more market-driven Indian film festivals. Watching the films was free once you registered, though you could make voluntary donations to support Kriti's work. Films were available for watching on your time for the duration of the festival (three days, usually between Friday and Sunday). Because most films were shorts rather than feature-length, it was possible to view all the films if you had the time. There were also panel discussions around the festival themes and with filmmakers, usually held via Zoom around a week after the films had screened.

The Rising Gardens Film Festivals connected with a broader rethinking of human relationships to nature that the pandemic had brought to the forefront (see Roy 2020). As curator Reena Mohan wrote while introducing the festival themes, "The ongoing pandemic has disrupted our lives, caused chaos, and shown us that our existing structures are unjust and unsustainable. Has the isolation we experienced affected our thinking and practices? Did the pandemic compel us to slow down and consider how to live with more compassion in relation to the environment?" (2021). There was a widespread feeling that there was no going back to a pre-pandemic normal, and more people were paying attention to the consequences our "normal" lives had had on the environment. The festival sought to expand and deepen the conversation around the environment and sustainability that intensified during the pandemic.

The festival also occurred against the backdrop of the farmer's protests that gained force in the early months of 2021. Indian farmers had launched

an unprecedented movement against laws passed by the Indian Parliament in 2020, ostensibly directed at modernizing the agriculture system in India, but in fact reducing government protections on pricing and opening the market to large corporations. Images of thousands of farmers camping outside the capital, driving into Delhi, and storming the iconic Red Fort attained international visibility. While it wasn't planned that way, Rising Gardens' themes resonated with the ongoing farmer's movement.

Rethinking Community at Rising Gardens

My experience participating in the Rising Gardens Film Festival felt "in between": it was not exactly like streaming films online by yourself, nor was it like attending a "live" festival event. The viewing experience was solitary, but at the same time I felt connected to the films' themes through the recordings of panel discussions and the continuing coverage of the farmer's protests on news and across social media. These experiences converged to create a somewhat dispersed, at times disorienting, yet an undeniable sense of community, connection, and engagement with the festival's narratives and themes (Fig. 12.4).

In the early months of the pandemic, a sense of solidarity brought viewers together, creating intense viewing experiences. Kriti Film Club had an "early mover" advantage, having been the first to initiate an online screening series during the lockdown. As Kriti's founder-director Aanchal Kapur told me, "In many ways, the lockdown has been good for us" (2021). The pandemic enabled this small, Delhi-based film club to engage a wider audience and grow in stature to become a regular organizer of documentary film festivals. If KASHISH expanded its global reach during the pandemic, Rising Gardens reached new audiences beyond Delhi, and even beyond India's borders. It also reached a more diverse audience than the typical documentary film festival. Partly because of the lockdown, it drew people who might previously not have considered watching documentary films. In this way, Kriti's experiences diverged from KASHISH's, where the proportion of non-LGBTQ+ community viewers dropped with the online version. Kriti was able to reach a more variegated audience across geographical boundaries (Kapur 2021).

If this new online audience was dispersed across space, the festival(s) also took on a rhythm and pace that differed considerably from the concentrated time of the typical festival event (Harbord 2016). While each edition was concentrated over a weekend, the festival unfolded over four months. Each festival viewing weekend marked an intensification in

Fig. 12.4 "Panel discussion: Conversations on Cosmic Connections." (Courtesy Kriti)

engagement with the films, but then conversations about the film extended over the following week and merged with ongoing social media updates to create a larger, ongoing conversation. Presumably, there was no specific, shared temporality experienced by the geographically dispersed audience that watched the films and followed conversations in their own time, across different time zones. Through the pandemic, most people could move between screens and time took on a sense of continual unfolding, with distinct nodes of more intense engagement. Reconfiguring the notion of community and exploring new and serendipitous audiences was a distinct gain. In March, Kriti Film Club screened some films from "Rising Gardens" at the India Habitat Center, its first physical screenings in over a year. But even beyond that, the Kriti Team had every intention of continuing with online screenings, and building "Doculive" into a portal for documentary film screenings (Kriti 2021).

