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Sociological analysis of the forms of collective actions by sexual and
gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal

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MSS in Social Work

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Philosophy (PhD)

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the collective actions of sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal (Within India), particularly focusing on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the dynamics within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and more (LGBT+) communities. The project is rooted primarily in sociology, incorporating ethnographic methods for specific aspects. It uses several methods to observe five different organisations and two social media groups that are not only located in metropolitan cities but also outside the big cities, which is often overlooked in academic research literature. Through exploring queer celebration events, social media spaces, and narratives of resource mobilisation to create a collective agency, this thesis highlights both solidarity and internal discrimination in overcoming stigma and oppression. Tensions arise from oppressive regimes, religious dominance, conflicting pressures of global LGBT+ advocacy and local socio-cultural contexts, often leading to exclusion and division. Despite a rich pre-colonial history of diverse gender and sexual identities, the current framing of LGBT+ rights as opposed to religion perpetuates misconceptions and limits effective collective action. However, emphasising local culture, religious reconciliation, and the resilience of queer labour, friendship, and care offers pathways to address resource gaps and foster creative agency within these communities.

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Author's declaration

“I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.”

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Signature:

Glossary List

AAS: Ashar Alo Society

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

BPC: Bangladesh Panel Code

BRAC: Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

CTA: Criminal Tribes Act

CBO: Community-based organisation

CrPC: Code of Criminal Procedure

COVID: Coronavirus disease

COC Netherlands: The most prominent LGBTI NGO in the Netherlands

CPM: Communist Party Marxist

DSD: Disorder of Sex Development

DMP: Dhaka Metropolitan Police

FCRA: Foreign Currency Regulatory Act

GLIFAA: Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies

GDP: Gender Diverse population

GSM: Gender and Sexual Minority

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HOP: Hang out place

INGO: International Non-Government Organisation

ICCR: Indian Council for Cultural Relations

JPGSPH: BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health

LGBTAIQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Asexual, Intersex, Queer and Others

MSM: Men who have sex with men

MoSW: The Ministry of Social Welfare

NGOAB: NGO Affairs Bureau

NGO: Non-Government Organisation

NALSA: National Legal Services Authority

NVivo: The premier software for qualitative data analysis

QRM: Queer Revolution Morocco

RAB: Rapid Action Battalion

SAATHII: Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

SGBV: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

SOGIESC: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression, and Sex Characteristics

SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

STI: Sexually Transmitted Infection

STD: Sexually Transmitted Disease

TOR: An open-source web browser that protects a user's privacy and anonymity by using onion routing to encrypt and direct traffic

TEDx: Technology, Entertainment, and Design. A TEDx event is a local gathering where live TED-like talks and performances are shared with the community.

UN: United Nations

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

VPN: Virtual Private Network

WIX: A software company that provides cloud-based web development services. It offers tools for creating websites and mobile sites using online drag-and-drop editing.

“I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.”

Printed Name: Tanvir Alim

Signature:

Chapter 1

Introducing the study and rationale

1.1 Introduction

This thesis sociologically examines collective action by queer organisations in Bangladesh and West Bengal (a state within India), a subject largely unexplored in previous social research literature. The research focuses on how queer individuals in both regions engage in collective actions, shedding light on social processes that often go unnoticed. By documenting the work of five queer collectives and two social media groups, the study breaks new ground by including groups based outside the capitals, a focus often neglected by other scholars. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of queer activism in less-studied, non-urban areas. The research employs a variety of innovative methods, which have not been used before, providing unique perspectives on queer organising in South Asia.

The thesis provides a sociological analysis of the forms of collective actions by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal. The primary research question for this project is: ‘How should sociological analysis interpret the forms of collective actions by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal?’ In addition to this central question, three sub-questions guide the research: first, what role does digital culture play in contemporary forms of collective action? Second, how does transnational resource sharing within an NGO-driven space impact movement building? Finally, how is traditional culture, in the context of queer collective action, reflected in the oral histories of community members?

The relationship between large, well-funded NGOs and smaller, partially funded community NGOs highlights a power imbalance based on control of resources and recognition. Large NGOs often take control of grassroots movements, either to dominate the narrative or address issues of marginalised communities. By incorporating smaller NGOs, they maintain power and ensure that grassroots groups rely on them for funding and legitimacy.

Additionally, the bureaucratic nature of funded NGOs often leads to repetitive activism that doesn't bring meaningful change, as they focus more on maintaining donor relationships than on achieving real transformation. In contrast, smaller community NGOs, despite limited resources, are more efficient and focused on impactful, community-driven work. However, their contributions are often overlooked in academic discussions, which tend to focus on larger, institutionalised efforts. This exclusion marginalises their role, reinforcing a top-down approach to movement-building that ignores the importance of locally driven activism.

Methodologically speaking, the thesis introduces organisations outside the capitals, which have largely been overlooked in previous studies. It highlights their collective actions, using a variety of original methods, offering a fresh perspective in the context of these regions. The study also addresses the role of social media in shaping queer activism and explores the complex emotions of shame and pride within the community, a topic rarely discussed. Additionally, the research delves into how these organisations creatively manage resources to mobilise and empower their members. It underscores the challenges faced by queer groups in non-capital areas and the innovative ways they navigate limited resources. By focusing on grassroots organisations, the study brings new insights into the dynamics of queer activism beyond urban centres.

Overall, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of queer collective action in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal.

This project is primarily grounded in sociology, with ethnographic methods incorporated for specific aspects. It also engages with other disciplines, including interdisciplinary gender and sexuality studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and anthropology. The thesis is structured into eight chapters, four of which focus on data: queer celebration events, social media, NGOs as platforms, and agency. The queer event chapter focuses on contemporary organising, while the social media chapter examines queer visibility politics. The NGO chapter analyses the impact of global queer movements, and the concluding chapter discusses how contemporary organising, visibility politics, and global influences create tensions with the existing local culture. These chapters focus not just on the struggles faced by queer communities but also on their resilience, creativity, and collective actions, offering a new lens through which to view queer movements in South Asia.

This thesis explores how the dominance of visibility activism, influenced by global norms, is seen as progressive, creating a complex paradox within queer collective actions. The research shows that, to integrate into the local political culture, queer collectives sometimes overlook internal tensions. These tensions are evident in the data chapters, where collective actions often fail to acknowledge the interconnectedness and complexities of the struggles. By highlighting the contradictions and challenges faced by queer organisations, this thesis ultimately provides a deeper understanding of collective actions in Bangladesh and West Bengal, revealing the ingenuity and resourcefulness of these movements in navigating difficult political landscapes.

In the first section of this introductory chapter, the historical and social contexts of West Bengal (within India) and Bangladesh are presented, laying

the groundwork for understanding the region's queer movements. This first section of the introductory chapter provides insights into the unique cultural, political, and social dynamics of these two areas, which shape the lives and experiences of queer individuals. The second section shifts focus to an exploration of sexuality and gender beyond heterosexual norms, utilising decolonial and post-colonial frameworks to analyse how these identities are formed and understood in South Asia. By critiquing Western-centric narratives, this section emphasises the need for a more localised approach to understanding queer identities in these regions. The third section delves into the history of collective actions and queer movements in South Asia, presenting a detailed overview of activism and the evolution of LGBT+ rights across the region. It traces the journey of queer organising, from its early emergence to the contemporary struggles and achievements of LGBT+ groups. The latter section explores how migration and cross-border movements affect queer communities, particularly concerning the interconnectedness of activists and organisations in neighbouring countries. Examining the flow of ideas and individuals across borders, it highlights how regional solidarity and shared experiences contribute to collective queer action. The discussion concludes by emphasising the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, and activism in South Asia, illustrating how local and global factors influence these elements. This foundational analysis sets the stage for a deeper understanding of queer movements in the region and the unique challenges they face.

Complex interactions between authoritarianism, nationalism, minority rights, and cultural preservation shape the sociopolitical landscapes of Bangladesh and West Bengal (within India). While political leaders have maintained tight control over their respective regions, social and cultural exchanges continue to thrive among the population, reflecting deep-seated historical and cultural

connections. Having outlined the conceptualisation of the core idea of the thesis in this section, the following section will turn to conceptualising the specific issue of collective actions by LGBT+ movements in South Asia.

1.2 Researcher's Positionality

I am particularly interested in this research topic, as I have been working with the queer community members of Bangladesh, as a self-identified queer person, for the last seventeen years. I want to formally articulate my experience for academics, as well as for community leaders and INGO decision-makers, so that they can use this knowledge in future for movement building.

I was born and raised in different cities in Bangladesh, which gave me exposure to different cultures. I am therefore familiar with small changes in dialect, local manners, and culture-specific norms. I was brought up in a Muslim family, with parents coming from different districts and following different cultural traditions. My work experience in various international organisations based in Bangladesh, as a senior manager, includes funding decisions. It gave me exposure to donor organisations and how decisions are made in cases of funding.

My privilege to have internet access gave me information about different groups for numerous years, and this is how I was introduced to the community. When I was twenty-six, I gained the courage to be a member of a gay community group by volunteering for them. Later, I came to know about the word 'queer' from different activists' circles. I found myself increasingly fitting in these circles, but in the same time I realised that I do not fit into the normative construction of gender and sexualities in my surroundings.

I came across other community groups outside the capital and learnt about the class structure, which plays a dynamic role in identity politics (Karim, 2014, p. 119). Initially, my community work also made me aware of how transnational AIDS networks have initiated and shaped the movement with a certain health-focused lens, when I had little information about the local history and traditions outside the capital (Dhaka).

As a community member, I have been volunteering with queer community groups for the last fifteen years, and thus I have come to know of many community groups in the capital as well as outside the capital. I have networks within these groups with which I have helped with writing grant proposals and workshop facilitation, and this, in turn, has helped me to develop my insight and understanding of types of collective actions. Speaking the same language helped me build trust in Bangladesh as well as West Bengal (India). This assured the best use of resources, as limits to trust mean that a researcher's access to socially excluded individuals and groups can become extremely difficult, time-consuming, and resource-intensive (Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh and Sales, 2007, p. 11). In contexts like Bangladesh and West Bengal, power dynamics between gatekeepers and socially excluded individuals often shape their interactions. Gatekeepers, who control access to resources or opportunities, may exercise significant influence over marginalised groups, reinforcing dependency and unequal relationships. These dynamics reflect broader societal hierarchies, perpetuating exclusion and limiting the autonomy of marginalised individuals.

From my position as a researcher, my decade-long experience with a volunteer-based, nonfunded queer collective shaped my understanding of collective actions and the dynamics of resource management. In 2020, the collective I used to volunteer with began receiving substantial funding,

growing significantly in human resources, and securing around £100,000 in a year. Observing from a distance during my PhD, I noted that while funding brought expansion, it also increased workloads and created tensions within the management team. The focus of many staff members shifted from passion-driven work to service delivery tied to payments, leading to disputes over fund allocation and transparency. During my initial fieldwork, a major conflict between the management and advisory board escalated to legal proceedings, highlighting how large-scale funding can strain relationships and prioritise quantity over values like passion and deliberation. This incident profoundly influenced my perspective on collective actions, underscoring the challenges of balancing growth with the foundational ethos of grassroots movements.

1.3 Sexualities and Genders beyond Heterosexuality

Throughout this thesis, terms such as LGBT+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and others), queer, and non-normative gender and sexuality are used somewhat loosely across different chapters. This deliberate flexibility stems from three considerations: first, the Eurocentric separation of gender and sexuality inherent in these terms may not align with the South Asian context (Jackson, 2000, p 405). Second, many queer community members I engaged with identify fluidly. Finally, the terminologies and concepts often originate from Eurocentric frameworks, which do not fully capture the nuances of the collective actions discussed in this analysis. Maria Lugones, in her essay, 'The Coloniality of Gender,' demonstrates that men who have been racialised as inferior exhibit the systematic violence inflicted upon women of colour. Although binary sex was recognised in the colonised, the prior absence of dichotomous gender marked them as non-human and exploitable; at the same time, non-white women were erased since different dichotomies were

characterised by their superior member, such as ‘woman’ meant white woman (Lugones, 2010). Lugones argues that gender itself is a colonial introduction, which is used to destroy people and communities as the building ground of the civilised West. This shift is also reflected in various texts from that period, where colonial influences redefined masculinity in the subcontinent, often marginalising the presence of eunuchs and other ambiguous identities. Similarly, in the Indian context, Charu Gupta studied masculinity in colonial India in her article about anxious Hindu masculinities in colonial North India, with a particular focus on Shuddhi and Sangathan movements. She argued how women and non-conforming identities were marginalised, embedding patriarchal values into the emerging nationalist discourse.

In colonial India, manhood emerged as a national preoccupation. Colonialism justified itself through masculine images, and nationalism worked out its own versions of it, expressing individual concerns to collective anxieties over the nation's manliness and femaleness. Masculinity was expressed in various ways: from Vivekananda to Gandhi, from Sana tan Dharmists to Arya Samajists, from notions of brahmacharya (celibacy) to the images of a warrior Krishna (Gupta, 2011, p 448)

In colonial India, the concept of manhood became a focal point, intertwining with both colonial justifications and nationalist reimagining of identity. The colonial regime framed itself as the bearer of masculine dominance, portraying colonised subjects as effeminate to legitimise its authority. In response, Indian nationalism sought to reclaim and redefine masculinity, manifesting in diverse forms that oscillated between ascetic ideals like Vivekananda's celibacy and the militant depictions of Krishna as a warrior. These varied expressions reflected broader tensions, as nationalists grappled with the dual pressures of

asserting strength against colonial narratives while maintaining cultural authenticity. This preoccupation with masculinity, however, often marginalised women and non-conforming identities, embedding patriarchal values into the emerging nationalist discourse, thus perpetuating hierarchical gender dynamics.

Colonialism recognised binary sex among the colonised but denied them a dichotomous gender, marking them as exploitable and dehumanised. In colonial India, masculinity became central to identity, with colonial rulers portraying themselves as dominant and colonised subjects as effeminate to justify their rule. Sinha in her book introduction on the ‘mainly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ in the nineteenth century mentioned that *Hobson-Jobson*, a glossary of British words and phrases in India compiled in the 1980’s suggests that in the popular colonial imagination the word *babu* had come to mean primarily ‘a native Clark who writes in English’ (Sinha, 1995, p 18). As the editors of this volume noted, the word was used with ‘a slight savour of disparagement, as characterising a superficially cultivated but too often effeminate Bengali’. Nationalist movements reimagined masculinity to counter colonial depictions, intertwining gender with broader political struggles. This thesis employs terms like LGBT+, queer, and non-normative gender and sexuality with flexibility, reflecting the complexity and context-dependence of these concepts.

1.4 Queer Collective Actions in South Asia: From Historical Organising to the Present

Bangladesh and India are in a complex interplay of preserving and promoting indigenous cultures while navigating the influences and opportunities of a

rapidly globalising digital world. Both Bangladesh and India have rich cultural heritages and problematic histories of colonialism that continue to shape their postcolonial identities. If we look back at history, part of this subcontinent was colonised by different nations between 1757 and 1947: the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British. Walter D. Mignolo, in his work on modernity, coloniality and de-coloniality argues about challenging these inherited frameworks that seek to reveal the deep entanglements with oppressive logic. According to him, this unveiling is crucial to dismantling the grip these narratives hold over both thought and practice.

Epistemic decolonisation is still of the essence since we are still living under the set of beliefs inherited from Theology and secularised by Philosophy and Science as well as the belief that ‘capitalism’ (and above all in its neo-liberal rhetoric and practice) and ‘economy’ are one and the same phenomenon. De-colonization (of the mind) must unveil the totalitarian complicity of the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality in order to open up space for the possibility, following the rhetoric of the World Social Forum as well as the Zapatistas, of ‘another world’ in which many worlds will co-exist (Mignolo, 2007, p 469).

Mignolo claims that epistemic decolonisation addresses the ongoing dominance of belief systems, which continue to shape global thought and reinforce inequalities. This process critiques the assumption that capitalism and economy are synonymous, particularly under ideologies that obscure alternative ways of organising societies and economies. It calls for a profound rethinking of knowledge, power, and economic organisation to foster equity and diversity. Decoloniality, in this context of South Asia, involves reclaiming and valorising indigenous knowledge, practices, and cultural expressions that

were marginalised during colonial rule. Bengal has been partitioned multiple times; the first territorial reorganisation along religious lines took place in 1905 under Lord Curzon, to be reunited again in 1911 under King George V, following intense protests at this divide-and-rule policy. In 1947, the last British Viceroy of India, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, announced that Britain had agreed to the partition of India (Madsen, 2015, p 473). This division led to the creation of two separate nations: a primarily Hindu India and a predominantly Muslim Pakistan. In 1971, an internal crisis in Pakistan led East Pakistan to secede from Pakistan and become the independent country of Bangladesh. Efforts to reconcile these forces involve a critical engagement with both decolonial and digital paradigms, seeking ways to harness the benefits of digital technologies while safeguarding and revitalising local cultural identities and practices.

In both places, Bangladesh and West Bengal, there is an emphasis on promoting and preserving indigenous languages that were suppressed during colonial times. The emphasis on indigenous languages and Bangla culture serves as both a form of resistance against past colonialism and a means of strengthening regional identity in the face of modern challenges. The Bengali Language Movement in Bangladesh, for instance, played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence. Similarly, in West Bengal, there has been a sustained effort to promote Bengali as a marker of regional identity. This focus on language is not just about cultural preservation but also about resisting the homogenising forces of globalisation and centralisation. This includes efforts to ensure these languages thrive in educational, governmental, and public domains. The dominance of English and other global languages in digital platforms challenges these efforts. While there are initiatives to develop digital content in local languages, the widespread use of English and its

association with contemporary progress can undermine the status of indigenous languages.

Forms of collective action give a picture of protest and demonstration, political campaigns or strikes. Melucci highlights how modern shifts in social dynamics, power structures, and conflicts complicate the analysis of collective action.

Whether wittingly or not, the debate on the significance of collective action always embraces the issue of power relationships, and on closer examination derives its energy from defending or contesting a specific position or form of dominance (Melucci, 1996, p 2).

According to Melucci, the discourse on collective action is inherently tied to the issue of power, as it often involves defending or challenging specific forms of authority or dominance. Ultimately, understanding collective action requires recognising these power dynamics and the stakes they represent in social and political struggles. Here, in the context of queer organising in Bangladesh and India, the discussion examines different strategies and methods through which queer community groups seek to assert their interests and achieve social change. It refers to the activities undertaken by queer community groups with a shared interest in achieving a common goal, particularly in a social context. The effectiveness and appropriateness of each form can vary depending on the context and the goals of the collective action. Snow and Benford (2000) defined their work as framing processes and social movements. They argued that 'collective action frames' enable individuals to weave together diverse and sometimes disparate threads of information so that they can become meaningfully interconnected and articulated (Benford & Snow, 2000, p 625). Their narrative provided analytical vocabulary, which in my view can be applied to queer individuals and their actions that enable them

to weave together diverse and disparate threads of information so that they can become meaningfully interconnected and articulated. By doing so, it allows them to see these issues as interconnected and motivates them to participate in collective action aimed at addressing broader systemic problems.

