

Siddart Chadha

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Mirror, mirror on the wall: AKS International Minorities Festival Pakistan 2021

Siddharth Chadha

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AKS International Minorities Festival is a film festival that seeks to showcase films and art projects, as well as to create a dialog around the representation of minorities, particularly immigrants, sexual minorities, trans people, and people of colour. Since 2014, the festival has been held annually both in Pakistan and Denmark, establishing itself as an important event within both the LGBTQ film festival circuit and the Human Rights film festival ecosystem in Europe and Asia.

This review charts the journey of AKS festival during the two years of the pandemic between 2020 and 2021 during which the festival was confronted with an unprecedented challenge and overcame it by re-discovering its own format, seeking new audiences, and finding new ways of showing films. It reflects upon the sources of resilience of small-scale film festivals during the pandemic and argues for greater recognition and support for festivals such as AKS.

The precarious history of AKS

Saadat Munir is a South Asian man in his early forties who lives in Copenhagen. He has worked as a filmmaker and a film festival organiser for many years. In 2014, Saadat along with trans activists living in Pakistan, founded the AKS International Minorities festival which sought to showcase films and create dialogue around the Indigenous Khwaja Siri (trans) community and other sexual minorities. Aks, which translates as 'reflection or

mirror’ in Urdu, describes itself as a festival that ‘aims to hold up a metaphorical mirror to the minorities with the aim of improving their visibility’.[1]

Their first film festival, AKS Pakistan 2014, held in Lahore and Islamabad, was entirely financed by Saadt and the organisers from their own pockets. In the following year Saadt organised AKS Copenhagen, which attempted to highlight the cause of trans communities living in South Asia. Since then, both AKS Pakistan and AKS Copenhagen have become annual events, alongside other off shoots of AKS which have been organised in the UK, US, and Germany.

Running a film festival primarily centred around LGBTQ themed films in Pakistan does not come without its challenges. Same sex relationships are legally prohibited and discussions around rights and civil liberties of people based on their sexual orientation or preferences are at best a work in progress. Most people who do not conform to norms of heterosexuality are discreet about their sexual lives. It was in this environment of criminality, secrecy, and social ostracisation that Saadt helped AKS take its first steps in the country and subsequently establish itself as a thriving venue for dialog around issues of sexuality and gender in major Pakistani cities – Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi.

In the words of film scholar Skadi Loist, the AKS festival organisation performs what can be described as ‘precarious cultural work’[2]. AKS has been no exception to the well known situation within LGBTQ festivals that often operate without much support from the local government. Even though Saadt and his team managed to organise a five year project funding for AKS Pakistan and Copenhagen in 2016, the money mostly financed the organisational costs for the festival. Despite the project funding, AKS heavily relies on the assistance of their supporters, both in Pakistan and Denmark, and a bevy of individuals willing to work with little or no remuneration.

An abrupt disruption, strategic screenings, new audiences

In March 2020, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the festival, Saadt and other members of his team were confronted with an unprecedented challenge. As the COVID-19 virus began spreading across the globe, Pakistan went into an immediate lockdown. AKS 2020, which was scheduled in the same month, came to an abrupt halt. The organisers, who had already booked venues, paid for the screening rights of the films, published pamphlets, hired volunteers, booked national and international travel, had to suffer financial losses.

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For Saadt, the financial loss of cancelling the festival at the last minute was nothing compared to the loss of avenues that AKS film festival has created for sexual minorities living in Pakistan.

Most of our audiences come from queer community from the lower sections of society. They see the festival as a communal space where they get together to meet up with other people. With isolation, our audiences were losing out on an important part of their lives. They were not only missing out on films but also other things – such as mental health support or leadership that they find at AKS festivals.[3]

It is no surprise that LGBTQ people in Pakistan are largely marginalised and live insecure lives. AKS film festival is an important place where some of these experiences of precarity can be articulated, shared amongst others, and perhaps even be resolved.[4] The pestilence, lockdowns, social distancing norms, and the ensuing sense of panic and confusion were all too threatening to vulnerable LGBTQ people in Pakistan.

The initial feeling that gripped Saadt and his colleagues was of disappointment and fear. They scrambled to move their festival online, but it was an experiment that did not last long. There were specific reasons for the online screenings being unsuccessful. First, in Pakistan, issues of gender and sexuality are seldom discussed in the open. Hence, the organisers could not simply screen films about gender and sexuality on the internet. Instead, they were forced to look for 'safe' films i.e., films which were not about the LGBTQ community. Second, a large section of AKS festival's audience did not have access to the internet, and therefore the festival was unable to reach the people for which it was primarily instituted.