Refusals: The Kolkata People's Film Festival

While many activist film festivals moved online with varying degrees of success, others steadfastly refused to consider this option. Among these was the Kolkata People's Film Festival, a grassroots initiative in the eastern metropolis of Kolkata. Started as a "community-based" people's film festival in 2014, it grew significantly in size and reach since. Rather than switch to a virtual mode in January 2021, KPFF decided to postpone until August, hoping conditions would permit physical screenings. Kasturi Basu, of the People's Film Collective which organizes the festival, questioned the purported reach of online film festivals. She asked:

> Films can be moved online fairly easily—but do audiences move online that easily? It's not a problem to show films online, in fact it will be easier for us in many ways, including in terms of the funding … But our festivals are not just about showing some good films, political films … It's about the space … a space where people can physically meet, argue. It's where people can have questions and have arguments with the filmmakers as well … which are in many ways dialectically connected with the films, their world views. It's also a space where other art forms converge, it's also a space for political art, for political publications. You don't come just for the films … It's not a set of 50 films that we choose and then the audience watches.

Basu expressed skepticism about the audiences for online film festivals in a country where only around 40% of the population have Internet

access, and of these few have adequate Internet capacity to watch full-length films in HD (World Bank 2022). Most people in India watch on their smartphones, which is often the only device they have. The KPFF team felt that was "not fair to films which are made with so much passion and care, they deserve to be shown on the big screen. And I think that the big screen and collective watching are the soul of our festival" (Basu 2021).

As a grassroots film festival, KPFF screens films at locations ranging from village football grounds, common courtyards in villages, worker's colonies, rooftop spaces, street corners, and local auditoriums. They decide on which films to show based on the needs and interests of the community they are screening for. The specificity of a location and the distinctive features of a unique audience grounded in a particular place are central to the festival. The idea of curating festivals for an uncertain and faceless online audience seemed to run counter to the spirit and purpose of a community-rooted festival.

Being a crowdfunded festival that had long resisted any form of sponsorship—from corporates, NGOS, foundations, any large entity—there was no pressure to keep sponsors happy or remain relevant for funders. Nor was it a source of livelihood for members of the People's Film Collective. There was no real compulsion, therefore, to pivot to an online festival (Basu 2021).

Is the Future Hybrid?

In 2021, early optimism in India about falling Covid numbers enabled a brief return to physical screenings. Movie theaters could operate at full capacity, and the return of physical festivals seemed possible. By April, however, the country entered a deadly second wave. The medical infrastructure collapsed. And this time, the pandemic hit much nearer to home for India's affluent classes, most of whom escaped the worst of the first wave. At the time of writing, the pandemic's endpoint seems further than ever (Pakrasi 2021). Amidst much grief and despair, it no longer seemed possible to hold any festival.

Over the last year, film festivals have developed a toolkit of strategies to adapt to different crises. Unhampered by demands of sponsors, markets, and industry considerations of mainstream cinema, community- or identity-based festivals easily moved online. When they did, they realized their audiences doubled or tripled when physical considerations were removed. "Why didn't we think about this before?" Rangayan exclaimed, talking about KASHISH's experience, and this was echoed by many other

film festival organizers (Chhabra 2020; Kiran 2020). For community film festivals in India, especially, going online may be beneficial on some levels, yet it undeniably entails the loss of poor, grassroots viewers who neither have adequate technology nor the time to attend online film festivals. Since this defeats the purpose of many community-based film festivals, which seek engagement with non-metropolitan, poor, rural, and working-class citizens, organizers need to devise ingenuous ways of enabling community viewing even online.

The path forward seems to be to combine a virtual edition with physical events, as KASHISH plans to do when the situation so permits. Virtual mini festivals and panels may spread through the year, like the recent "Kashish Trans Fest" to celebrate Transgender Day of Visibility. Kapur of Kriti envisions another screening landscape—combining online festivals and physical screenings in diverse places. The two could work together. For example, an online festival would be shared via a link to community groups, giving rise to multiple screenings of the same festivals in communities around the country, and perhaps even internationally, creating conversations around issues along multiple nodes and levels (2021). While many strategies for survival in the pandemic and beyond are still being forged and reimagined at the time of writing, the future for community-based film festivals in India, and perhaps elsewhere, does indeed seem to be hybrid (Fig. 12.5).

Fig. 12.5 "Poster for the virtual KASHISH 2021 festival." (Courtesy KASHISH Arts Foundation)

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