The discussion of collective action includes grassroots efforts that build power within communities, enabling them to address local issues and advocate for their needs. Additionally, it encompasses coordinated actions aimed at influencing policymakers and legislators through both direct and indirect persuasion. Together, these approaches strengthen community voices and drive broader social change. Furthermore, the analysis discusses the use of digital tools and platforms to organise, mobilise, and communicate collective action to spread awareness, coordinate actions, and influence public discourse. The discussion in this thesis also highlights queer organisations and their way of engaging non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for advocacy and service delivery, to influence policy and public opinion through organised, non-state efforts.

Considering the social context of Bangladesh and West Bengal, the next section examines several laws that influence queer collective actions. These laws are further discussed in subsequent chapters of the thesis, which explore their impact on queer organising. Furthermore, the chapters will present original arguments about how the queer community is finding innovative ways to navigate and mobilise within these legal frameworks.

1.5 Laws that impact queer collective activism

In 1860, the British Raj, in directly governed British territories, replaced the criminal offences and punishments with those of the 1860 Indian Penal Code.

Section 377 covers intercourse against the order of nature. The law stated: "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with [imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine" (Baudh, 2013, p 289). In a landmark judgment on September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court of India decriminalised consensual same-sex relations by striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (Reilly, 2020, p 549). This ruling was a major victory for the LGBT+ community, affirming their right to equality and freedom from discrimination. One year after marriage equality was first proposed, and five years after the High Court overturned Section 377, India's 2023 Supreme Court ruling declared that there is no inherent right to marriage and that unions between same-sex individuals cannot be incorporated into the Special Marriage Act of 1954 (Kuttappan and Kaur, 2025, p 1). This was a disappointment to the queer collectives, but the repeal of Section 377 has had positive effects in lessening the stigma around queer individuals and has marked a significant step towards greater societal acceptance of their rights. The right to assemble peacefully is guaranteed under Article 19(1)(b) of the Indian Constitution. This right extends to all citizens, including members of the queer community. However, societal attitudes and local authorities can influence the practical exercise of this right.

The legal environment for queer rights in India has seen significant progress, especially with the landmark 2018 Supreme Court ruling that decriminalised homosexuality by striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This ruling marked a major victory for the queer movement, allowing greater visibility and activism for queer rights. However, challenges remain in terms of social acceptance, discrimination, and the legal recognition of same-sex relationships and marriages.

Homosexuality remains illegal under Section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code, which criminalises ‘unnatural offences’. The queer community faces severe social stigma, discrimination, and the risk of legal persecution. Public advocacy for queer rights is extremely challenging, and the movement is largely underground, with activists often operating in a hostile environment. While India has made significant strides in advancing queer rights legally, Bangladesh continues to maintain strict legal prohibitions against homosexuality, limiting the scope of queer activism. Overall, the legal situation for the queer movement in Bangladesh and India has notable differences, reflecting distinct social, cultural, and legal contexts. Having outlined the conceptualisation of various issues in the thesis in this section, the following section will turn to conceptualising the specific issue of the two Bengals and the border.

1.6 The Two Bengals: Borders and transboundary

The partition of India in 1947 was the result of an agreement between the British colonial rulers, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League, led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, which aimed to address the demands for a separate Muslim-majority state. The agreement led to the creation of two independent nations—India and Pakistan—on August 15, 1947, with Pakistan being divided into West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The partition was marked by widespread violence, mass migrations, and the redrawing of borders based on religious lines. British colonial rule played a pivotal role in the formation and exacerbation of Hindu and Muslim identities, particularly through strategies of divide and rule (Zaman, 2024, p 85). While large-scale communal riots and conflicts emerged primarily during the colonial period, the British fostered distinct political

identities by emphasising the "elite-mass" divide and reinforcing religious distinctions between Hindus and Muslims. This led to the politicisation of religion and the deepening of communal tensions. Notably, before British rule, the Indian subcontinent was under Muslim rule for nearly 200 years, but local identities were less sharply defined, suggesting that colonialism significantly shaped the modern communal divide. The British imperial policies amplified societal divisions that have had lasting political and cultural repercussions in the region.

East Pakistan, however, remained politically and economically marginalised, leading to a struggle for autonomy. This culminated in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, when East Pakistan, with the support of India, achieved independence on December 16, 1971, and became the sovereign nation of Bangladesh. The war highlighted the consequences of regional inequality, the failure of political integration, and the deep cultural and linguistic divides that had been ignored by the central government, which ultimately led to the birth of a new nation.

To provide a comprehensive political context, it is essential to note the political landscape during the study's timeframe. In Bangladesh, the ruling political party was the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had been in power for two decades. Meanwhile, in India, the dominant political force was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with Narendra Modi serving as Prime Minister since 2014. In the Indian state of West Bengal, the political landscape was primarily dominated by the All-India Trinamool Congress (TMC) under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who has held office since 2011. Notably, West Bengal was previously governed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for 34 years, marking the longest-serving democratically elected communist-led government in the

world. These political ideologies have shaped cultural practices in the region, a trend observed during fieldwork. In August 2024, a significant political shift occurred in Bangladesh when Prime Minister Hasina fled to India, and a caretaker government took charge. This turbulent political backdrop offers valuable insights into the dynamics influencing the study's findings.

The relationship between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh is deeply rooted in shared history, culture, and language, but it is also shaped by political separation and evolving transboundary issues. Historically, the region of Bengal was a unified cultural and geographic entity, with a shared literary and artistic heritage that remains vibrant on both sides of the border. The partition of Bengal created distinct political entities, yet the cultural ties have endured. Both Bengals celebrate literary figures, share festivals, and enjoy a common culinary tradition. Cross-border cultural exchanges through music, films, and literature have continued to foster a sense of shared identity, even as nationalism and statehood emphasise their differences.

The two Bengals exhibit both cooperation and contention. Economic linkages, including trade in textiles and agricultural products, have grown, but issues such as migration, border management, and river water disputes often strain relations. However, globalisation and regional platforms provide opportunities for enhanced collaboration. By focusing on shared heritage, economic interdependence, and cultural diplomacy, the two Bengals navigate their intertwined destinies in ways that transcend political boundaries, illustrating the enduring complexity and potential of their relationship.

The idea of transboundary encounters is introduced for capturing the complexity of the two Bengals, recognising their shared past and ongoing connections, and understanding how these elements interact with broader global processes. Go and Lawson discuss the concept in 'Global Historical

Sociology’ where they argue that this approach emphasises the transboundary encounters where different social forces, ideas, or movements meet and influence each other. These encounters occur in contact zones, which are areas where interactions happen, leading to transformation.

Global historical sociology explores the transboundary encounters between entities-in-motion. These are the contact zones and/or interstitial spaces where actors engage in novel interactions... These in-between spaces are often the sites through which interactions either transform existing social orders or produce novel forms, objects, or entities – whether these are imperial states, revolutionary movements, new ideas about political economy, or even capitalism itself (Go and Lawson, 2017, p 27).

Go and Lawson called for examining how social spaces—traditionally viewed as separate, like national or global—are interconnected and affect one another. It challenges the analytical divisions that separate these spaces in traditional social science. In this case, both Bangladesh and West Bengal have experienced significant political changes, influenced by broader regional and global trends, but they have also diverged in key aspects due to their different national contexts. Understanding these differences and similarities requires looking at how global forces and local realities interact across borders.

Transboundary encounters help in understanding how historical, cultural, and linguistic ties have persisted across borders, despite the political separation into two distinct nations. This shared heritage is crucial to grasp the ongoing social, cultural, and even political exchanges between the two Bengals. Issues related to minority rights and ethnic tensions often have varied dimensions. The treatment of minorities, such as religious or ethnic groups, can have implications across borders, influencing policies, public opinion, and even

international relations between India and Bangladesh. Here in this study, transboundary encounters allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how these issues are interconnected and how they impact both sides of the border. This approach acknowledges the fluidity of borders and how people, goods, and ideas continue to move between Bangladesh and West Bengal. Migratory flows, economic trade, and familial ties transcend political boundaries, making it essential to view these interactions beyond a strictly national framework. This perspective helps in understanding how communities navigate and negotiate their identities in a context where borders are both real and permeable.

The legacy of colonialism and the subsequent formation of nation-states have left deep imprints on both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Transboundary encounters allow for an exploration of how colonial and postcolonial histories have shaped the socio-political landscapes of both regions, highlighting the similarities and differences in their trajectories of state formation, governance, and identity politics. Having outlined the conceptualisation of various issues in the thesis in this section, the following section will outline the thesis.

1.7 Outline of the thesis

This thesis offers a sociological examination of collective actions by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal, with a particular focus on organisations outside major urban centers, which have been largely overlooked in previous research. By employing a range of original methods, the study provides a fresh perspective on queer activism in these regions. It explores the role of social media in shaping queer movements and examines the complex emotions of shame and pride within the community—an area

seldom addressed in existing literature. Additionally, the research investigates how grassroots organisations creatively manage resources to mobilise and empower their members, highlighting the unique challenges faced by queer groups in non-capital areas. By centering on these organisations, the thesis offers valuable insights into queer activism beyond urban centers, contributing to a deeper understanding of collective action in Bangladesh and West Bengal.

In this introductory chapter, the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal (within India) is briefly outlined, providing a foundation for the study. The chapter explores sexuality and gender beyond heterosexuality through the lens of decolonial and post-colonial academic perspectives. The chapter highlights collective actions and movements in South Asia, offering a brief overview of the region's queer activism. The discussion touches upon the impact of migration and cross-border dynamics on communities in the region. Overall, it sets the stage for understanding the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, and activism in South Asia.

The second chapter of the thesis outlines the theoretical foundations guiding the project. It engages with postcolonial and decolonial theories to examine how global power dynamics shape identity, activism, and knowledge production, while also acknowledging their limitations in capturing local, grassroots realities. The concepts of homocolonialism and homonationalism are used to critique the ways queer identities are framed within state agendas and transnational funding structures. Additionally, the chapter draws on literature on social movements, civil society, and the NGO-isation of activism to explore how institutional and cultural factors both support and restrict collective action. Together, these frameworks offer a critical lens for understanding the tensions between visibility, resistance, and negotiation within queer activism as shaped by local and global forces.

The third chapter addresses the gap that exists in the literature in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal (India). The chapter analyses the history of NGOs in Bangladesh and West Bengal (India), and how sexual health funding has shaped that in both contexts. This chapter highlights a significant gap in the existing academic research on queer collective actions, particularly those led by communities outside metropolitan areas and isolated groups. Previous studies have predominantly focused on NGOs, feminist movements, or prominent urban queer collectives, overlooking smaller, grassroots initiatives. This reflects a broader trend in institutional research to prioritise mainstream movements while sidelining less visible actors. By addressing these gaps, the chapter shows the need to fill the gap by including diverse voices in queer activism research. Through this approach, the chapter underscores the need for inclusive research practices that capture the multiplicity of queer activism in diverse sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

The fourth chapter of the thesis is about research design. It starts with the main research question and researchers' positionality and reflexivity. Later, it gives the concept about the organisations, which are the NGOs, CBOs and community NGOs. The fourth section of the research design chapter is about ethics, and it continues the discussion around data protection, where the discussion addresses anonymity and pseudonyms. Considering the sensitive nature of the data, there are difficult ethical issues in this study, especially about measures to protect participants and this section highlights that with arguments. There is a section on fieldwork risk assessment later. The rest of the chapter is about methods of data collection and analysis processes for different methods. It discusses the recruitment of participants for this project, and sampling, specifically the details about why and how four methods were used to collect the data. The four methods that were used for this project are in-depth interviews, event observation, digital ethnography and creative

workshops. These combined methods are unique and have not been previously used for studying collective actions in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal.

The fifth chapter is titled *Introducing the Organisations*. The purpose of this chapter is to deliver an account of each organisation, followed by a comparative analysis of the organisations concerning their resources and with whom they work. Many of the interviews discussed in this chapter focus on how the organisations formed and their early origins, with some practices also referencing pre-colonial traditions. In the end, there is a comparison between the organisations based on how they are funded in categories and how they include and exclude community members for their various activities. The chapter also presents the annual budgets of the organisations to highlight their material resources, something which is often kept confidential in many other studies. It concludes with a comparative analysis of these five organisations, evaluating them not only on material resources but also on other forms of resources and resource sharing. This approach contrasts with the more common big-city-centric academic research. By broadening the evaluation, the chapter provides a more holistic view of how these organisations operate.

The sixth chapter names resources, queer labour and friendship in the forms of collective actions. The chapter explores creative and cultural events. Over three decades, the queer movements in Bangladesh and West Bengal have used various strategies, media and messages to combat stigma, discrimination and violence against queer people in different social spheres. Cultural tools have been pivotal in these efforts. Despite limited resources, numerous innovative artistic and cultural initiatives emerged in the early years. These art and cultural advocacy initiatives created numerous safe spaces for queer people, fostering community and visibility. These were not just physical

spaces, but also emotional and creative, as queer people could gather, feel protected, and find friendships. Here, the traditional and contemporary culture is discussed in the light of decolonial theories. There is a discussion about indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality in this chapter, which shows that gender and sexuality beyond heterosexuality peacefully coexisted in the subcontinent for a long time. The first section of the chapter narrates the creative workshops that were organised for data collection. The second section deals with the external events that were observed for the project, with an analysis. Finally, there is a section evaluating the respectability of these events that queer community members organise as a form of collective action. The chapter provides an analysis of culture and social interaction in the organisations, and about their non-economic resources, and external social contexts. This chapter fills a gap in the academic literature by focusing on queer events and exploring creative methodologies. It offers a new perspective on collective action, presenting insights that have not been previously discussed. While topics like queer parties, drag culture, and events such as *Badhai* have been explored, the research on events featured in this study of queer collective actions is unique. By highlighting these distinctive aspects of queer collective action, the research contributes original findings to queer studies in South Asia.

The name of the seventh chapter is Half-truths in a queer digital life. The digital life of queer collectives and how they create a sanctuary is discussed in chapter six. This chapter provides some examples of how young queer individuals connect through phatic communication and the changing interface of social media. Previously, in various literature, there has been a discussion around queer fan fiction and fandom as a means to connect. The chapter presents two case studies: one from Bangladesh and one from India. The case from Bangladesh is about how the queer community react collectively in cases

of backlash. The case study from India describes how community members react and express their joy and grief after a collective action like Pride. The chapter ends with an evaluation of these collective emotions and how queer groups express their collective emotions online. The chapter presents an original analytical argument addressing the role of social media in shaping collective actions online and explores the complex emotions of shame and pride within the community, a topic rarely discussed.

The final analysis chapter is titled Resource Distribution and Organisational Cultures. The chapter examines the concept of NGOization. While the previous chapter on social media and queer celebration events explored various methods of mobilising cultural resources, this chapter shifts focus to the analysis of economic resources. This analysis is crucial for understanding the international politics of queer rights, as some nationally based organisations are connected to transnational and international actors through funding and strategic guidance. The first section examines organisational narratives surrounding resource sharing, detailing the types of resources utilised. The subsequent section investigates how these organisations generate agency by navigating the challenges they encounter. In the final section, the chapter assesses how marginalised groups negotiate boundaries within different forms of collective action. Rather than focusing solely on the limitations these organisations face in resource sharing, the chapter's central argument highlights how they creatively demonstrate their agency, leveraging collective labour and emotional resilience to overcome obstacles and forge paths forward. The chapter discusses how resources are mobilised in environments characterised by hierarchy and highlights how organisations create agency and thrive despite these challenges. While collective actions often involve stories of suffering and exploitation, this chapter emphasises the creativity and collective actions that make these organisations unique. It

ultimately celebrates the resilience and ingenuity of queer movements, offering a fresh perspective on their impact.

The last chapter, chapter nine, is the conclusion of the thesis. This chapter synthesises the key themes from the previous sections, focusing on events, social media, and NGO-ization in the context of queer activism. It highlights that queerness has existed in local cultures without conflict in pre-colonial times. The social media chapter reveals that queer visibility is often shaped by external pressures, which can lead to exclusion within local contexts. The NGO chapter examines the inevitability of hegemony but also explores the potential for adaptation and resistance. Given these challenges, queer collectives face various hurdles in planning their actions. The external environment, marked by religion and the dominance of visibility politics, creates a dichotomy that complicates these collective actions. The LGBT+ activists in South Asia critically evaluate religion and the dominance of visibility politics by creating a dichotomy between traditional religious values and the modern struggle for LGBT+ visibility politics. On one hand, many activists acknowledge the deep-rooted religious and cultural conservatism prevalent in the region, which often marginalises sexual and gender minorities. These religious frameworks, particularly in countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, have historically influenced social norms, creating a hostile environment for queer identities. On the other hand, LGBT+ activists also challenge the dominance of visibility politics, which often prioritises representation in mainstream media and public spaces over addressing deeper, structural issues such as discrimination, lack of legal protections, and violence against LGBT+ individuals. This dichotomy highlights a tension between advocating for immediate visibility and the need for a more comprehensive approach that includes religious and cultural engagement for sexual and gender minorities in the region.

This chapter explores the intersection of religion and queer politics, highlighting how religious discourse influences queer activism. In response to the hostile environment, collective actions sometimes overlook their shared struggle with other marginalized groups and inequalities. To better integrate into local culture, queer collectives often avoid confronting these tensions. While there is a prevailing dichotomy that positions religion against progressive views on queerness, a broader perspective reveals a spectrum of beliefs that coexist within the same cultural context. Although hostility between these groups may appear to exist, it is often constructed rather than inherent. This thesis examines collective actions through events, social media, and transnational funding, offering an original argument on these dynamics.

1.8 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter reflects the tension between pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial norms and the modern, globalised digital spaces that queer communities use to organise. Decoloniality in this context involves challenging the colonial legacies that continue to shape societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality in both regions. This includes resisting Western frameworks that often dominate queer discourses and seeking to reclaim indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality.

Digital culture has become a crucial tool for queer organising, providing spaces for connection, advocacy, and visibility. However, it often relies on Western-centric platforms and terminologies, which can sometimes clash with decolonial efforts to promote locally rooted queer identities.

The contestation lies in balancing the use of digital tools for activism while resisting the imposition of global (often Western) queer narratives that may

not fully resonate with the cultural contexts of the two Bengals. Activists in these regions navigate this complex terrain, aiming to create a queer discourse that is digitally empowered. This thesis will present and analyse various forms of collective actions initiated and mobilised by activists in the region.

Chapter 2

Literature review I: Conceptual Frameworks

2.1 Introduction:

This chapter outlines the conceptual foundations that inform the analysis of queer collective actions. It begins with a review of postcolonial and decolonial theories, incorporating my position on decoloniality, to situate the study within broader global debates on power, identity, and knowledge production. The discussion then turns to the concepts of homonationalism and homocolonialism, offering a lens that is rarely applied to the South Asian queer movement, yet is essential for understanding how sexuality and nationalism intersect in postcolonial contexts. The chapter also examines theories of collective action and social movements, defining different forms of resources that movements mobilise, and an analytical framework that is later applied in each empirical chapter to illustrate the resource strategies of queer collectives. Finally, the chapter reviews scholarship on culture, civil society, and NGOs in Bangladesh and West Bengal, recognising that while the role of NGOs in South Asian development sectors has been extensively studied, their impact on queer collective organising remains underexplored. Situating queer movements within the historical trajectory of NGOs in the subcontinent and considering the cultural dimensions of activism establishes the necessary groundwork for the analysis in subsequent chapters. To identify relevant sources from global literature, I utilised widely accessible databases with an international reach. My search specifically focused on materials concerning collective actions by queer communities in Bangladesh and West Bengal. I employed databases such as ProQuest and the International Bibliography of

the Social Sciences (IBSS), both of which have a global scope, to conduct thorough searches. While some social research literature in West Bengal examines collective actions by queer collectives, alongside feminist movement building, and NGO contributions, research in Bangladesh has focused primarily on NGOs and the Hijra community. It has neglected the collective actions initiated by queer communities, particularly those outside metropolitan cities and within isolated groups like the Chukri community. This chapter aims to highlight these gaps and underscore the need for further research on overlooked communities and contexts.