The feeling of loss and disappointment did not last long. As the pandemic extended through the following year, the festival organisers decided to return to physical screenings, albeit on a smaller scale. In 2020, the festival was not only revived in their traditional venues in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi, but also extended to other smaller cities such as Faisalabad and Hyderabad. Keeping in mind the existing COVID-19 protocols in the country, these screenings were limited to 20 persons and were on 'invitation basis only'. [5] In addition to these events, the festival also reached out to educational institutions, non-governmental organisations as well as private circles of their audience members to expand its scope. This addition to the pre-pandemic program was aptly named AKS Outreach.

Innovations with the festival program and the film format continued for AKS Pakistan 2021. To expand its collection of films, AKS partnered with other international LGBTQ festivals including Pink Life Turkey, Queer Festival Heidelberg, Germany and Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival, India. These partnerships helped AKS secure films which were relevant for their audiences in some of the new areas or groups they were screening their films with. For instance, collaborating with the Kashish festival in India helped AKS access their selection of Hindi/Urdu language LGBTQ films, which were then screened in all parts of Pakistan.

The film festival also introduced a special section titled, Made in Pakistan, which showcased short films made by local filmmakers. This section aimed at providing local filmmakers with an opportunity to screen their work. Many filmmakers in Pakistan end up making socially relevant films for an audience which is seldom located in their own geographical areas. Through AKS Outreach these filmmakers got an opportunity to show their films within their own geographies.

The story of the AKS response to the pandemic speaks of the resilience shown by its organisers to keep their film festival alive. The disruption forced the film festival organisers to move out of their established practices and seek out new ways to reach audiences. As an organisation AKS was adaptable to these new changes, even if they could not foresee the outcome of their efforts. In this, the AKS festival joins several other film festivals, currently being documented, to have found innovative solutions to keep themselves going through the pandemic.[6] Small scale film festivals have shown to be particularly adaptive through this unusual time. Writing through this period, film festival scholar Marijke de Valck noted that small festival organisations traditionally rely on ‘volunteer labour, community encouragement, eclectic support networks and creative fundraising’.[7] For Saadt and his colleagues, it was about using every available avenue to ensure they conduct a successful AKS Pakistan 2021.

Breaking new grounds / A brave new world

In 2021, AKS attracted three times the number of audiences for their screenings than they had pre-pandemic. Their screening venues increased manifold and reached parts of the country which they never believed was possible. By moving away from its traditional venues and introducing new screening locations, the festival attracted new audiences from vastly different walks of life. Talking about the AKS Pakistan 2021 festival opening Saadt’s enthusiasm was hitting the roof:

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So when we were holding screenings in universities, private houses, non-governmental organisations, all of a sudden people heard about us and they were even more eager to participate in a real, physical festival. Take for example our festival opening in Lahore. It was at a venue which accommodates about 80 people, but we ended up having 250 people who arrived to watch the film. We had to split the screening in two. The same film was screened twice in the same evening, which is very unusual.[8]

According to de Valck, in the aftermath of the pandemic, 'the longing for "real" contact will not disappear...and people are likely to reassume their affective investments in cultural encounters when opportunities arise'.[9] Hearing Saadt share his experiences of AKS Pakistan 2021, one can easily concur with de Valck's thesis that people did indeed long for 'real' encounters. The fact that AKS has been able to broaden their audience in the urban centres of Pakistan is testament to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic not only made people long for the physical contact they had before the pandemic, but also seek out new forms of social and cultural encounters, something that AKS provided them with.

Kami, a Khwaja Sira (trans) community leader based in Karachi has been working with AKS since its inception. Kami overlooks the festival work in Karachi. According to Kami:

In 2021, AKS covered 32 screening venues over ten different cities. And we were successfully having screenings in places where we could have never imagined, such as outskirts of Peshawar which is quite a conservative part of Pakistan or Quetta, and is under military control. With AKS Outreach we have been able to use our activist/volunteer network to organise screenings in these smaller venues to great success.[10]

An important lesson one draws from LGBTQ film festival research is how the festival as a place allows us to grasp the social isolation and disconnectedness faced by vulnerable groups such as LGBTQ people (Chadha 2021). AKS is not simply a film festival showcasing a selection of films, but rather, it allows access to a discourse which challenges the heteronormative norms within society. It is a safe space where the organisers, volunteers, guests, and audiences collectively experience, understand and talk about things that cannot be discussed outside the festival. To emphasise the importance of AKS Outreach, Kami explained:

Everytime something is organised for the trans or LGBTQ communities, it is inevitably in the urban cities where the audience is more or less familiar with these themes. In the rural areas or

smaller towns, there are seldom any events. But this does not mean there are no issues there. Or that no trans people live there.[11]

Film festivals have become sedimented in society as an urban phenomenon. They seldom reach out to audiences who are in the periphery and unable to access them in the city. In the context of South Asia which is mired by deep social and economic inequalities, this means that people who live outside the urban centres are, in a sense, denied access to images that reflect their own sensibilities or desires. For many LGBTQ audiences, a film festival like AKS is the first time they ever see images that portray same sex relationships or alternative sexualities. The embrace that AKS festival has found in the peripheral centres of Pakistan is reflective of how established patterns within the film festival ecosystem limit our imagination about the influence of films in society.

Re-thinking resilience

AKS no longer relies on Saadt and other members of their group to exclusively host their screenings. Instead, several local filmmakers, activists, and volunteers host AKS screenings in their own areas. This shift in the festival format allows Saadt and other organisers to focus on important tasks including fundraising and other creative innovations to expand their reach within Pakistan.

Despite these gains, the future of the AKS festival remains precarious. Even as volunteers from the community and the local support networks are driving the festival to unprecedented success, the program funding of the AKS festival has come to an end. At present, it is unclear to Saadt how financial support for the future will be secured. In the meanwhile, though, he has some ideas for 2022.

This year we are keeping it slow. For the first five years of our festival, we were supported by a program which has now ended. So right now, we are not sure how we are going to manage financially. But one of our ideas is to keep it bohemian – the way we started. We are going to ask filmmakers to get their films. We have the set up and the equipment to screen their films. If we don't have money, we will just go on anyway. If we have money, that's good. Then we have some food too (laughs).[12]

There is much irony in the fact that a film festival such as AKS faces precarious conditions for much of its organisational lifetime. And the constant confrontation with these challenges, which it braves through the continuing support of its supporters and volunteers perhaps left it well-prepared with the necessary resilience required to face

the pandemic. During the pandemic, many small-scale film festivals received little or no support from their local governments. Yet they did not shut down since they were already accustomed to functioning with minimal resources, with the help of their supporters.

One must however not mistake this resilience for sufficiency. AKS 2021 is an excellent reminder that the importance of film festivals in society extend far beyond their commercial considerations. Is it not then in the wider interest of all stakeholders to remain attentive to the presence and requirements of smaller film festivals such as AKS?

A methodological footnote

Peering through a film festival from a digital space poses methodological challenges that are difficult to surpass. After all, a film festival is not simply a showcase of films but much more – its audiences, events, dialogues, performances, and the festive environment that it creates. To follow the AKS International Minorities Festival 2021, I had to rely on the testimonies of the festival organisers, Saadt and Kami, and an account of the festival held in Karachi written by Hafsa Arain, a PhD candidate at Boston University. In addition, I had access to video clips and photographs shot on mobile phones and circulated over the Instagram and Facebook pages of the festival. Yet as a film festival ethnographer, I was constantly aware of the absence of a ‘real’ contact with the festival which can only be achieved by being there.

The researcher’s presence at a festival not only enables them to observe what takes place, but also provides myriad opportunities for chance and encounter – especially at a small-scale film festival such as AKS. This could have been about striking a friendship while lifting chairs or noting the absences at the festival – who was not there, what could have happened but did not happen, etc. Digital ethnographies, such as the one presented here, limits our ability to not only faithfully represent our own observations about a film festival but also precludes the possibility of fulfilling our own affective investments in the festivals we research.

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Notes

- [1] See <http://www.aksfestival.com/> (accessed 22 April 2022)
- [2] Loist 2011, p. 268
- [3] Sadat Muneer, personal interview, April 2022.
- [4] Butler 2006; Allison 2013.
- [5] Sadat Muneer, personal interview, April 2022.
- [6] de Valck 2020.
- [7] Ibid., p. 133.
- [8] Sadat Muneer, personal interview, April 2022.
- [9] de Valck 2020.
- [10] Kami, personal interview, April 2022.
- [11] Ibid
- [12] Sadat Muneer, personal interview, April 2022.