This chapter is organised into multiple sections, each addressing a specific thematic area relevant to the study. After the introduction, the first section reviews postcolonial and decolonial theories, providing a foundational framework. The second section examines the idea of Homocolonialism and Homonationalism. The third section explores theories of collective action and social movements. The last section is about culture, the concepts of NGOs and civil society.

2.2 A review of postcolonial and decolonial theories

This section explores various decolonisation and post-colonial theories, which are crucial for an understanding of the various forms of collective action in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Decolonisation challenges the dominant Western Eurocentric historical narrative that has politically marginalised indigenous experiences. It involves unlearning the colonial histories internalised by many communities, histories that were often imposed to reinforce the hegemonic power structures of colonial rulers. As Mignolo (2007) argues, decolonisation is a critical theory and political process that not only interrogates the legacies of colonialism but also addresses its ongoing effects, often referred to as colonality. Through the lens of indigenous

knowledge, philosophies, and worldviews, decolonisation seeks to confront local oppressions and reimagine relationships between the global and the local. Mignolo stresses the importance of recovering pre-colonial histories, suggesting that these alternative narratives provide new ways of living and resisting the logic of modernity and coloniality.

In a similar vein, Edward Said (1978) critiqued the Western representations of Eastern societies, exposing how the West often portrayed the East as inferior, stagnant, and 'other'. Said demonstrated that Europe constructed the Middle East as the ultimate 'other' in a deliberate effort to dominate the region and strip it of its voice and agency. He explored the power dynamics between knowledge and dominance, showing how Orientalism, Western portrayals of the Arab Middle East, shaped not only Western perceptions but also the self-perceptions of the Middle East itself. By denying the East the power to represent itself, Western hegemony perpetuated a cycle of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Said critiques the false notion of exclusive identities as an enduring legacy of imperial rule, which restricts the complexity of human experience.

Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental.... No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness as if that was all human life was about (Said, 1978, p 336).

His statement interprets imperialism as both a force of cultural amalgamation and a paradoxical driver of rigid identity constructs, such as being solely white, Black, Western, or Oriental. While acknowledging the persistence of long-standing traditions, languages, and geographies, it challenges the necessity of emphasising their separateness. Said calls for a rejection of fear and prejudice, advocating instead for a more integrated understanding of human cultures and identities as interconnected rather than isolated.

On a similar note, Spivak (2010) raised the question of ‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking of’ in her works, where the history and many other narratives are not written by the indigenous communities in the colonised states. Spivak offers an analysis of the relationship between Western discourses and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern (woman). It is nonetheless more important to attend to the historical construction of representation through ‘interest’ than to try to rethink the individual through concepts such as power and desire (Spivak, 2010, p 179).

In this connection, my argument is that the long-overlooked records of historical interactions and collaborations, across domains such as culture, history, and research, challenge assumptions surrounding religion, the so-called ‘Third World,’ and South Asia. Decolonisation, for me, entails a deliberate reorientation of focus: moving beyond dominant narratives that frame queer lives in the Global South primarily through the lens of victimhood and religious repression. It involves centring the everyday practices of friendship, care, resilience, and collective imagination that sustain queer communities. These everyday acts not only make survival possible but also cultivate spaces for thriving and futurity, offering a counter-archive to hegemonic accounts of marginality. In my argument, decolonisation is a dynamic process that blends indigenous values with contemporary ideas, such

as queer identities in digital media, rather than treating them as opposites. It reimagines traditional queer identities through contemporary platforms, creating hybrid and context-sensitive forms that challenge both colonial legacies and dominant liberal frameworks.

In the context of South Asia, both Said's and Spivak's theories highlight the complex interplay between imperialism, identity, and representation. Said's critique of imperialism as both a force of cultural blending and a creator of rigid identity boundaries challenges the regional tendency to emphasise cultural separateness. His call for a more integrated understanding of human identities resonates with South Asia, where diverse traditions, languages, and geographies have long coexisted and been shaped by colonial histories. Similarly, Spivak's concept of 'speaking for' and 'speaking of' emphasises how colonial narratives often exclude indigenous voices, particularly those of marginalised groups such as queer communities. She critiques the Western construction of subaltern identities and urges a deeper analysis of how power and interest shape historical representation. In South Asia, where colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary social and political dynamics, all these thinkers encourage a shift toward more inclusive and interconnected understandings of identity, history, and cultural agency.

2.3 The concepts of Homonationalism and Homocolonialism

In a global context, the queer collectives that receive funding and the international organisations and philanthropy providing those funds create a hierarchical dynamic. Pour's analysis primarily interrogates how pinkwashing operates within broader political discourses in the Global North, rather than examining the mechanisms and implications of international funding

processes, a dimension that has been more extensively addressed by other scholars.

Pinkwashing harnesses global gays as a new source of affiliation by recruiting liberal gays into the dirty bargaining of their safety against the continued oppression of Palestinians, who are now perforce re-branded as 'gay un-friendly.' This strategy then also works to elide the presence of numerous Palestinian gay and lesbian organisations, for example, Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (Puar, 2011, p 138).

In the case of Bangladesh and West Bengal, queer collective actions funded by international donors and philanthropy often involve negotiations with the state and religious fundamentalists, which can place these queer collectives in unsafe positions. On the other hand, international funding is also directed towards security training for marginalised groups in these countries. Puar discussed such funding and the intentions behind it while addressing the politics surrounding the sexual politics of Israel.

Within global gay and lesbian organising circuits, to be gay-friendly is to be modern, cosmopolitan, developed, first-world, global north, and most significantly, democratic (Puar, 2011, p 138).

. In both cases, international funding, philanthropy and the NGOization process foster an environment where queer collectives perceive themselves as progressive and developed, while those opposing the movement are labelled as homophobic and ignorant. This perception of homophobia among queer activists is, in part, shaped by the framework through which they engage with international NGOs. By viewing groups like the state and religious collectives as homophobic and ignorant, queer collectives often dismiss the possibility of

collaboration and dialogue. Both queer collectives and fundamentalist groups share the same cultural context, and they must engage in dialogue and work towards understanding one another.

Concerning international funding, Waites argued about the importance of dialogue and including new kinds of LGBTI and queer movements. Bringing an example from the commonwealth funding, Waites reflected a tension between structural-historical critique and contemporary empirical observation.

...while the Commonwealth clearly is problematically formed in relation to colonialism, both historically and in the present, future decolonial analyses might risk overemphasising the coloniality of the Commonwealth by overstating historical associations. There is a need for careful empirically informed investigation of whether such organisations are opening up dialogical spaces—including for new kinds of LGBTI and queer movements (Waites, 2024, p 211).

While the Commonwealth's institutional genealogy is rooted in colonial power relations, a purely historical reading risks collapsing its present functions into a single, unchanging narrative of domination. Organisations like the Commonwealth may also function as arenas where meanings and identities are negotiated in real time. This opens the possibility that historically marginalised actors can articulate new forms of solidarity and recognition, even within problematic institutional frameworks. In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar describes 'homonationalism' as a form where a society presents itself as tolerant by highlighting its acceptance of queer rights, while simultaneously excluding other sexual minorities.

.. what I term Homonationalism that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire (Puar, 2011, p 2).

The author argues that as America embraces LGBT+ rights, it also reinforces its exceptional status, positioning itself as a model of progress while simultaneously othering or marginalising non-Western cultures that are seen as less tolerant or progressive. This process involves creating a divide between the dominant, 'acceptable' group and those deemed as 'others,' who are seen as incompatible with the society's supposed values of progress and inclusion. This framework of homonationalism is primarily grounded in the political contexts of Western Europe and the United States. While her analysis offers crucial insights into the co-optation of LGBTQ+ rights by nationalist and imperial projects, it may not fully account for the more nuanced and contested terrain navigated by queer collectives in the Global South. In these contexts, queer activism often unfolds within complex political landscapes where aligning with the state cannot be easily mapped onto the logic of homonationalism.

While homonationalism remains a valuable concept, it must be situated within a more flexible, multi-layered analysis of power, nationalism, and the shifting hierarchies of political priorities. Matthew Waites, in his work on 'The international politics of development for LGBT+ inclusion', argued about the limits of relying solely on Jasbir Puar's framework of homonationalism for understanding the political positioning of LGBT+ rights within right-wing nationalist authoritarian populism.

What a focus on homonationalism and Puar's analysis alone do not sufficiently provide, is an analysis of right-wing nationalist authoritarian populism that can account for the inconsistent place of LGBT rights in such politics... Nationalism, involving racism, is generally the central ingredient of recent right-wing populisms, expressing scepticism about international aid, and homonationalism

generally has a secondary rather than primary role in relation to right-wing nationalist populist formations. Moreover, the fluid and febrile character of such populist politics makes rapid changes possible and disrupts structural discursive continuities. Some queer theorists focused on LGBTIQ+ concerns can exaggerate the centrality and continuity of homonationalism (Waites, 2024, p 17).

He highlighted that LGBT+ rights are not foundational to political agendas but are instead contingent, peripheral, and politically expendable. This suggests that LGBT inclusion can be instrumentalised or abandoned depending on broader nationalist priorities, particularly those rooted in racism and scepticism toward internationalism. The argument also points to the volatility of populist politics, where rapid reversals and discursive inconsistencies are common, making stable theoretical models inadequate without empirical sensitivity.

‘. According to Adnan Hossain and Momin Rahman, ‘homocolonialism’ accounts for both the influence of a certain framework of sexualities and politics and the related resistance from homophobic cultures and governments, who deny local traditions of SOGIESC precisely to legitimise their homophobia as defences of cultural integrity and autonomy.

Homocolonialism is a dynamic process that both sides buy into and reinforce: on the one side by promoting queer rights as both universal and a threshold marker of ‘progress’ and respect for human rights, and on the other, by agreeing that queer rights are only western, and using that claim to resist the demands of queer human rights and social legitimacy, even at the expense of local traditions of SOGIE and the safety of local queer populations (Hossain & Rahman, 2024, p 17).

According to them, ‘homocolonialism’ operates as a mutually reinforcing dynamic that highlights the complexities of global queer rights discourses. Such framing risks imposing external norms that may not align with local cultural contexts, inadvertently marginalising traditional expressions of queerness such as the *Chukri* collectives discussed in this thesis. On the other hand, the rejection of queer rights as ‘Western’ is used by some religious fundamentalists to resist demands for equality and social legitimacy, perpetuating harmful narratives that dismiss the safety and rights of local queer populations. This binary dynamic both disrupts local queer histories and legitimises homophobic practices under the guise of cultural preservation, demonstrating the need for a more inclusive, context-sensitive approach that values local traditions. I would argue that in the context of the pervasive influence of social media, the distinction between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ identities has become increasingly blurred. Ideas about gender and sexuality now circulate transnationally, challenging the notion of fixed cultural binaries. Queer individuals and communities in the Global South are not merely passive recipients of Western discourses; they actively engage with, reinterpret, and localise these ideas in ways that reflect their own social, political, and cultural realities.

Regarding the concept of homocolonialism, Schotten argued that homonationalism cannot be reduced simply to racism or nationalism but rather emerges from the regulatory function of queerness in shaping inclusion and exclusion within the nation.

Without queer as regulatory, homonationalism is not necessarily a project of race, racism and racialization. Crucial in their interconnectedness to describe the post-9/11 domestic scene in the United States, these three phenomena are concomitant but distinct and

do not necessarily entail one other, either logically or historically. Taken together, however, they constitute a distinctive theoretical contribution of this text and make clear that the homonationalism of Terrorist Assemblages requires both US sexual exceptionalism and queer as regulatory for its complete conceptualisation as a racialised project of US empire... homonationalism is defined by and through a primarily American context. While there are obvious applications of the term elsewhere, and Puar occasionally mentions them by and large the analysis centers on US policies, discourses, events, racial formations and lexicons (Schotten, 2016, p 356).

It stresses that while race, racism, and racialisation intersect with sexuality in the post-9/11 U.S. context, these processes remain analytically distinct and historically contingent. By situating homonationalism within U.S. sexual exceptionalism and imperial practices, Puar demonstrates how queer recognition is unevenly distributed and tied to broader projects of state power and empire. Thus, the concept has limited universal applicability, required careful contextualization when extended to non-U.S. settings.

In this framework of homonationalism and homocolonialism, my argument in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal is the politicisation of religion and the rise of religious nationalism. Both have created a deep polarisation between the general population and queer collectives. On one side, many queer collectives view religious institutions as antagonistic and see international donor organisations as sources of support. Conversely, many among the public perceive INGOs as threats to local cultural values and uphold religious nationalism as the foundation of their collective identity. International donor organisations, in some cases, inadvertently reinforce this

binary opposition, thereby hindering meaningful dialogue between these communities.

2.4 A review of theory on collective action and social movements

Resource mobilisation theory (RMT), which emerged in the 1970s, sought to explain the origins, importance, and impact of the social movements of the 1960s. Within RMT, two primary approaches are evident: the economic or ‘organisational’ model, championed by McCarthy and Zald, and the ‘sociopolitical’ model, favoured by scholars such as Tilly, Diani, and McAdam. The latter group emphasises the political processes that drive the formation of social movements, while the former focuses on resource management, leadership, and organisational dynamics, applying economic theories to the study of social movements. This theory assumes that economic growth and affluence typically lead to an increase in social movements, that participants in these movements are considered rational actors, and that successful movements require a certain level of political and economic resources. In this framework, as societies become wealthier and acquire essential resources, these factors are expected to facilitate the mobilisation of social movements. Mobilisation is framed as the process through which a group, typically a social movement, organises and utilises these resources to pursue collective goals, effect change, or communicate a shared message. However, Snow, Soule & Kriesi suggest that social movements must focus not just on resource mobilisation but also on the mechanisms that enable the efficient and cohesive use of those resources.

The assumption that resource availability enhances the likelihood of collective action is generally taken for granted by contemporary

analysts of social movements. Human time and effort, along with money, are the most widely appreciated kinds of resources that are more or less available to collective actors. But the simple availability of resources is not sufficient; coordination and strategic effort are typically required in order to convert available pools of individually held resources into collective resources and to utilise those resources in collective action (Snow, Soule & Kriesi, 2004, p 116).

They highlight a common assumption in social movement theory that resource availability directly influences the success of collective action. However, it argues that simply having access to resources like time, effort, and money is not enough to spur collective action. It emphasises that effective coordination and strategic planning are crucial in transforming individual resources into usable collective resources.

Concerning resource mobilisation theory, various kinds of resources are mobilised by the queer collectives and are discussed in this section. The resources here are not only financial but can be cultural, social, political or digital. Doug McAdam (1999) talked about resources in his work on political processes and the development of black insurgency, where he discussed the relationship between resource availability and the emergence of social movements, suggesting that increased resources alone cannot fully explain their genesis. His sociological work presents a political-process model that explains the rise and decline of the black protest movement in the United States. Moving from theoretical concerns to empirical analysis, he focuses on the crucial role of three institutions that foster protest.

...it would be exceedingly difficult, given the all-inclusive definitions quoted earlier, to find a social movement that was not preceded by some increase in some type of resource. What ultimately casts doubt

on such accounts are well-founded suspicions that the resources so identified are in no simple sense the cause of the movement and that similar increases in resources take place in periods of political quiescence as well as those of turbulence (McAdam, 1999, p 40).

McAdam's argument highlights the difficulty in identifying a direct causal link between resources and movements, given the broad definitions of resources and their varying effects in different contexts. He points out that resource increases often occur during times of political inactivity, indicating that resources alone do not inherently lead to mobilisation. This critique suggests that other factors, such as political opportunities and cultural shifts, play a significant role in triggering movements. Ultimately, it underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how resources interact with other dynamics in the creation and sustenance of social movements.

Snow, Soule and Kriesi critique earlier movement analysts for their vague treatment of resources in mobilisation theories, pointing out the lack of clarity around the concept and its various types. It acknowledges recent advances in the field, where scholars have begun to provide more defined categories for understanding resources in social movements.

Until the last decade, movement analysts who made resources central to their thinking about mobilisation neglected to specify in much detail the concept of resources, and, especially, they developed no clear specification of resource types. We now have some stronger guidelines for conceptualising resource forms and specifying their primary types among social movements. By synthesising past work, we develop a fivefold typology of moral, cultural, social-organisational, human, and material resources (Snow, Soule & Kriesi, 2004, p 117).

The development of a fivefold typology, moral, cultural, social-organisational, human, and material resources, represents an important step forward in conceptualising how different forms of resources contribute to movement success. Nevertheless, while this typology offers structure, its utility hinges on how these categories are operationalised and applied in empirical research.

In the case of queer collective actions, there are volunteers and other contractual staff members working with various skills, who are the human resources of these organisations. Snow, Soule and Kriesi (2004) highlight human resources as more concrete and easily understood compared to other resource types, with a focus on labour, skills, experience, and leadership. One of the key resources that is discussed in this thesis and is mobilised for collective actions in Bangladesh and West Bengal is cultural resources. It includes knowledge, skills, education, and cultural awareness that individuals can use to gain social mobility and status. Queer collectives often use them to mobilise the lack of resources apart from international aid; however, it is often not recognised in the discourse. These resources are often passed down through families and social institutions. Snow, Soule and Kriesi argue about cultural resources that the definition of cultural resources highlights the role of providing specialised knowledge and tools necessary for social movements to function, such as protest tactics or organisational strategies. However, the claim that these resources are widely known may overlook disparities in access to such knowledge, as certain cultural tools and expertise may be limited to groups and networks. The resources that a trans women group can avail are often inaccessible for kothi groups, which is going to be discussed in this thesis.

Cultural resources are artefacts and cultural products such as conceptual tools and specialised knowledge that have become widely,

though not necessarily universally, known. These include tactical knowledge about how to accomplish specific tasks like enacting a protest event, holding a news conference, running a meeting, forming an organisation, initiating a festival, or surfing the web (Snow, Soule and Kriesi, 2004, p 126)

According to Snow, Soule and Kriesi, the focus on technical and strategic know-how assumes uniformity in how these resources are utilised, neglecting the potential for different interpretations of these cultural tools within varying social, political, and historical contexts.

Social networks and organisations can be controlled, and may overlook power dynamics that can limit access, particularly for marginalised groups and smaller movements with fewer resources.

...By contrast, access to social networks, especially groups and formal organisations and thereby the resources embedded in them can be controlled (Snow, Soule & Kriesi, 2004, p 127).

The ability to control access to networks and organisations underscores the potential for exclusion and co-optation, suggesting that movement actors with fewer resources may struggle to tap into these social organisational assets. Very often, this co-option is a common picture of a funded NGO which is discussed in a chapter separately in this thesis.

Overall, while resource availability is seen as directly influencing the success of collective action, simply having access to resources is insufficient on its own. The development of a fivefold typology, moral, cultural, social-organisational, human, and material resources, provides a significant framework for understanding how different types of resources contribute to movement success. In this context, I adapt these five types of resources to

analyse the organisations and social media groups involved in queer collective actions, recognising how each resource type plays a role in mobilising support and sustaining activism in these spaces. When each organisation and social media group are introduced later in this thesis, these resources are identified and discussed to underscore how various resources in this context play a role in mobilising collective actions. While this section discusses the idea of the five types of resources, the next section will explore queer studies in Asia to provide a background and link resources with queer collective actions in the later parts of the thesis.

2.5 Concepts of culture, civil society and NGOs

This section will introduce the concepts of culture, civil society and NGOs in Bangladesh and West Bengal. Culture in Bangladesh and West Bengal is shaped by their shared histories of colonialism, migration, and partition, blending rich traditions with evolving identities tied to religion, caste, and class. Civil society in both regions reflects a legacy of grassroots activism and collective resistance, yet it is influenced by state control, religious ideologies, and the tensions between local and global frameworks of justice and identity. NGOs often play a pivotal role in mobilising resources and advocating for marginalised groups, but their operations are sometimes critiqued for imposing Western narratives that may not fully align with the socio-cultural complexities of the regions.

Raymond Williams explored the multifaceted nature of culture, emphasising the overlap of meanings and their significance. It suggests that culture encompasses both general human development and specific ways of life, as well as the artistic and intellectual works they produce.

But in general, it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant. The complexity of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life and between both the works and practices of art and intelligence. .. This often confuses but even more often conceals the central question of the relations between ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ production (Williams, 1988, p 47).

According to William, the differing emphasis on material production and cultural studies (symbolic systems) often leads to confusion and obscures the core issue of how material and symbolic production are interconnected. Ultimately, he calls attention to the need for a more integrated understanding of these dimensions to fully grasp the complexities of culture.

In South Asia, the lack of formal documentation on queer culture has led to a reliance on oral traditions, where shared beliefs and practices are preserved informally within communities. This oral history creates a living archive that resists dominant narratives and preserves alternative identities, often excluded from mainstream records. The project’s exploration of organisational formation and resource mobilisation can be seen as a constantly evolving process, shaped by shifting social and political contexts. This approach highlights how queer communities adapt traditional practices for contemporary advocacy, navigating between cultural preservation and the demands of current-day activism.

While talking about engagement, there is traditional as well as contemporary culture in the context of queer collective actions. However, traditions are not static; they are continuously interpreted and reinterpreted by different groups. As society changes, so do the meanings attached to traditions, leading to conflicts over their interpretation. These differing interpretations can align

with competing political ideologies, making tradition both a unifying symbol and a source of division.

Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, in their journal 'Reflections on Varieties of Culturespeak' argued about the dual role of cultural research: examining the deployment of 'culture' in public discourse and reflecting on the theoretical frameworks shaping these uses. Such research not only investigates cultural phenomena but also interrogates the implicit assumptions and ideological functions underlying the way culture is defined and mobilised in public life.

One kind of cultural research with one definite policy relevance involves scrutinising the 'culture' and uses related and the assumptions underlying these in public concepts uses life. (Hannerz,1999, P 396).

By addressing popular theories, Hannerz emphasises how emergent ideas about culture significantly influence policy and social behaviours, revealing gaps between formal academic discourse and societal understanding. This approach underscores the importance of dismantling both the conceptual and practical applications of culture to expose its political and ideological stakes. Having outlined the thesis's concept of culture, the next paragraph will focus on conceptualising civil society.

The idea of civil society is used several times in this discussion, where there is a local meaning derived from the independence struggle and the construction of a Bangladesh state, and from local traditions of urban and rural voluntarism. David Lewis (2004) is considered to have prolific knowledge of Bangladeshi NGOs and has been observing this sector for years. His paper on Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), state and democracy in Bangladesh states that the concept of 'civil society' has emerged recently in Bangladesh among social research literature and activists, much of which has been generated by

international aid agencies and their 'good governance' policy agenda of the 1990s. It is concerned primarily with the increasingly high-profile community of local and national development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which have emerged in Bangladesh.

The term civil society is best understood as both a system and an idea, consisting of both old and new civil society traditions, resisting tendencies to privilege only one (external, policy-focused) definition of the term (Lewis, 2004, p 300).

The term 'civil society' can be viewed as both a system and an idea, encompassing a blend of traditional and contemporary practices. It resists the tendency to favour a singular, policy-driven definition, acknowledging its diverse forms and roles. Crowson et al (2009) talked about the overlap between the voluntary sector and the public sphere. The authors of the book discussed the formation of the NGO sector after the war and its impact from many different perspectives. They have also defined NGOs. They mentioned:

Another common theme deserving particular comment, as it goes to the heart of what is meant by NGO is the question of independence from the state ... The significance of this trend, of course, is not merely organisational; when the state becomes a major (perhaps even the sole) funder of an organisation, tendencies that might have existed towards campaigning and confrontation with the government will almost inevitably be tempered (Crowson, 2009, p 8).

NGOs are viewed by donors as catalysts who have come to play an increasingly central role in shaping and implementing development policies. NGOs in South Asia are credited with major achievements in improving the welfare of the poor for their extensive grassroots work in public health,

education, food security, and poverty alleviation. Sabeel Rahman (2006) in his article about development, democracy and the NGO sector in Bangladesh has mentioned the role of activism and how NGOs are playing that role to empower the poor in Bangladeshi society. According to his narration, NGOs have taken on the rhetoric of an activist civil society, claiming their programmes increase the political and social empowerment of the poor within their societies (Rahman, 2006, p 452).

Correspondingly, the concept of the fiscal sponsor is also used in the discussion of this thesis, which refers to an established organisation that provides administrative and financial management services to a project or group that does not yet have the status to receive foreign funds (Andersson, and Neely, 2017, p 488). In this context, it is a mechanism for grassroots initiatives within the nonprofit sector that need the benefits of international funding, without immediately setting up a separate legal entity.

There are various development projects from the government as well as international organisations for the community. Sri Lankan scholar Chamindra Weerawardhana wrote about their perspective in their work on decolonising development. He said that when these projects come to the so-called third world countries, the third world refers to how the West perceives economically under-developed places in the global South as places that need to be aided, as backwards spaces full of chaos and problems.

Across the global South, Western colonial domination was imposed by forcing colonised peoples to conform to strict cis-heteronormative lifestyles, thereby destroying local traditions of gender identity/ies, family structures and social cohesion, just as racism and sexism, homophobia and transphobia (if not gender plurality-phobia), were part and parcel of the Western colonial project, contributing to creating

what we know today as a global South hostile to non-cis-heteronormative peoples (Weerawardhana, 2018, p 121).

His statement emphasises that the negative attitudes and policies toward gender and sexual diversity in the global South today are deeply rooted in the colonial history of enforcing Western norms. This imposition disrupted and often destroyed existing local traditions and diverse understandings of gender and family structures. The colonisers enforced their cultural norms, leading to the suppression of gender plurality and alternative sexualities.

As a result, the legacy of colonialism has contributed to a pervasive hostility towards non-cis-heteronormative people in many parts of the global South. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia were integral to the British colonial project, shaping social attitudes and laws that continue to marginalise those who do not conform to the cis-heteronormative model. Similarly, Julie Moreau and Ashley Currier, in their chapter about LGBT+ activism and international funding, mentioned that as some HIV/AIDS programs have included gender and sexually diverse persons, development agencies have contributed to the transnational diffusion of LGBT+ identities in and movements in Latin America, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa:

One way that Western identities have circulated transnationally is through Northern donors' funding of LGBT movements. Due to the economic, political, and social threat that HIV/AIDS has posed worldwide, development agencies in the North have funded HIV/AIDS education and prevention programs in the global South (Moreau and Currier, 2018, p 223).

In their work, they highlighted how Western (often Northern) funding for HIV/AIDS programs in the Global South (Latin America, Asia, and sub-

Saharan Africa) has inadvertently or intentionally contributed to the spread and recognition of LGBT+ identities and movements in these regions. By including gender and sexually diverse persons in their initiatives, these programs have facilitated the transnational diffusion of Western LGBT+ identities and concepts. This influence is tied to the broader impact of globalisation, where ideas, norms, and identities cross borders, often driven by financial and institutional support from wealthier nations. In this case, the fight against HIV/AIDS has become a vehicle for the global circulation of LGBT+ identities, as development agencies channel resources into these movements. By weaving together postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, critical queer theories such as homonationalism and homocolonialism, and the literature on collective action, culture, and NGOs, this chapter constructs a multi-layered conceptual framework for examining queer movement building. It argues that any analysis of queer collective action in this region must be attentive to both global theoretical debates and the specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape activism. Understanding how NGOs, civil society structures, and cultural practices have evolved in the subcontinent provides an essential backdrop for interpreting the strategies, resources, and negotiations queer collectives employ. This integrated framework enables the thesis to move beyond descriptive accounts of activism, offering a critical lens through which to analyse the interplay between local histories and transnational currents in shaping contemporary queer movements. Having outlined the conceptual framework in this section, the following chapter will turn to conceptualising the Literature from South Asia for this thesis.

Chapter 3

Literature Review II: The South Asia Context

In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, research¹ have made significant strides in addressing social change, but their coverage of queer collective actions remains limited and often insufficiently nuanced. While these reports frequently highlight broader issues of gender equality and social justice, the representation of queer activism is often framed within a traditional, heteronormative lens. International development organisations and government research may acknowledge the existence of queer movements, but their analysis tends to focus more on isolated events, rather than examining the broader, structural challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities. Furthermore, such research often fails to capture the full diversity of queer activism, particularly grassroots efforts that occur outside the major urban centers. As a result, the reports overlook critical issues such as religion and regional disparities. The dominant focus on mainstreaming often sidelines the complex and nuanced struggles of queer communities, reinforcing the need for more inclusive approaches in both governmental and development research. In this chapter, the references include academic research, newspaper articles and various other documents such as an ordinance by the government that directly and indirectly addresses issues that impact queer collective actions.

This chapter begins with an overview of queer studies in Asia, highlighting the diversity of experiences and identities across the region. Drawing on examples

¹ Some of such researches include Socioeconomic Progress and Recent Macroeconomic Developments in Bangladesh (2022) (Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) Research, The State of Social Enterprise in Bangladesh (British Council), [India Social Enterprise Landscape Report](#) (Asian Development Bank), etc.

from various Asian countries, including South Asia, the section emphasises the plural and culturally specific expressions of queerness that often challenge the standardised frameworks of SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics) used in global discourse (Cleofas, 2024, p 5).

The second section explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, religion, and the politics of marginalisation, examining how these forces shape exclusionary practices and lived experiences. The third section turns to the socio-legal contexts of queerness in India and Bangladesh, providing a comparative analysis of rights, recognition, and resistance. The fourth and fifth sections trace the historical evolution of NGOs working on gender and sexuality in Bangladesh and West Bengal, respectively, illuminating their role in shaping queer activism and advocacy. The sixth section examines literature on sexual health funding, analysing how funding priorities influence the formation and focus of queer initiatives. The seventh section delves into the literary history of queer collective actions in both regions, mapping narratives of resistance and solidarity. The chapter concludes with a discussion on queer digital cultures, synthesising insights from the previous sections to reflect on how digital platforms are reshaping queer visibility, community-building, and activism in South Asia.

In all sections, this chapter identifies a substantial gap in the existing academic research literature regarding queer collective actions in Bangladesh and West Bengal (within India), particularly those initiated by communities outside metropolitan centres and isolated groups. Most previous research has focused on NGOs, feminist movements, or prominent queer collectives within urban contexts, neglecting smaller, grassroots efforts. This gap reflects a broader tendency in institutional research to privilege mainstream movements while

sidelining lesser-known actors. By addressing these omissions, the chapter seeks to expand the scope of inquiry, incorporating diverse voices and experiences that challenge the dominant urban-centric and NGO-driven narratives. This focus emphasises the importance of inclusive research practices that recognise the multiplicity of queer activism in varied sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

3.1 Queer Studies in Asia

This section will give an insight into sexuality, gender and queer studies in Asia, through the works of scholars like Howard Chiang, Rahul Rao, and Peter A. Jackson. They emphasise the complex interplay of colonial histories, local cultural norms, and global sexual politics in shaping Asian sexualities.

LGBT+ people are well documented in various artworks and literary works of Ancient India, with evidence that same-sex/same-gender sexualities and forms of gender diversity were accepted by the major dharmic religions. Hinduism and the various religions derived from it were not homophobic, and evidence suggests that same sex desire thrived in ancient India until the medieval period. The Kama Sutra (Vatsyayana Mallanga) is an ancient text dealing with *kama* or desire (of all kinds), which in Hindu thought is one of the four normative and spiritual goals of life (Vatsyayana, Doniger, Kakar, & Yasodhara, 2002). Many erotic artworks depicting same-sex desires can be found in numerous temples throughout India, including Khajuraho temple sculptures built in the 700s, and the Sun temple in Konark built in the 1200s.

Howard Chiang, in his work on sexual science, talked about the earlier histories of the colony's sexological problems, sex crimes, prostitutes, and other related matters. The early history of sexuality in Asia reflects a growing

interest from Western researchers in documenting and studying sexual behaviours and issues across East and Southeast Asia. In the mid-20th century, organisations like the Kinsey group sought to expand their research to include Asian populations, with staff members travelling to Hong Kong in 1956 to explore potential donations and information about sexual practices. By 1959, individuals such as Anthony Lee from Hong Kong were actively investigating issues related to sexology, including sex crimes and prostitution, in the region.

‘Information has been collected on the sex life of other East and Southeast Asian peoples’. The Kinsey group sent a staff member to meet with this potential donor in Hong Kong in December 1956, although the trail of records about this potential donation concluded here in the archive. In November 1959, Anthony Lee, another individual from Hong Kong, revealed that he had been ‘investigating information about this colony’s sexological problems, sex crimes, prostitutes, and other related matter ... If there is anything, regarding sex, I can be of service to you, please let me know’ (Chiang, 2024, p 3).

According to Chiang, these efforts highlight an emerging, though often outsider-driven, academic and clinical curiosity about the sexual norms and problems of Asian societies during this period. There is a significant cultural divide between Western and Eastern sexual practices and representations, driven by differing values placed on sexuality in both societies.

Peter A. Jackson wrote ‘Queer Bangkok’, where he pointed out significant differences between Western culture and Thai culture in their understanding of sex and sexualities. He argued that in Western history, non-normative sexualities were often legally criminalised, though discussing them was more

permissible; it was the act itself, rather than the acknowledgement of homosexual feelings, that was punished.

Considerable mutual misunderstanding on sexual matters arises between Thais and Westerners because sexual practice and the representation of sexuality in discourse and other media are inversely valued in traditional Western and Thai sexual cultures... In Western history it was been possible to talk about non-normative forms of sexuality, but it has been illegal to engage in non-normative forms of sexual behaviour... This attitude was been carried over into law in many Western countries: admitting one has homosexual feelings has rarely been a crime, only having sex with men...The view that new genders and sexualities beyond the West derive from US-inflected Western modes of sexuality has subsequently been critiqued for failing to capture the full scope of the processes at work in world sexual and gender cultures (Jackson, 2016, p 216).

According to Jackson, this legal approach was exported globally, influencing perceptions of sexuality in non-Western cultures, where the imposition of Western norms has been critiqued for oversimplifying the diversity of sexual and gender identities beyond the West. However, such a legal approach can also be observed in the case of South Asia. The early history of sexuality in South Asia is deeply influenced by colonial legal frameworks, particularly the British Empire's anti-sodomy laws, which were codified in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in 1860. This law, which criminalised "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," was imposed across British colonies, shaping sexual norms and legal systems in places like India and beyond. Rahul Rao, in his book 'Out of Time', mentioned the views from where carnal

intercourse against the order of nature became an influence in South Asian culture.

Legal histories of anti-sodomy law inform us that while sodomy was sporadically prosecuted in England under the common law, its first codification in the British Empire as ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’ occurred in section 377 of the IPC, which was enacted in 1860. The IPC was exported to other colonies and also influenced codification in England itself, with section 377 providing the model for the reformed punishment of ‘buggery’ in the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act... Colonial discourse frequently imagined the colonies as opening up non-normative sexual possibilities for desiring white male subjects. The putative licentiousness of these spaces was attributed variously to the climate, the savagery of the natives, and the paucity of European women. The specter of unbridled sexual opportunity generated considerable anxiety, compelling the introduction of policies intended to curtail it (Rao, 2020, p 15).

According to Rao, colonial discourse often framed these colonies as spaces where non-normative sexualities could flourish, particularly among white male colonisers, and attributed such behaviours to the climate, the savagery of the indigenous populations, and the scarcity of European women. The perceived sexual licentiousness of the colonies provoked significant anxiety, leading to the implementation of laws and policies aimed at regulating and controlling sexual behaviours in these regions.

This section aims to highlight that Eurocentric conceptualisations of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGIE) are not the sole frameworks through which sexual and gender diversity can be understood. The predominance of Western epistemologies in international aid projects often marginalises or

overlooks historically and culturally embedded understandings of gender and sexuality in non-Western contexts. When international aid organisations employ the SOGIE framework to design interventions, it is crucial to critically engage with the local histories and sociocultural constructions of gender and sexuality in Asia. This thesis, in subsequent chapters, explores how such externally imposed frameworks have shaped identity politics and modes of representation, often resulting in unintended consequences and forms of resistance, especially in the contexts of Bangladesh and West Bengal. In brief, Howard Chiang's work critiques the imposition of Western frameworks onto Asian sexual identities, arguing for a more nuanced understanding that recognises indigenous sexual cultures and practices, as well as the impact of colonialism on these identities. Rahul Rao's scholarship highlights the intersections of sexuality, law, and religion in South Asia, particularly in the context of queer activism and legal reform, questioning how colonial-era laws like Section 377 continue to shape contemporary sexual politics. Peter A. Jackson, similarly, investigates the entanglements of Western and Asian sexualities, focusing on the tension between global queer movements and local sexual cultures, while also addressing how market forces and transnational flows of media influence Asian sexual identities. Together, these scholars challenge Western-centric narratives of sexuality in Asia, advocating for a more diverse, historically informed, and context-specific approach to understanding sexuality in the region. After this brief discussion on queer studies in Asia, the next section will focus on the role of gender, sexuality, religion and the politics of marginalisation.

3.2 Gender, Sexuality, Religion and the Politics of Marginalisation in Bangladesh and West Bengal

This section examines how the colonial legacy in Bangladesh and West Bengal shaped strict gender norms to maintain political control, influencing contemporary gender and sexual politics. In India, Hindutva supporters marginalise Hijras, deeming them deviant, while efforts like *Ghar-Wapsi*² aim to assimilate them into Hinduism. The rhetoric around Section 377 aligns with right-wing Hindu ideology, affecting minority rights. In Bangladesh, NGOs focus on male-to-male sexuality and Hijras, but gay and lesbian groups struggle with visibility, and Section 377 remains a major obstacle. Krupa Shandilya critiques the repeal of Section 377, viewing it as a tool for regulation rather than true equality.

The state uses the language of tolerance and inclusiveness when granting rights to sexual and religious minorities. This ideology of tolerance is thinly veiled Hindu right-wing rhetoric, which makes the rights of minority subjects contingent on their visibility as object objects, as tolerance functions as a technique of perpetrating marginalisation and regulation that leaves intact the broader ideological and normative framework within which it operates (Shandilya, 2017, p 468).

Shandilya argues that this rhetoric, aligned with Hindu right-wing ideology, makes minority rights conditional on their visibility as marginalised subjects, perpetuating marginalisation by framing tolerance as control. Hindutva's influence is expanding beyond its traditional strongholds, creating complex power dynamics within queer collectives. These groups often resist full

² Ghar Wapsi is the programme of religious conversion to Hinduism from Islam, Christianity, and other religions in India conducted by Indian Hindu nationalist organisations

assimilation into Hindu nationalist frameworks. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, homosexuality is still criminalised under Section 377 of the Penal Code, a relic of colonial-era laws, which punishes same-sex activities with imprisonment that can extend to life sentences (Baudh, 2013, p 289). This legal framework not only criminalises but also creates an impact socially and politically in the discourses, making any form of public assembly or activism dangerous. Adnan Hossain wrote about Section 377, same-sex sexualities and the struggle for sexual rights in Bangladesh. He argued that the dynamics of activism around Section 377 in Bangladesh highlight the intersection of visibility, institutional constraints, and socio-political resistance in queer collective actions.

In February 2009, the first report on gender and sexual minorities of Bangladesh was submitted to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights' Universal Periodic Review... The government of Bangladesh categorically rejected the recommendation in the report to decriminalise consensual same-sex sexuality by repealing section 377. Furthermore, the foreign minister of Bangladesh denied the existence of homosexuality during the discussion of the report. In the same year, a school of public health organised a stakeholders' dialogue on section 377 in which representatives of the emerging lesbian, gay, bisexual, Hijra and MSM groups, researchers, and activists participated. Opinions among participants were divided on the steps towards a campaign for the repeal of Section 377. Some suspected that the initiation of a campaign would simply result in the laws being used against sexual minorities, while others argued for a gradualist approach in which a sensitisation and awareness-building program should precede an attempt to legally challenge section 377 in court (Hossain, 2019, p 119).

While Hossain talked about the rejection in the Universal Periodic Review and the divide in opinion among the researchers and activists, he did not address the underlying role of religion and how that is mobilised in shaping the culture of public opinion. Colonial rule was deeply intertwined with attempts to control and shape the personal and social lives of the colonised people. Jessica Hinchy, in her work on 'Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India' talked about the background of such a mindset in colonial India. She argued that the colonial government in 19th-century India sought to exert control over the colonised population by focusing on gender, intimacy, and bodily practices.

The colonial government in nineteenth-century India envisaged a controllable and knowable colonised population in highly gendered ways. Matters of gender, intimacy and the body were at the heart of colonial concepts of political authority and moral visions of colonial governance. Moreover, the colonial management of the population depended on the regulation of households, sexual practices and forms of gender expression (Hinchy, 2019, p 250).

The colonial authorities viewed their subjects through a lens that heavily emphasised gender roles and norms, believing that regulating these aspects would help them maintain political authority and enforce their moral vision of governance. This control extended to managing households, sexual behaviour, and gender expressions, as these were seen as crucial to governing the population and reinforcing colonial power. In addition to that control, cultural identity has instigated violence against NGOised movement building in the context of collective action. Dina M Siddiqi, in her paper on 'Exceptional Sexuality in a Time of Terror', referred to Bangladesh as an Asian country of moderate Muslims (Siddiqi, 2019, p 4), which, in my argument and

considering the current context, is questionable. She mentioned that the territory that is now Bangladesh has historically been represented as possessing a distinctively Bengali and moderate form of Muslimness. I take a different view from her position, as I believe religion has played a significant role in shaping the cultural identities of people in the subcontinent, a dynamic that is evident in historical events such as the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. Rather than situating contemporary culture concerning such historical trajectories, she characterises the region simply as a ‘land of moderate Muslims,’ a framing with which I respectfully disagree.

Discussing various incidents, in 1993, a fatwa against writer Taslima Nasreen forced her into hiding and exile, highlighting tensions between national identity and individual expression in Bangladesh (Zafar, 2005, p. 411). Her critiques of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy were seen as threats to the cultural narrative, leading to the suppression of dissent and limiting freedom of expression. Similarly, the 2015 murder of atheist blogger Avijit Roy by Ansar Bangla-7 for his views on homosexuality and the 2016 killing of LGBT+ activists illustrate a rise in religious extremism (Alam, 2015, p 11). These incidents challenge Bangladesh’s image of religious moderation and reflect increasing fundamentalism.

The relation between such interplay of faith, politics and majoritarianism also has an impact on queer collective actions. Ani Dutta argued about Hindu nationalist ideology that often constructs Muslim-majority areas as threatening ‘others’, linking them with enemy nations like Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan, while using such narratives to reinforce Hindutva.

Hindu nationalist imagination constructs Muslim-majority spaces as the Other, associating such areas with threatening ‘enemy’ nations like Pakistan, but also uses such spatial othering to entrench Hindutva

ideology. ... While Hijras often live in working-class areas, elsewhere in queer Hindutva... Indeed, the Hindu Right has periodically attempted to widen its reach to include otherised groups such as Muslims for reasons like electoral expediency, but without abandoning its 'core values' like Hindu majoritarianism and reverting to Hindu-Muslim polarisation during crises (Dutta, 2023, p. 14).

Hijras are viewed by Hindutva supporters as marginalised, associated with dirtiness and deviance, and their mixed Hindu-Muslim practices make them religious outsiders. This reflects Hindutva's strategy of both excluding and assimilating marginalised groups for political gains. Both India and Bangladesh emphasise homogeneity in cultural identity, using religion, Hinduism in India and Islam in Bangladesh, to shape national identity and consolidate power. This often marginalises minorities, reducing acceptance of diversity and fostering exclusionary practices.

Even as we heed Hindutva's ability to malleably expand into diverse regions and communities, these irreducible 'elsewheres' not only expose the weaknesses of its assimilationist capacities but also suggest tentative openings towards a future not organised around its central concerns (Dutta, 2023, p. 23).

Dutta argues that Hindutva's adaptability in infiltrating diverse regions and communities highlights its strategic resilience, yet the existence of irreducible 'elsewheres' underscores its inherent limitations in fully assimilating pluralistic identities. These resistant spaces reveal fractures in their hegemonic project, pointing to the persistence of cultural, religious, and regional differences that defy homogenisation. Such openings offer potential pathways for envisioning a future beyond Hindutva's central ideological framework,

challenging its dominance with alternative discourses of inclusion and diversity.

Overall, to conclude this section, it can be said that in India, the push for uniformity under Hindutva marginalises Hijras, treating their mixed Hindu-Muslim practices as deviant and seeking to assimilate them into Hinduism, while aligning Section 377 rhetoric with right-wing ideology to control minority rights. In Bangladesh, NGOs addressing male-to-male sexuality and Hijras get a lot of attention, but gay and lesbian groups lack visibility and view Section 377 as a significant barrier, with NGOs largely neutral on the issue. Both regions reveal the colonial legacy of enforcing rigid gender norms to regulate households and sexual behaviour, and reinforce moral governance, shaping present-day socio-political dynamics.

3.3 The social and legal context of queerness in India and Bangladesh

The social and legal context of queerness in India and Bangladesh is shaped by colonial legacies, particularly the British 1871 Criminal Tribes Act, which regulated non-normative gender and sexuality. Hinchy's work highlights how this historical influence persists, contributing to entrenched biases and shaping contemporary perceptions of gender and sexuality, as explored in this thesis.

Yet British administrators viewed Hijras as failed men who were physically effeminate, incapable of strenuous labour and had no capacity for moral improvement... Part II of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) included overlapping strategies of both cultural and physical elimination... Adult Hijras were targeted with a regime of cultural elimination, policing and surveillance that aimed to erase their

public presence and control their ‘criminal’ activities in anticipation of their impending deaths (Hinchy, 2019, p 251).

Under the CTA, the British implemented strategies to both culturally and physically eliminate non-normative gender and sexualities. This involved intense policing, surveillance, and efforts to erase their public presence, effectively controlling their activities and marginalising them further. Hinchy added that the law was also illegally enforced beyond its scope in some places, becoming a de facto law against male cross-dressing, as it was applied to people not registered as ‘eunuchs’ under the law (Hinchy, 2019, p 254).

The current rules and regulations by the state are not very different from that mindset where the authorities internalised the colonial regulations and set different laws and acts accordingly. Many of the legal framework and the way the legal system works are derived from that colonial mindset, which is discussed in this section and is interlinked with the main research question of the collective actions of this project.

Baudh, in his chapter, referred to an interview where the interviewee first came to learn about Section 377 (Introduced in Chapter 1) in an NGO. In the context of Bangladesh and India, this NGO plays a vital role in queer community mobilisation. Yet in India's case, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act FCRA restricts international funding for NGOs without fiscal sponsors. In Bangladesh, NGOs must be registered under the NGO Bureau to receive international donor funding. The Foreign Donations Regulation Bill 2016 (FDRB), effective from October 13, 2016, subjects NGOs to strict government control, limiting freedom of expression and other rights.

These actions stifle civil society, undermine rights, and contrast with international best practices that support NGOs' freedom to contribute to societal development.

Digital authoritarianism is prevalent in both countries, where algorithms and commercial interests limit the visibility of marginalised voices. The 2000 Indian IT Act regulated Internet use, including digital shutdowns. Additionally, queer collectives' online actions in Bangladesh have been largely overlooked in social research literature.

In addition, in 2020, the Indian government banned TikTok, along with 58 other Chinese apps, after a simmering conflict between India and China flared into violence at their border (Kumar & Thussu, 2023, p 1584).

In 2024, in the build-up to the ongoing quota-reform protests, Bangladesh police arrested a man under the Cyber Security Act for his criticism of the quota system in a Facebook post (The Daily Star, 2024). In another case, seven people were charged under the Cyber Security Act during the protests for publishing 'satirical pictures and taunting' government officials, including ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a Facebook post (Amnesty International, 2024).

Reports of illegal phone searches by law enforcement have also emerged (News Report, 2023). Often, such surveillances and their impact on queer collective action are not discussed in academic research; nonetheless, this project details these laws to give a context under which queer collectives strategise their collective actions and strategise them for movement building.

In February 2014, the Supreme Court's NALSA judgment in India recognised³ transgender individuals as the 'third gender' and upheld their constitutional rights. Ani Dutta notes that while this ruling highlights the growing influence of transgender activism in India, it excludes some gender nonconforming identities and practices, which are explored in this thesis (Dutta, 2014, p 226).

In January 2014, the Bangladesh cabinet officially 'recognised' a third gender category by issuing a gazette notification with a brief statement: 'The Government of Bangladesh has recognised the Hijra community of Bangladesh as a Hijra gender (Hossain, 2017, 1418).' However, as Ani Dutta has observed in similar contexts, this recognition suffers from limitations. Consequently, the policy has failed to bring about any substantial improvements in the lives of Hijra community members and how such an idea of neoliberal development by the government, as well as the legal regulations discussed in this section, is problematic for the queer collectives is explored in this thesis.

In brief, it can be said that the social and legal context of queerness in West Bengal and Bangladesh is deeply shaped by complex cultural, religious, and colonial legacies, such as the Criminal Tribes Act, which continue to influence issues of queerness with a binary lens excluding indigenous practices and identities such as kothi, launda or chukri. Research based on interviews in South Asia reveals that activists in both Pakistan and Bangladesh have rejected legal interventions (Repeal of Section 377), framing the issue as social rather than legal, and deeming such interventions unnecessary and undesirable (Baudh, 2013, p 300). In both India and Bangladesh, government

³ The word recognised inside inverted commas is yet to be discussed, whether this is a tokenistic recognition of the neoliberal idea of development or proper empowerment.

regulation of international funding complicates the work of LGBT+ organisations, often stifling their ability to operate freely. While the NALSA ruling in India marks a significant step forward for transgender activism, it also excludes certain gender-nonconforming identities, which this thesis critically explores. In Bangladesh, recognition of trans identities suffers from significant limitations, failing to improve the lives of the Hijra community substantially. Both countries also experience digital authoritarianism, including internet shutdowns, further complicating the fight for queer rights and collective actions in these regions.

3.4 History of NGOs in Bangladesh

In this section, the literature about different NGOs in recent times and their formation process is going to be critically analysed. Bangladeshi NGOs are instrumental in reaching remote areas and contributing to UN goals like the MDGs and SDGs, despite tensions with the government. International aid NGOs working in Bangladesh often prioritise short-term, one-size-fits-all projects, such as microcredit, and tend to overlook broader and more diverse needs. Importantly, organisations working with queer collectives in Bangladesh have yet to receive scholarly attention.

global trends in development funding came to favour NGOs as the preferred mechanisms for development assistance, resulting in dramatic increases in funding and support for Bangladeshi NGOs. However, social research literature has largely overlooked collective actions by queer collectives, although there has been a focus on the inclusive developed projects implemented by such big names.

David Lewis (2004) argued that much of the development in Bangladesh is driven by international aid agencies and their governance policies from the 1990s (Lewis, 2004, p 313). He focused on the growing number of local and national NGOs since Bangladesh's independence in 1971. However, he and many other scholars overlooked grassroots organisations like Hijra groups, which began emerging in the mid-90s. These community-based organisations (CBOs) often operate with limited, voluntary resources, unlike NGOs that are donor-funded. In recent years, small CBOs working on non-normative gender and sexuality have started receiving funding from larger NGOs, but often lack involvement in program design, focusing more on project delivery with limited understanding of long-term change. This dynamic is discussed in the work of Aeshna Badruzzaman (2023), though she did not study CBOs or NGOs in this specific context. According to Lewis, the NGO-dominated landscape in Bangladesh is shaped by: (a) local traditions of voluntary action, especially after disasters and wars, (b) heavy foreign aid influence, and (c) a state with limited services and a rigid bureaucratic structure (Lewis, 2004, P 305).

There exists an unspoken tension between the government and the NGO sector working with foreign aid, which is depicted in a journal by Sarah. C. White (1999), on 'NGOs, Civil Society, and the State in Bangladesh'. Her work deals with the politics of representing the poor, where NGOs have expanded from economic and welfare benefits to encompass the political goods of civil society. White's work addressed the tension existing between the state and NGOs to tighten control, particularly over NGOs' access to foreign funding.

... the system for approval of projects had virtually broken down. Structurally, state suspicion of the NGOs was expressed in a highly complex and inaccessible bureaucratic procedure; less formally, state

NGO tensions found expression in the demand amongst government officials for extra payment if applications were to be processed (White, 1999, p 312).

The project approval system has nearly collapsed due to bureaucratic complexities and informal demands for extra payments from government officials. White suggests tensions arise from the perception that NGOs are closest to foreign donors. Overall, it can be concluded that Bangladeshi NGOs play a crucial role in reaching remote areas and contributing to UN goals such as MDGs and SDGs, although tensions exist between the government and NGOs. International aid NGOs typically focus on short-term, homogeneous projects, such as microcredit, without addressing more diverse needs. Notably, there has been no scholarly attention on queer collectives and their funding in Bangladesh.

3.5 NGOs in West Bengal

In this section, I am going to address different literature around NGO formation in West Bengal (India) in parallel to the anxiety that has existed in queer collective actions. The work with non-normative genders and sexualities in India started long before work in Bangladesh. This is evident in some of the social research literature that investigated the feminist movement and how NGOisation has shaped that. At the end of the section, the discussion is about the role of satellite centres formed by donor-funded projects, and how they envisioned various cultural activities, which helped mobilise queer collective actions.

Srila Roy (2009) discusses the evolution of early women's organisations in India into NGOs, highlighting how melancholic loss can shape a conservative

politics that seeks to contain feminism within a lost 'home.' Her work examines how the institutionalisation of feminism in government, NGOs, and academia has contributed to this sense of loss in India.

Today, most of the autonomous women's groups that came into being in the 1970s have transformed into non-governmental organisations (NGOs), funded either by the government or by foreign funding agencies. It is these funded NGOs and not grassroots political organisations that often undertake important decisions on behalf of the entire women's movement, thereby significantly transforming the character of the Indian Women's Movement as a whole ... The original political thrust of the women's movement has been 'blunted' by this corporatisation and careerism; from the militant feminists of the 1980s, we have now become 'nine-to-five feminists' (Roy, 2009, p 343).

Many autonomous women's groups from the 1970s have evolved into NGOs, funded by either the government or foreign agencies. These NGOs, rather than grassroots political organisations, now often make key decisions for the entire women's movement in India, leading to a significant shift in its nature. This transformation has diluted the original political focus of the movement, as the activism of the 1980s has given way to a more corporate and career-oriented approach, turning 'militant feminists' into 'nine-to-five feminists'. Roy's work shows how it is problematic when a privileged group with access to resources oversees an entire collective action, and how livelihood and corporatisation have blunted collective actions.

Large amounts of foreign aid from rich countries support indigenous NGOs in poor countries to promote institutional development. Historian Eldrid Mageli (2005) discussed NGOs in Kolkata, highlighting Unnayan, Chhinnamul, and

Sramajibi, noting that Unnayan's existence was closely intertwined with the non-NGO world, lacking a distinct social and political agenda.

In the 1980s, NGOs achieved a reputation for 'doing good' and for being able, cost-effectively and sensibly, to reach poor people where states and official development agencies fail to do so. In the course of the past decade, it has been widely acknowledged that NGOs, like state institutions, have difficulties in reaching their target groups....

According to recent debates, NGOs can be seen as part of a new transnational community which is donor-controlled and top-down, and which promotes a new kind of imperialism in the world today. NGO donors located in the North impose hegemonic ideas of partnerships, empowerment, neo-liberalism, decentralisation and professionalism on their recipients in the South... Ideas of the right kind of global governance become more important than effective poverty reduction (Mageli, 2005, p 251).

In the 1980s, NGOs were recognised for reaching poor communities where states failed, but recently, they have faced similar challenges. Critics argue that NGOs now serve as part of a donor-controlled, top-down transnational system that imposes neo-liberalism and professionalism on Southern countries, prioritising global governance over poverty reduction. Mageli highlights this imperialistic donor-driven approach, while Dutta and Roy (2014) discuss how community engagement has influenced the formation of community-based organisations, drawing on Roy's activism and Dutta's ethnographic experiences within Kothi and Hijra communities.

This period saw the establishment of many CBOs in eastern India that received funds under the MSM rubric, such as MANAS Bangla, a CBO network in which Raina worked for several years. These CBOs

typically drew membership from kothi-dhurani communities rather than focusing on gender-normative MSM. (Dutta and Roy, 2014, p. 327)

CBOs in eastern India supported kothi-dhurani communities, emphasising their specific identities over gender-normative MSM. Through outreach, terms like ‘kothi’ gained prominence, reflecting evolving self-identification. Dutta and Roy’s work shows how HIV/AIDS prevention led to the formation of community-based organisations, exploring the tension between state-recognised anglophone LGBT+ identities and regional gender/sexual variance. Their reference to the CBO network MANAS Bangla is a prominent example of donor-funded projects and their ultimate failure in the context of queer movement building in South Asia. Similarly, feminist activists Akanksha and Malobika described their journey in founding Sappho in Kolkata, collaborating with networks like the British Council and local NGOs to raise awareness and gain support. Their account shows how resources are mobilised, no matter that there are certain limitations in donor-driven approach, which is significant for analysing the collective actions in the region.

As the first step to raising our voice, we went in for a series of collaborative mass awareness programmes with the British Council, Calcutta. We took advantage of networking with the local NGOs that were present as part of the audience. Sappho became a member of Maitree, a forum of various activist groups and NGOs working for women’s rights. We believed if Sappho raised its voice for their causes, it would also support us whenever we needed them. Thus, the coalition proved to be successful when one of the NGOs from the

Maitree provided us with a telephone line. And a space for setting up our helpline (Akanksha and Malobika, 2007, p 366)

The coalition with Maitree and other women's rights groups, while strategic, raised concerns about Sappho's autonomy and long-term sustainability, as reliance on external resources limited its growth. Srila Roy (2009) noted that while feminist movements began to address sexuality, some viewed it as a Western issue, contrasting with older women's groups' reluctance to engage with sexual rights. She highlighted how AIDS prevention programs advanced sexual minority rights, though some feminists resisted, seeing it as foreign (Roy, 2009, p 341). Roy also pointed out the precariousness of Women's Studies in India due to limited resources, but her focus on women's groups overlooks the intersectional challenges faced by gay men and other queer communities in NGO work.

This section discusses how feminist literature has addressed the women's rights movement from autonomous groups to donor-funded projects in India. It highlights the details of how CBOs and NGOs supported a form of collective action. The existing literature touches upon some of the initiatives, yet it is not as vivid as it explains the HIV/AIDS work and mobilising through those donor-funded projects. Often, such research overlooked initiatives outside the metropolitan cities and grassroots collective actions initiated by Kothi, Launda or other community members. As discussed by Roy, the journey was not straightforward. The next section will discuss sexual health funding and how creative resistance emerged, especially in the context of heteronormative homo/transphobic social systems and structures.

3.6 Sexual Health Funding

If we look at queer organisations and their collective actions in the subcontinent, they started with international sexual health funding. This funding helped queer male communities converge and form NGOs and charities when big donor organisations such as the Global Fund reached South Asia with their HIV/AIDS-related works. Kumud Rana, in their journal article on transnational AIDS networks, regional solidarities, and the configuration of *Meti* in Nepal, talked about how the network was established in the initial phase.

... Through its Asia Region men who have sex with men AIDS Network, Naz facilitated ‘networking, sharing of information and skills, as well as regional support to men who have sex with men sexual health projects’ through its ‘partner agencies’.

Even before BDS⁴ was formally registered, its founder — Sunil Babu Pant — had begun attending conferences and workshops on men who have sex with men-targeted HIV programmes in the region including a regional conference organised by the Humsafar Trust, India in 2000, an annual conference by the Bandhu Social Welfare Society in Bangladesh, and training on running HIV programmes conducted by Naz in 2002. Humsafar and Shojon were both close collaborators of Naz (Rana, 2022, p 1458).

Naz played a pivotal role in establishing and supporting regional networks for men who have sex with men (MSM) across South Asia, facilitating the sharing of skills and resources for HIV outreach and advocacy. Through

⁴ The Blue Diamond Society is an LGBT rights organization in Nepal. It was established in 2001 to advocate for change in the existing laws against homosexuality and to advocate for the rights of Nepal's marginalized gay, transgender, and other sexual minority communities.

collaborations with organisations like Humsafar Trust and Shojon Social Welfare Society, and by offering technical expertise to emerging groups like BDS [Blue Diamond Society] in Nepal, Naz helped strengthen MSM-targeted HIV programs and documented human rights violations in the region.

The Shojon Social Welfare Society (BSWS), a local NGO, has been working with men who have sex with men in Bangladesh since 1997 (Khan, Hudson-Rodd, Saggars, and Bhuiya, 2005, p 161). Hossain et al. (2022) discussed the role of NGOs in HIV/AIDS prevention and how queer activism began in Bangladesh. Dasgupta (2023) discussed tensions among organisations competing for similar funding while developing intervention strategies. He highlighted activist Agniva Lahiri's work with 'Prothoma', a transgender shelter in Kolkata for trans and Kothi individuals, and the fractious nature of queer organising and funding politics in the city.

...the HIV epidemic provided a breakthrough in terms of breaking the silence around a public discourse on sex and sexuality in India, leading to large-scale resource mobilisation largely driven by international donor support. This also led to all forms of tension between different organisations who were developing intervention approaches and trying to target similar—and often the same—funds (Dasgupta, 2023, p 238).

According to Dasgupta, the HIV epidemic played a pivotal role in opening discussions on sex and sexuality in India, driving significant resource mobilisation, largely fuelled by international donors. However, this surge in funding also sparked tensions between organisations, as they competed for similar resources and struggled to differentiate their intervention approaches, potentially leading to inefficiencies and fragmented efforts. In the case of Bangladesh, social research literature has largely overlooked such discussions. His journal explores the relationships that exist as a form of queer kinship, and

creative resistance, especially in the context of heteronormative homo/transphobic social systems and structures.

Shuchi Karim (2013) highlighted the surge in queer activism and the rise of NGOs focused on health and sexual rights, including HIV/AIDS, in Bangladesh during the early 2000s. This period marked greater visibility for queer communities and a shift towards organised advocacy, driven by international funding and global human rights discourse (Karim, 2013, p 68). Hossain et al. (2022) noted that NGOs like Ashar Alo Society (AAS) played a key role in supporting people living with HIV (PLHIV) through peer groups, community engagement, and policy advocacy, working to reduce stigma, empower individuals, and promote social inclusion (Hossain et al, 2022, p 13).

Dasgupta (2012) discussed how SAATHII, founded in 2000 at the Retrovirus Conference in San Francisco, addresses the sexual health needs of gay men, other MSM, and transgender communities in India. Funded by various national and international organisations, including the Elton John AIDS Foundation, WHO, and Global Fund, SAATHII focuses on HIV prevention, capacity building, and advocacy in India.

Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) is at the forefront of challenging and tackling social stigma, discrimination and violence towards gay men, other MSM and transgenders in India through its innovative use of digital media and the Internet ... One of the earliest queer initiatives in Kolkata (India) was the Fun Club. The Counsel Club followed this in 1993, which advocated slightly more political and social aims. At the same time, there was a noticeable growth in political and sexual health activism in Kolkata (India). For example, Pravartak was a popular newsletter that

was typewritten, photocopied and distributed discreetly amongst gay men, other MSM and transgender communities (Dasgupta, 2012, p 88).

SAATHII played a critical but complex role in the queer movement in West Bengal, with significant impact in urban areas, especially among English-speaking, middle-class individuals in Kolkata. However, it struggled to reach LGBT+ individuals in rural areas or lower socioeconomic groups and faced challenges with funding and sustainability, limiting its ability to expand and maintain long-term programs.

Paul Boyce and Akshay Khanna (2011) raised questions about the representation of the queer or same-sex sexual subject in law and HIV prevention, especially in the context of post-colonial perspectives on sexuality. In their journal article on rights and representations querying the male-to-male sexual subject in India, they illustrated a short performance staged by members of a community support group for men who have sex with men in Kolkata (India). They claim that contemporary India offers an example of a society in which the effects of discourse in respect of the production of same-sex sexualities are manifestly ambiguous, such that who such subjects are, and how they are affected by both prejudice and liberalising actions, is far from predictable (Boyce and Khanna, 2011, p 95). Their illustration gives an idea of the forms of collective actions and ambiguity at that time. In their work, the authors discussed the role of law and HIV/AIDS funding, yet they do not critically engage with how such funding mechanisms have reshaped passion-driven activism, particularly within the contemporary landscape of development aid. My project seeks to highlight the ongoing shifts in which funding not only supports but increasingly steers radical activism, often resulting in its co-option. The donor organisations intervene without adequate attention to local contexts. As a result, the short performance might look

successful, but I will question the sustainability of such projects, looking into the picture of the HIV/AIDS infection rate in the subcontinent.

At the end of this section, it can be said that the regional network for HIV prevention in South Asia played a crucial role in fostering the growth of small LGBT+ collective actions, which formed support structures like information centres and peer groups, thus initiating movement building. In West Bengal, however, these organisations primarily impacted urban, middle-class, English-speaking individuals, limiting their reach to broader segments of society. In Bangladesh, academic researchers have largely overlooked the collective actions of asexual activists. The role of such public health funding has initiated queer collectives to form and perform for sure, but at the same time, my argument is to critique such public health funding models after all these years and evaluating their impact is important. Notably, the existing academic research does not talk about queer collective actions apart from sexual health organising. There are trans organisations, intersex organisations, asexual collectives and *chukri* groups located outside the capital, which are not covered in the existing narratives of male sexual health.

3.7 History of queer collective actions in India and Bangladesh

In this section, the content is about collective actions that have taken place in recent times. In West Bengal, the queer movement has evolved from underground activism to a more visible and legally recognised struggle, culminating in the decriminalisation of homosexuality. In contrast, Bangladesh's LGBT+ movement remains largely underground, with activists facing severe legal and social risks.

Kumud Rana talked about the impact of categorisation and visibility in the context of Nepal. She highlighted the evolving language to categorise gender and sexual identities, with 'tesro lingi' emerging as an umbrella term replacing earlier vernacular categories like '*meti*'.

While other vernacular categories like natuwa, maugiya and phulumulu had previously been used by BDS as 'regional variants of *meti*', the latter has more recently been replaced by 'tesro lingi' – loosely translated into English as 'transgender' – as an umbrella category to represent these groups (Rana, 2022, p 1457).

She argued that while the use of '*meti*' has historical roots in Nepali LGBT+ communities, the study suggests that its meaning has shifted over time, particularly concerning modern understandings of male same-sex sexuality. The connection between '*meti*' and contemporary issues like HIV/AIDS activism is important, as it shows how global health movements have influenced local understandings of gender and sexuality. However, this shift also reflects a tension between traditional identity categories and the influence of transnational frameworks, which could potentially marginalise or oversimplify local expressions of identity that have long existed in Nepali culture.

If we look back into the chronology in brief, in 1990, Ashok Row Kavi founded India's first queer magazine, *Bombay Dost*, amid significant social stigma (Khan, 2001, p 104). The Naz Foundation International was established in 1991 to raise HIV/AIDS awareness, and the first Pride march, the Friendship Walk, occurred in 1999 (Khan, 2001, p 99). In Bangladesh, small groups like Boys of Bangladesh (BoB) emerged in the 2000s, advocating for LGBT+ rights under a broader human rights framework (Hossain, 2017, p 1423). Legal progress in India included the decriminalisation of

homosexuality in 2009, overturned in 2013, but reinstated in 2018, leading to increased visibility and acceptance. In Bangladesh, the 2010s saw some visibility through online activism and events, but the 2016 murder of LGBT+ activists by extremists forced the movement underground (Siddiqi, 2019, p 6). Today, LGBT+ activism in Bangladesh remains risky, relying on digital platforms for communication and connection.

Apart from traditional practices such as *Hijragiri*, *launda nach*, *chukri nach*, both Bangladesh and West Bengal have groups that started organising and mobilising the community many years ago. From the 90s, organising involved transnational resources for HIV/AIDS campaigns, which has also impacted the forms of collective action. The traditional community groups, as well as social media groups with young community members, organise events and activities collectively, and in both cases, it is online and offline. Different activities of these organisations and their forms of collective actions are discussed in this thesis, where organisations are categorised in a certain manner.

3.8 Queer Digital Culture

Digital media is a relatively new tool for collective action in India and Bangladesh, but many Muslim countries and authoritarian regimes in Asia and Africa, such as Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey, have witnessed significant movements emerge through social media, exemplified by the Arab Spring. Gerbaudo (2012) argued that social media allows for more flexible relationships and spontaneous collective action, as seen in movements like the 'Queer Revolution Morocco' and Turkish queer activism. Similarly, Bangladesh has experienced social media-driven movements like the 2013

Shahbagh protest, and the road safety protests, though these were often controlled by the government.

Heterosexual spaces, including digital media, are often not queer-friendly, leading many queer youths to create or adapt online spaces to fit their needs. These spaces offer support, help affirm marginalised identities, and facilitate real-world connections, but also pose risks like harassment or misinformation (Hawkins and Watson, 2017, p 122). Talking about alternative blogs, websites and archives, Mohammed Rashid in his article about queering Bangladeshi blogging networks, problematised the approach of Bangladeshi queer activism and analyse how adopting Western frameworks of queer activism, primarily based on pro-visibility, coming-out strategies, and pride rallies, presented itself with extreme existential challenges for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals in key digital platforms. His work touched upon topics such as legal rights, religious fundamentalism, and the politics of blog publics in Bangladeshi queer activism.

...over the last couple of years, using the connections and networks the platform was able to privately establish with queer communities, Mondro published several works of literature in print as well. These literary works comprise the first-ever compilation of nonfiction literature on GLB issues in Bangladesh—Thahor, a selection of short stories about the queer community, titled Shomaroor, and a compendium of indigenous GLB literature in Bangladesh, named Ludong. These works were deliberately disseminated solely to the queer community and its allies in Bangladesh, with the principal aim of preserving and safeguarding the creative output, writings, and perspectives of GLB individuals (Rashid, 2023, p 110).

Rashid critiques liberal narratives of progressive digital activism in Bangladesh, arguing that secular blogging platforms like 'Somewhere In'⁵ fail to address queer oppression and advocate for queer rights, as conservative and religious views still shape the discourse. While I agree with his critique of LGBT+ activism's reliance on progressive frameworks like visibility and pride rallies, I disagree with his claim that alternative blogs represent a decolonial shift in LGBT+ resistance (Rashid, 2023, p 112). His dismissal of indigenous queer activism undermines his argument, and his use of 'decolonial' feels superficial, oversimplifying the complexities of queer resistance in Bangladesh.

While Rashid characterises alternative blogs as a form of decolonial resistance within LGBT+ activism, this claim warrants closer examination. His reading, particularly about Arondekar, overlooks the nuanced critique she offers of identity framing in legal discourse. Arondekar (2009) highlights how the strategic use of the term 'MSM' in the Section 377 petition distanced itself from 'gay' identities, reinforcing a depoliticised placeholder that ultimately shaped the court's reception. She further argues that the petition's reliance on history as a legitimising force paradoxically enacts a Westernised judicial logic, exposing the irony in framing decriminalisation as a return to indigeneity (Arondekar, 2009, p 172).

Earlier in this chapter, in the section titled Gender, Sexuality, Religion and the Politics of Marginalisation in Bangladesh and West Bengal, a similar dynamic was discussed in the context of Bangladesh, where the state's denial of homosexuality's existence during the UPR 2009 echoes this rhetorical

⁵ Somewhere in... blog is the first public blogging site in Bengali established in 2005 and the largest community of Bengali bloggers in the world. With over 213,000 registered bloggers at that time, the blog always promoted liberal views. The post and telecommunications minister at that time blamed the site for spreading atheism in Bangladesh.

strategy. A strategy that often uses these terms, such as LGBT and homosexuality, without referring to the historical existence of sexual diversity.

Rashid's analysis of blogs and archives, which uncritically adopts the LGBT acronym, fails to acknowledge how this framing often erases historically grounded, regionally specific identities. Rather than recovering a history of diverse sexualities, such efforts risk reproducing a normative, ahistorical lens under the guise of decoloniality.

Moreover, his analysis lacks critical attention to class and accessibility. Communities like *kothi*, *hijra*, and *chukri* remain largely absent from these digital spaces, which are shaped by elite, Anglophone discourses. While these platforms contribute to visibility, their claims to decolonial resistance must be evaluated with greater historical and social nuance.

Online spaces have opened avenues to explore and network inside the community, and different organisations are also using these digital platforms for organising. Nonetheless, there is very little in the existing literature about their organising or how these groups have emerged from digital space to physical space. Whilst there is some literature around fanfiction, social media gets updated constantly, and different generations use it in different ways. A generation that commonly used fan fiction to get to know each other and create queer ecotopia is no longer relevant for the young generation. Social media has introduced reels and stories where people can interact privately, even if they do not know each other.

Online spaces are constituted when two or more people interact with each other using the internet. What matters is that the internet creates interactions between people who are not close to each other physically (Berger, 2020, p 605). Space is often described as heterosexually produced, and there exist

nonnormative practices by gender and sexual identity minorities that challenge this and actively 'queer' space (Goh, 2018, p 465). Goh mentioned this while writing about safe cities and queer spaces. Similarly, social media group features are also created, not imagining queer communities mobilising the space. The need for space for interaction for queer community members is significant.

Ultimately, the social media groups allow for collective identity formation, yet this process is shaped by the tensions between empowerment, surveillance, and commercialisation within digital infrastructures. There is a significant gap in the literature concerning how social media groups facilitate the formation of collective identity, particularly within queer communities. Existing research rarely addresses how queer collectives navigate dynamics of surveillance, tension, and backlash in these digital spaces. This project aims to address this gap by examining two social media groups: one based in Bangladesh and the other in West Bengal, as case studies. Through this comparative analysis, the study will explore how queer collectives engage, organise, and assert their presence within these online platforms under varying sociopolitical conditions.

3.9 Conclusion

The history of sexuality, gender, and queer studies in Asia, often overlooked, is central to understanding the social and legal dynamics shaping queerness in both India and Bangladesh, influenced by complex cultural, religious, and colonial legacies. In West Bengal, the queer movement has evolved from underground activism to a more visible, legally recognised struggle, whereas Bangladesh's LGBT movement remains largely underground, facing significant legal and social challenges. While international aid NGOs in

Bangladesh focus on short-term, standardised projects, they often ignore the diverse needs of queer collectives, which have yet to receive sufficient academic research attention. In West Bengal, community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs have supported collective action, but the process has been complex, excluding smaller city initiatives and marginalised identities such as *launda* or *chukri* dancers. Both regions face challenges with funding inflows, where competition for resources leads to fragmented efforts. Digital platforms, while offering new opportunities for collective action, also reproduce inequalities and expose activists to harassment.

NGOs exert considerable influence across a range of socio-political issues today, including poverty, education, human rights, disaster management, public health, disability, gender equality, environmental protection, child rights, and mental health. They have been instrumental in lobbying, policy advocacy, raising awareness, and building networks. However, there is a simplistic, linear narrative that overlooks the intricate and critical organising efforts of local queer communities in Bangladesh and West Bengal. A deeper investigation of existing literature on queer community organising can reveal the diverse methods employed, urging a shift from the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to a more nuanced understanding of the social and political context, the effectiveness of strategies, and the realities faced by different groups.

The existing social research on queer communities in Bangladesh and West Bengal largely focuses on NGO involvement and Hijra communities but falls short of addressing the resources mobilised for collective actions within these organisations. Further research is needed to explore groups beyond the capitals, particularly those working with Indigenous identities like *chukri* or *launda*. In West Bengal, the growing body of social research offers optimism, whereas in Bangladesh, there is a significant gap in studies examining how

queer collectives operate under oppressive conditions and creatively mobilise their agency. Having outlined the conceptualisation of various concepts and academic research literature in this chapter, the following chapter will turn to conceptualising the research design.

Chapter 4

Research design for evaluating various collective actions by queer communities in Bangladesh and West Bengal

4.1 Developing a research design:

This research is designed to map and analyse social processes that often remain undocumented from a critical sociological perspective. The specific focus is queer activism in Bangladesh and West Bengal. This research is important for the wider community, showing that there is a link between academia and activism, including INGOs [International Non-Government Organisations] working in the specific socio-cultural context. The research addresses the different viewpoints of the organisers and how participants learn from each other's views, which is essential for the construction of an activist movement. The project is rooted primarily in sociology while also incorporating ethnographic methods for specific aspects.

The first section of this chapter gives an overview of the research questions, and the second section analyses the researcher's positionality, reflexivity and ethics. The third section investigates the methods of data collection, where each method is analysed in detail. The fourth section analyses fieldwork and fieldwork risk assessment. The fifth section investigates the overall methodology of the project, and the sixth section examines it. In the end, the last section, which is the seventh section, details the data analysis process of each method. The key discussions in this chapter demonstrate how this research is designed and how data collection was executed following a systematic approach. This gives a vivid understanding of the original output,

which was not researched before for collective actions, in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal together.

4.2 Research questions

The main research question seeks to sociologically understand how forms of collective actions by sexual and gender minorities are shaped by and respond to their specific cultural, social, and political contexts in Bangladesh and West Bengal. It also aims to explore the intersections of identity, power, and resistance, examining how these movements navigate societal norms, digital cultures, and resource dynamics to drive social change. Key to this discussion, the primary research question is, ‘How should sociological analysis interpret the forms of collective actions by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal?’. Along with this overarching question, there are several crucial sub-questions:

- What is the role of digital culture in contemporary forms of collective action?
- How is transnational resource sharing in an NGOised space creating an impact on movement building?
- How is the traditional culture, in the context of queer collective action, reflected in the oral history of the community members?

This overarching inquiry is supported by these key sub-questions, examining the role of digital culture in collective action, the impact of transnational resource sharing within NGO spaces on movement building, and the significance of traditional culture in queer collective action, as reflected in the oral histories of community members.

4.3 Selection of organisations and research methods:

The landscape of Bangladesh and West Bengal (India) was categorised into five sections, where organisations were selected based on their location. Instead of focusing on individuals, organisations were chosen for this research as they offered a more structured perspective on collective action, a realisation informed by my extensive experience as a community organiser. A purposive sampling method was employed, structured into three layers. First, I aimed to include funded, non-funded, and partially funded organisations, providing insights into the dynamics of large, medium, and grassroots organisations, all of which contribute to movement building according to their capacities. Second, I sought to capture perspectives from organisations located outside the capital, as they are often overlooked in research, a gap I've observed through my work. Third, I focused on organisations serving specific community groups, such as gay men, trans individuals, or Chukri, to challenge the prevailing narrative that all organisations cater to all communities equally. This approach aimed to amplify underrepresented voices often missing in metropolitan-centric research, ensuring a more original and vivid depiction of diverse collective actions. Below is a list of the selected organisations with brief details, where two of these are online social media groups (using Facebook).

Name, category and location	Details about the organisations
Organisation A Shurjer Alo Hijra Shongho	This is a non-governmental community organisation working for the livelihood programme of socially excluded people. It has been implementing the four-year

Category: Partially funded community NGO Location: Northern Bangladesh	programme 'Leadership and Empowerment of Transgender' in the north of Bangladesh and nine upazilas (Sub-districts) of the district. The project is being implemented in association with Global Affairs Canada to improve the living and livelihood conditions of 1,200 transgender people.
Organisation B Shojon Category: Regis tered NGO Location: Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh	Shojon is a registered NGO working in Bangladesh since 1996 with the Ministry of Social Welfare and the NGO Affairs Bureau. All activities of the organisation are in line with the guidance provided by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) and the Ministry of Social Welfare (MOSW) of the Government of Bangladesh.
Organisation C Turning Point Category: Partially funded community group Location: Southeast of Bangladesh	To build a strong circle in the southeastern district, Turning Point is an area-based platform for friendship, rights, and creativity. The group started its journey online, and now they are partially funded. They also include the indigenous population because of its geographic location.
Organisation D Equality Network Family	With this initiative, Equality Network Family designed its programs and activities to be a catalyst that helps community members reach their goals and fulfil their

Category: Social media group Location: Capital of Bangladesh	potential. The organisation mobilises resources through social media campaigns and aims to bring change by creating more work opportunities for the Trans and Hijra population in Bangladesh.
Organisation E Bahurupi Category: Non-funded community group Location: Southwest of Bangladesh	An organisation located in the Southwest of Bangladesh with inherited folk performances. The genre usually requires elaborate theatrical performances where the actor takes on multiple roles – sometimes a man, and sometimes a woman, to present stories to their audience.

In West Bengal, the following are the platforms and organisations with which I worked:

Name	Details
Organisation F History Trust	The organisation promotes dialogue on gender and sexuality in India through publishing, public events, research, advocacy, training and service referrals. Their roots lie in the work done by Guidance Club ⁷ (1993-2002),

⁷ It was within this fraught climate that the Guidance Club, one of India's first LGBTIAQ+ peer support groups, emerged. The Guidance Club operated between 1993 to 2002 in Kolkata (India), providing peer-to-peer support, both for the members and for the wider community. Along with offering tangible mental and sexual health aid through a letter-writing initiative, the club also published the house journal *Instigator* twice a year.

Category: Registered as a trust ⁶ Location: India	Instigator, an independent publication by a group of individuals in 1991-92, was later published by this club as their house journal from 1993-2000, and Combination Society (sibling NGO of the club, 1999 to around 2005) – all among the earliest queer support initiatives in India.
Organisation G Azadi Festival Category: Social media group Location: India	An online queer forum, Azadi Festival, is popular in West Bengal (India) for organising the Rainbow Pride Festival. Their Facebook group is very active during the Pride march in December for organising, however, it also shares several important documents to update group members. It had 7487 members when this chapter was developed in 2023.

Table 1: Brief details of the organisations for this thesis

For clarity, the organisations observed here are divided into a few categories. The division below is based on government registration and funding. To give a rough idea of the details, the categories that are sorted for this project are stated below. More details about the organisations are discussed in Chapter 4.

Group 1: Non-funded organisations

In this category, organisations are formed through social connections as a friendship-based group. Some organisations do not receive funds but instead mobilise their socio-cultural and other resources for their collective actions.

⁶ The trust can acquire properties and hold properties through the trustee for the benefit of the beneficiaries. Trusts do not have a separate legal personality under Indian law. The primary purpose of a trust under the Indian Trusts Act is to protect the interests of beneficiaries. A trust can be created for any legal purpose, such as charitable or public purposes. A trust can also be created for private purposes

They conduct their activities and contribute to various forms of collective actions. Often, these organisations do not have a physical space but by using their socio-cultural resources, they can mobilise spaces and other resources.

Group 2: Partially funded community NGO

The term community NGO is used here in this thesis to refer to such organisations which are community-based and do not function as registered NGOs but receive funds from various mediums like fiscal sponsors. This category has irregular funds from different sources and has a fluid structure of fixed employees and temporary offices to conduct their work.

Group 3: Funded NGO

Government-registered NGO that has the authority to mobilise transnational funds and can distribute them to other smaller organisations. To talk about NGOs in contemporary Britain, Crowson (2009) stated that NGOs are those bodies seeking or exerting socio-political influence while belonging to neither the government nor the business sectors. They exist in the overlap between the voluntary sector and the public sphere (Crowson, 2009, p 4). In a broader sense, the term NGO is associated with organisations that are not directly affiliated with the government and are not for-profit. Often, these organisations have several projects with international donors and have a structure for human resources and financial management. Most of these organisation's function around health/legal/educational/social services through community support, information dissemination, networking, operational research, advocacy, training, and other technical assistance services.

Four methods were used for data collection, which are stated below, and the details are described in a separate section. Not all methods are applied to all organisations. Therefore, in the table below, the methods are named with the organisation name in the next column to define which method was used for which organisation. The discussion points for all these methods were based on the three research sub-questions.

Method No	Method Details	Organisation
Method 1	Creative workshops	A, B, C, E, F
Method 2	Event observation	A, B, C, D, E,
Method 3	In-depth interviews of the members of the organisations	A, B, C, E, F
Method 4	Social media observations of two Facebook groups	D, G

Table 2: Different methods of data collection indicating organisations

This chapter outlines the selection of organisations, the project design, and the details of data analysis, emphasising the originality and innovative nature of the research. Building on previous studies of Hijra communities and NGO efforts, this work employs an extensive, multifaceted methodology rarely used in similar contexts. By integrating four distinct methods, including creative workshops and oral histories, the study captures unique insights into queer collective action, particularly in underrepresented, non-metropolitan areas of Bangladesh and West Bengal. Its comparative approach bridges these regions, highlighting shared cultural ties while addressing their distinct socio-political

contexts, offering a cross-border perspective uncommon in academic research. The project challenges traditional methodologies and urban-centric narratives, contributing fresh knowledge to the field and expanding the understanding of queer activism in the Global South. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform policymakers, activists, and researchers while inspiring further exploration of queer communities' experiences and challenges.

4.4 The Researcher: Positionality and Reflexivity

It is essential to share my personal experiences and demonstrate how this research aligns with my understanding of the background of the stated issues.

Through this project, I wanted to document and learn about the oral history and lived experiences of the collective actions of the community members, which are often not spoken about in academic discourse.

After the murder of two friends and fellow activists in 2016, I was relocated abroad for some months and decided to return to Bangladesh later. Po-Han Lee mentioned that a nation-state is even more dangerous when it is organised and only desired by privileged citizens; such an idea of a nation-state casts out the undocumented/unwanted who are stateless or homeless and not so 'clean living' (Lee, 2019, p 222). During my stay abroad for months under relocation, like other migrants from South Asian societies, I was exposed to the conflict between myself and my cultural background in the new society, with a struggle to settle down in an unfamiliar environment or to go back home, which is not a safe and secure home anymore. The concept of home and belonging, when the movement is shattered, created a deeper impact in my mind, from where I always wanted to write and document what I have seen as collective actions in queer communities.

I applied to the call of the College of Social Sciences (CoSS) scholarship opportunity, which was advertised by the University of Glasgow, titled 'Sexualities and Genders beyond Heterosexuality in India and Bangladesh: Contestations Between Decoloniality and Digital Cultures'. My first supervisor, Matthew Waites, and my second supervisor, Rohit Dasgupta, designed the call to which I applied. After the selection process, I designed the details of the project in consultation with them.

In the context of my study in Bangladesh and West Bengal (India), I am a bilingual researcher who speaks both Bangla, the official language spoken in my main research site, and English, the language in which I received my academic training, and in which I have transcribed the data, analysed the data, and written my thesis. Being part of both the cultural and political context of Bangladesh and the academic rules and regulations of a university in the UK meant that I had to navigate the ethical and cultural paradigms of both cultures. My access to the activists' circle has helped me to navigate different community groups and organisations in West Bengal (India) and meet them to learn about their work.

Based on the above-mentioned details, the experience and perspective of the researcher are shaped by the position of the researcher, which has been reflected in the data collection and analysis process. Documenting and mapping various practices and mobilising various resources played a key role as a researcher since there is a shift in forms of collective actions, and many of these processes are not documented. Being a part of the community and working as a community organiser for many years was a predominant strength in my observation and data analysis process. Being positioned as an organiser, I have multiple aspects where I am a middle-class Bangladeshi man, with complicated gender experiences and certain privileges. My experience

working with different community members has helped familiarise me with their struggles and challenges. In such cases, where hierarchical relations between the researcher and the researched were immediately evident, being a community member and organiser for many years helped ensure I would be respectful of the direction their narratives may take.

Overall, my positionality for this fieldwork supported me as a catalyst to navigate different forms of collective actions. It helped permit my access to my chosen organisations, which is often an obstacle for a researcher working with a hard-to-reach community. My lived experience as a queer individual in Bangladesh, my identity as a queer community member, and my language skills deeply informed and aided the design of my research process.

Additionally, the understanding I developed through my work as a community organiser, and my scholarly profile and work experience in international development organisations, enabled me to design research that was both contextually appropriate and sensitive for data collection. I employed a range of methodologies tailored to the specific cultural and social dynamics of the setting, allowing me to analyse the situation comprehensively and authentically. This approach ensured that research outputs were both original and unique. It also brought forward perspectives and insights that had not been previously explored by other academic researchers using similar methods.

4.5 Ethics

Considering the sensitivity of the subject matter, in this section, I am going to talk about various ethical issues that have been raised and how I addressed them during my fieldwork. The application was based on the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. Specific ethics issues for individual data-collection methods are addressed in a later section.

I received approval from the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee on 25 August 2022 (Appendix 14). I developed comprehensive risk assessments and data management plans, which were reviewed and approved by the committee. This process required me to provide detailed descriptions of the research methods, along with thorough documentation, including the consent form, participant information sheet, and privacy notice, to secure the necessary permissions. In certain cases, I began the data collection process by reading aloud and explaining the consent form, participant information sheet, and privacy notice in Bangla. This was necessary because some participants were not proficient in reading or writing in English.

Ethics and positionality in qualitative research with vulnerable and marginal groups is one of the key areas that I focused on in my initial planning. This area has been described by Shaw, Howe, Beazer and Carr, who mention that doing research with persons from vulnerable and marginal groups can be challenging, as there is the potential for a power imbalance between researchers and vulnerable groups as a researched population (Shaw, Howe, Beazer and Carr, 2019, p. 279). Conducting research with individuals from vulnerable or marginalised groups requires careful attention to power dynamics, as researchers often occupy a position of privilege that can unintentionally reinforce hierarchies. This imbalance can manifest in how questions are framed, whose voices are prioritised, and how findings are interpreted, potentially leading to the marginalisation of participants' perspectives. A reflexive and participatory approach, which centres on collaboration and shared agency, is essential to mitigate these challenges and ensure that the research process empowers rather than exploits these communities.

I planned to conduct a monthly visit to a new metropolitan city for my observation. As a result, I had ample time to write the field notes and prepare for the next visit, and I could attend monthly debriefing sessions online with my supervisors. Being a community member, I have a close understanding of different informal community groups which are stigmatised (Tortu, Goldsamt and Hamid, 2002, p. 123) and am aware of the formal, informal, and comprehensive gatekeeping (Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh and Sales, 2007, p. 5) that exists.

Given the security concerns, the fieldwork posed potential risks for both the participants and for my safety as the researcher. Having grown up in Bangladesh, I was well-acquainted with the local security dynamics, which allowed me to mitigate risks through a nuanced understanding of the context. Apart from the colonial law section 377 in Bangladesh, there is a tension between religion and progressive secular beliefs that exists, particularly in the context of Bangladesh, which is important to address. This was evident in the 2016 murder of a queer rights activist (Alam and Marston, 2023, p. 2), the detention (Roy, 2017) at a gay party in 2017, and numerous other incidents. A law like the Digital Security Act exists in Bangladesh, where religious sentiment is prioritised over a person's human right to live with dignity. This came out clearly in an essay by Haque, when he wrote about the security conundrums of queer lives in Bangladesh. As I was brought up in an environment like this, being familiar with the circumstances gave me an opportunity to design and complete this fieldwork safely in Bangladesh. Additionally, my supervisors also proposed an approach which avoided a public profile of the project (especially online) while data collection was in progress. The approach taken emphasised the safety and security of the researcher as a top priority.

The answer is hard to find, and the activist is the most aware of the closed road ahead. In this hybrid regime, the activist faces the inability to meaningfully engage in a political process with the elected officials of the country simply because a meaningful political process no longer exists... There is no recourse for popular debates or conversations by the aggrieved, either. Conversations do not go far when very quickly the irrefutable ‘culture and religion arguments’ are brought in, which condemn queer lives, followed by the legal argument that queer lives are illegal in Bangladesh (Haque, 2022, p 189).

His argument gives a reflection of the environment in which the community members work and where a debate or public opinion can lead. This was taken into consideration while designing the project, and throughout the fieldwork, a very low profile was maintained. There was no public-facing activity where I discussed my project, such as a seminar or newspaper article.

This project followed the ethical guidelines as stipulated by the University of Glasgow for sociological research, after approval by the College of Social Sciences. For the research, I had to obtain ethical clearance from the College of Social Sciences ethics committee at the University of Glasgow. For data protection, the forms and the questionnaires were printed from Glasgow so that no photocopy machine or unauthorised computers had access to information about the research. The field notes were taken in a diary, which was later word-processed in the university-provided password-protected laptop. In the second stage, these field notes were transcribed and translated by me to ensure confidentiality. In the third stage, output was uploaded to the OneDrive of the University of Glasgow with a code, so that it was anonymised and there was no risk associated with it. In future, the data will be stored in a

certain location of Enlighten: Research Data from where it will be automatically removed after ten years.

4.6 Methods of data collection

The data collection process of the research started with the creation of bonds of respect, affection, and care. In this section, the key idea is how respect, caring and collaboration played a valuable methodological role. The existing relationship with the community allowed me not only to understand and address my research questions, but also to build knowledge that goes beyond the very objective of writing a doctoral thesis and is more closely linked to the reality we want to transform.

In this section, I am going to address the different methods of data collection which were used to gather the narratives, to compare the different forms of collective actions in the context of Bangladesh and India. The methods for this research were not a tool to collect data from an outsider perspective, but rather me being a part of the community, collecting it through a dialogue with each others. The interviews, observations and creative workshops were a collaboration with each other. The vulnerability and the queer labour for each other were reciprocated and not one-sided. It would have been different if I were not a part of the community.

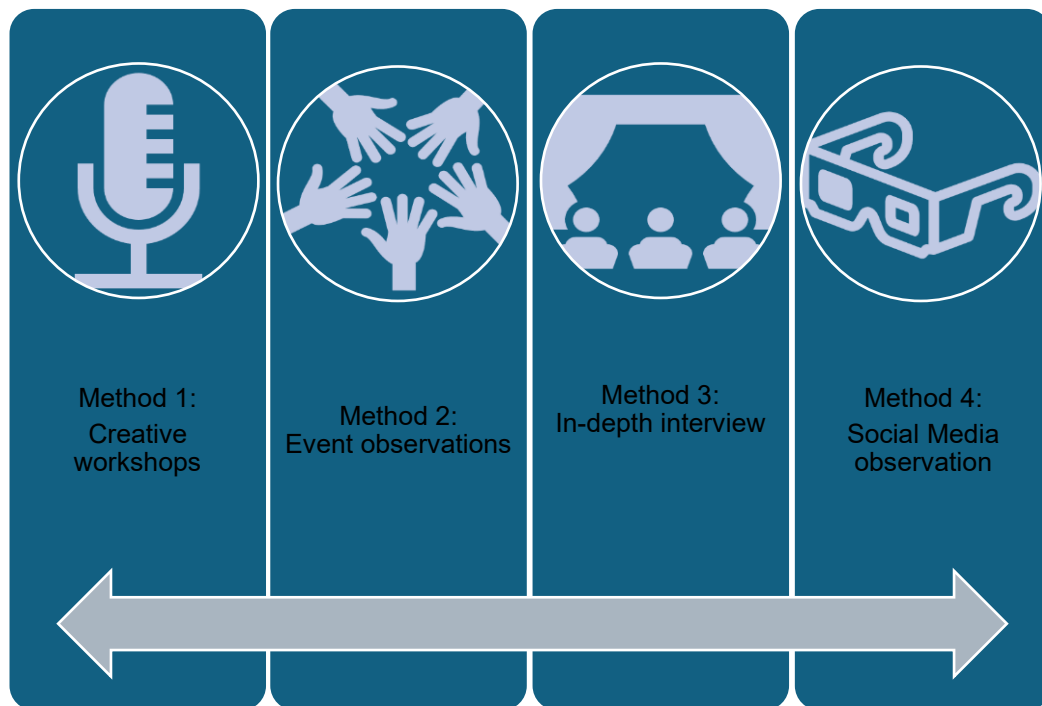


Image 1: Four different methods for data collection

No location-related information was posted on social media through which the work could be traced. At the beginning of each method, I explained to the participants that I am a student at the University of Glasgow and not an employed representative of any other local organisation. This explanation helped to avoid misunderstanding during the process and avoid conflicts that could arise later. For each method, before the process started, there was a brief chat regarding consent. At the end of the research, the data is going to be stored in Enlighten: Research Data from where it will be automatically removed after ten years. During the fieldwork, the encrypted documents were uploaded to the OneDrive location of the University of Glasgow so that even if the laptop goes missing, I have access to the data.

4.6.1 Method 1: Creative Workshops

The first activity of the Creative Workshop served as an icebreaker for the later part so that participants would not be hesitant to share their experiences and debate in the participatory process. The initial idea during the design phase of the project was to produce a ‘wall newspaper’, which is a simple, informal publication designed to be displayed on walls in public spaces. It consists of handwritten, illustrated content arranged on large sheets of paper, focusing on news, creative writing, artwork, or issues relevant to the community.

To share a skill from the researcher's end, this idea was developed as ‘wall newspapers’ are a low-cost and accessible medium, allowing communities to share information and ideas collectively, especially in contexts where other forms of media are expensive. Historically, they have been used as tools for activism and grassroots communication. During the fieldwork, participants made ‘wall newspapers’, alongside zines, posters, and collages. Whilst using this method, many conversations and debates came about spontaneously, something which was not as noticeable using my other methods.

I have experience in offering art workshops in Bangladesh and Scotland, and I wanted to use creative methods for the research. Creative methods can educate broad audiences, garnering attention for a discourse (Leavy, 2021, p 416). I strongly believe oral narratives provide communicative space and flexibility (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004, p 366), and that is why I planned to use this creative method in my research method. The participants of the workshops were selected by the leader of the organisation, and in most cases, they were junior staff members of the organisation. This reflects that the senior leadership team was very busy and thus unavailable. Additionally, the leaders

of the organisations selected staff members who would not be able to share any confidential information, such as material resources.

At the beginning of the workshops, I introduced myself and the project. The workshops took place on the organisation's premises. The participants were briefed about the project and privacy notice and informed that the conversation was going to be recorded for the project. The discussions were recorded in an audio recorder provided by the university and later transcribed. Subsequently, by introducing a few topics, a conversation was initiated. The process included icebreaking as the first step so that the participants were not hesitant to share their experience of collective actions in the organisation. After the initial discussions, as a second step, the participants were asked to produce content where, as a collective, they decided to make a zine, poster or wall newspaper. The materials for the workshop were provided from the researcher's end, where there were colours, pencils, paper and old newspapers and magazines for collage. At the end of the workshop, the participants had to sign the consent form as their last stage and decide if they wanted to take back their work or leave it with me. In Rajshahi, the organisation kept the outcome on their premises, but in other places, the participants collectively decided to hand it over to me.

This type of research, using a variety of creative mixed methods, has never been used before in research with LGBT+ communities in the context of Bangladesh. Hajra and Boyce have used photographic research for studying transgender people and MSM in West Bengal (India), and they talked about the appropriateness of creative methods in their essay.

Photographs facilitate research and can potentially capture layers of emotion, intuitive experience and a sense of self that may not be verbalised other than in response to images (or indeed verbalised at all)

but which might be intrinsic to an understanding of sexual subjectivity in an embodied pre-verbal or pre-conceptual sense. The aim of working with photographs in this way was to explore day-to-day experiences and their relationship to research participants' perspectives on self and social context (Hajra and Boyce, 2011, p 5).

The method captured people's perception of moments with layers without verbal expression. The workshops were not simply introduced as illustrative adjuncts to data analysis but as a means of democratising research processes. The workshops allowed participants to creatively represent their circumstances and to develop their insight into their situations employing such depictions. In this way, the images produced can catalyse potentially cathartic emotional processes and insights.

I wanted to use creative methods in my data collection as I wanted to contribute to movement-building during my fieldwork. I believe that this process helped generate a dialogue in the discourse, which is needed for the community to reduce unspoken tensions and help build solidarity. This method also worked as a conversation starter, which was very helpful to use before continuing with other methods. The workshops produced texts and images which were later explored through sociological and anthropological interpretations in dialogue with research participants.

4.6.2 Method 2: Event observation

The initial idea during the design phase of the project was to observe the organising process of various celebration events, as it is an integral part of collective action in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal. During fieldwork, it was possible to accurately follow what was planned, and

additionally, I attended a few other events organised by other groups to see the interaction. One of the core strengths of this ethnographic method is observation, which enables researchers to gain an insider perspective on the culture they are studying. Alpa Shah, who worked in South Asia, also talked about participant observation in her work on ethnography. She mentioned that through living with and being a part of other people's lives as fully as possible, participant observation makes us question our fundamental assumptions and pre-existing theories about the world; it enables us to discover new ways of thinking about, seeing, and acting in the world (Shah, 2017, p 47). According to her, it's a two-way process where a researcher can explore all aspects of the lives of the people they are working with and recognise their interconnections. As a member of the community, this helped me to see different perspectives where I had to move away from my assumptions.

The five events were selected based on the organisations I was working with. I have, however, observed other events as well during fieldwork. The key five events were observed, and notes were taken in the diary where some of the interview participants or workshop participants were key organisers. Seeing them organising was also an experience apart from hearing them in other methods. I was not familiar with all the group members involved in organising events. The participant's observation of the events was an intimate engagement with a group of people who were once strangers. It provided the opportunity to know and experience the world through their perspectives and actions in as holistic a way as possible. Events were observed with permission in different locations.

I had planned to stay for a few days in each location, so that I could observe events organised by the organisations and take part in those, to see what forms

of collective actions are used in that local setting. On location, my data collection approach involved collecting data using my senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way (Smit and Onwuegbuzie, 2018, p 1). Among very different events in various locations, there were yearly get-togethers, Pride walks, gender fairs, poster-making workshops, workshops, and many others. The events I observed are listed below:

- Indradhanur Mela (Rainbow Fair), Chittagong, Bangladesh (23 September 2022), organised by Turning Point
- Kolkata (India) Rainbow Pride Walk, India (18 December 2022), initially initiated by History Trust
- Reincarnate III, Dhaka, Bangladesh (17 January 2023) organised by Shojon
- CSO members on human rights, good governance, women's empowerment, and advocacy, Rajshahi, Bangladesh (24 January 2023), organised by Shurjer Alo
- 'Padmar Janma Pala' (The tale of goddess Padma's birth) at the Radha Krishna Temple, Khulna, Bangladesh (14 April 2023), organised by Bahurupi

The permission to observe the events was verbally gathered through the event organisers. Instead of recording the entire event, notes were taken in the researcher's diary, which were analysed later. The week following each data collection session was dedicated towards active reflection and writing up on the events. One day each week was utilised to consider the highlights of the events, make notes, and write a brief reflection journal, which will be referred to later during the analysis phase. The initial field notes were taken in a diary,

which was later word-processed in the university-provided password-protected laptop in Microsoft Word.

Apart from the events organised by the organisation I worked with, I also attended other events to see the interaction of the organisation members in those events:

- Dialogue session on Developing the Inherent Capacities of Transgender, Hijra and Gender Diverse Populations, Dhaka, Bangladesh (15 September 2022)
- Advocacy meeting to abolish the existing practice of medical testing to identify the Transgender & Hijra community, Dhaka, Bangladesh (19 November 2022)
- Gender Mela at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India (6 December 2022)
- Poster making and slogan writing workshop, Kolkata, India (9 December 2022)
- Book launch ‘Feminist and queer politics in neoliberal India’ at L 51, NAB, Kolkata, India (14 December 2022)
- Book discussion on COVID-19 assemblages at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India (15 December 2022)
- Day-long session to explore the vision for the community at the American Club, Dhaka, Bangladesh (6 May 2023)
- Cultural event Bondhon supported by the Swedish Institute, Dhaka, Bangladesh (13 January 2023)
- Review and Learning Circle by CREA - A Feminist Initiative, Dhaka, Bangladesh (10 January 2023)
- International Transgender Day of Visibility, Dhaka, Bangladesh (31 March 2023)

4.6.3 Method 3: In-depth interview of the organisation members

For the interviews, I reached out to the leaders of various organisations, requesting each to select four additional members from their team for interviews. Including the leader, this resulted in five interviews per organisation, and I worked with a total of five organisations. I ensured that the leaders provided detailed insights during their interviews, as, in my experience, they possessed the most comprehensive knowledge about the organisation's history, background, and collective actions over time. The selection of leaders was based on purposive sampling, while the additional members were chosen by the leaders, constituting a form of random sampling. In total, I planned for twenty-five interviews ($n = 25$) and managed to complete them all in eight months.

Initially, during the design phase of the project, I thought all the members of an organisation would be able to provide substantial input about resources and decision-making processes in their collective actions. However, during the practical work phase, I realised that some junior staff members, such as contractual staff, are completely unaware of how decisions are made at the senior management level, or why such decisions are taken. Different topics were discussed from a semi-structured questionnaire, with selected group members chosen by the organisation leader. It was semi-structured; as a result, my preparations beforehand could complement the interview process. These interviews were conducted at different layers of the organisation, such as leadership positions as well as volunteer positions, to include differing perspectives.

My approach has involved observing and listening in a systematic and meaningful way (Smit and Onwuegbuzie, 2018, p. 1). I planned for the data

collection to take place in a preferred location of the participants so that they could have a sense of agency while giving their opinions. As Thapar-Björkert and Marsha Henry suggested in their article about reassessing the research relationship:

While we are aware of the ways we were able to take up power at different stages of the research process, we do not suggest that we were always in positions of power. Rather, we have explored ways in which participants can exercise power too, particularly on issues of national location, age, generation and reciprocity (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004, p. 377).

When it is taking place, there is also some preparation in place in case other members unexpectedly enter the room and necessitate a change of environment. It was not uncommon in the context of Bangladesh, as Kanamik Koni Khan mentioned while sharing his experience in his monograph:

The reason why I was unable to conduct most interviews at the participants' residences is that the families of the participants are often unaware of their sexual and gender orientation; thus, it was better for them to talk in a place where they would feel safe. (Khan, 2021, p 128).

In his work, he talked about a situation where the interviewee could not provide a separate room in their office for the interview. There was no time to get to know each other, and as a result, it was difficult to maintain privacy in the office space where he took the interview. A similar thing happened during my interviews in Bangladesh and India; however, due to my preparation beforehand, it was not difficult to manage. The questionnaire and the other documents were printed from the University of Glasgow before I started my

fieldwork. This ensures that there is no disclosure or trace of the documents afterwards, through which this work can be traced. Because of the preparation in advance, there was no need to use any local photocopier or printer to produce the consent forms and questionnaire.

My postgraduate degree in social work deepened my belief in the power of narratives, particularly the way oral storytelling creates a communicative space that fosters flexibility and connection (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004, p. 366). Each time, before the process started, there was a brief discussion about the consent form in Bangla. I subsequently shared the transcription via their email address, in those cases of participants who can read, write and hold an email address. In the email, I asked them to make any changes they wished, so that they have control over what is going to be used as data for this research. The participants were asked to choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the process so that both the researcher and the participant could agree on this.

I had planned to stop the recorder in case of vulnerable situations. I had it in my mind that not every conversation with the community members would be recorded. In some instances, I thought of choosing to turn off the recording during interviews, because the issues discussed would reveal the identity of the participants in such close-knit activist circles. I also had planned to turn off the recorder if the participant got emotional. In the end, there was no situation like that in my fieldwork.

All the participants were given a pseudonym for security reasons and to ensure anonymity in all stages of the process. I kept a separate file with participants' names and pseudonyms. For the individuals interviewed, there was no number or code used in the transcripts, as that would remove the human approach from their narratives. No location was disclosed to the externals for the data

collection process to ensure safety. The recording was done in a recorder provided by the convener through a research support grant. Initially, the data was uploaded to OneDrive every month after translation and stored in a Word file or mp3 file.

On average, each interview, with my questions and their answers, lasted one and a half hours. In the initial months of my fieldwork, interviews were taking longer. By the end, however, the interviews were very focused, and I felt that I could ask direct and specific questions without hesitation. With time, I also realised that some of the junior members of the organisation had no idea about their total budget and decision-making process, and the leaders of the organisation were able to give more insight. However, managing the time of these community leaders was not easy, as they remained occupied with various meetings.

The interviews (Appendix 15) took place in the organisation's premises for detailed observation, or a neutral place. I chose not to conduct interviews in my home or any restaurant so that participants could feel comfortable and have a sense of agency throughout the whole process. It is important that participants feel comfortable in their interview location and thus can interact naturally. A local café or a club might not have been affordable for them, and they may have felt uncomfortable with the ambience of the setting.

There were certain risks associated with interviewing in a public space, as it is not socially accepted. The participants might feel hesitant to pronounce certain words and phrases in public. Confidentiality was a key issue, and it was ensured that when the interviews were taking place, there was no one else in the room. It was agreed that the organisation member who was being interviewed had that time allocated as free solely for the interview. It was a learning experience that several participants in Kolkata (India) chose a public

café for their interviews and could discuss the topics easily, whereas in Bangladesh, people were very hesitant to pronounce certain words, such as condom, openly in their preferred locations. I drafted a semi-structured questionnaire and categorised it into ten categories (Appendix 15), based on which the interviews took place. There was a briefing before and after the interview so that the participants were aware of the project as well as their engagement with it.

I asked the ethics committee about an additional method of interviewing independent activists after I started my fieldwork. I considered the possibility of interviewing key activists. This method was kept as a backup plan for the project, which I did not use later.

The interviews conducted with both organisational leaders and volunteers provided a diverse range of perspectives. This approach is significant because it addresses a gap in previous research, which often overlooked such details, leading to potentially subjective findings. My attention to smaller but crucial details, such as discussing consent not only signing, ensuring the confidentiality of locations, and printing materials from Glasgow to avoid local shops, was essential in maintaining participant trust and ensuring the integrity of the research. These efforts reflect a commitment to ethical interview practices and safeguarding participant anonymity.

4.6.4 Method 4: Social media observation

The initial idea during the design phase of the project was to observe two social media groups where there are regular interactions among community members. However, in practice during the fieldwork, I found that groups in Kolkata are not as active as those in Bangladesh. Similarly, offline activities are an integral part of online interactions. This was a major finding and

reflected in chapter six on social media, where online interactions merged with offline activities and incidents. Two private Facebook groups for sexual and gender minority people were observed, where consent was obtained initially from the group owners.

The two social media groups were selected during fieldwork, based on their impact on collective actions. The group Azadi Festival in West Bengal (India) was selected as they contributed to the organisation of Pride Walk in its early days, and one of the key sub-questions of the project was to learn about traditional organising. Bangladesh Equality Network Family was also selected as they play an important role in mobilising social media to create employability and livelihood for queer community members in Bangladesh. In both cases, management members were interviewed online to learn the details of community organising. It was a learning experience that the two are very different and do not have any interaction with each other, even though digital spaces ensure possibilities of transboundary interactions and exchange.

For both the closed groups, access is restricted by a group moderator, and only members inside the community can have access to them through friends. The group regulations set by the moderators mentioned that the group members needed to be 18+ in age, and thus, I ensured that the interaction observed was with people who had self-identified themselves as above 18 years old. The group names and other details are anonymised in the researcher's diary.

Meta, in their policy, reflects a commitment to leveraging technology and data to address broader community and global challenges. In addition, there was ethical clearance from the University of Glasgow for the non-standard data protocol, a protocol that is required for research using online sources. The

application was based on Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019).

There was a specific protocol for research dealing with non-standard human data, which is social media, in the case of this project. A separate profile was created on Facebook with all the research-related information in the profile. Besides the group observation, all the information related to the project was explained to the group admin, assuring that no screenshots or names would be disclosed, so that it had informed consent from all ends. A screengrab from that profile is provided here:



Image 2: Facebook profile created for data collection detailing the informed consent

Included in the description of my project was a link so that people were aware of the process, as well as informed consent. This is as per Facebook policy, which says, “Should you wish to collect content or information from people

who interact with your Page, group or event (ex, information obtained from a call-to-action button), you must first provide them with notice.” Keeping a low profile and meeting in secret and closed networks is already the practice of many LGBT+ groups in Bangladesh. As an activist for many years, I am acquainted with the security protocols related to it, particularly regarding digital footprints. I discussed the safety issues carefully with my supervisors, and there was an agreed-upon plan with both supervisors.

Offline collective actions are not exclusively taking place offline but are connected to online social media practices. Most internet users constantly crisscross a range of online and offline platforms. Sara Pink, who is a leading researcher in online ethnography of queer contexts, mentioned that researching social media and activism entails going beyond interviewing activists about what they do to include bringing together online materials and either following or actively participating in blogs, social media platforms, online news sites and face to face events...social media ethnography brings new routes to knowledge that are specially opened up through online/offline engagements (Pink, 2012, p 125). According to their opinion, it is important for gaining a sense of the shifting interests as they emerge online, but it is also intertwined with offline activities. Based on my observation, Chapter 6 is developed where no screenshots are used, rather, the interactions are described in a narrative form.

4.7 Fieldwork

Not everything I planned for data collection went smoothly during this fieldwork. In some cases, participants were either uninterested in contributing or some organisations were difficult to reach. These findings, documented

through various media, form the foundation for a deeper analysis, illustrating the complexities of queer collective actions and their cultural contexts. As per the guidelines, a plain language statement was prepared as a requirement of the Ethics Application so that the participants are aware of what the research is about, what the process is, and what their rights are as respondents. This statement was briefly summarised before the start of each interview in Bangla. Permission was always sought to record the interview. Participants were asked to sign a consent form at the end of the interview and were informed that they could also withdraw consent at any time before the research was complete. Considering the volatile political context of Bangladesh, with anti-transgender backlash, arrest and murder of activists and human rights defenders, it was precarious to have a confirmation from the participants for the recording. They were assured that their details would be kept confidential. In addressing the important issue of maintaining anonymity, any direct identifiers (like names, location, pictures) or indirect identifiers (like occupation, workplace) that might expose participants or link quotes to individuals were removed from the final thesis. They will also be removed from any future publications.

My initial idea for the creative workshops was to produce 'wall newspapers', but in practice, participants preferred to create different materials such as zines and posters. They felt more comfortable working on these within the limited time available, and I prioritised their collective opinions and discussion points over sticking rigidly to my original plan. Time constraints for the workshops were an important factor which I had not fully accounted for when planning my fieldwork. During the creative process, participants shared their experiences and opinions, which I recorded with their consent, aligning with the core goal of my methodology. Later, I transcribed them, and these transcriptions were used along with the output of the workshops. Some of the workshop outputs are with me, while others remain at their office, where I

documented them through photographs for this project. Selected images will be presented in the following chapter (Chapter 5).

During the data collection process, it took time to gain access to some organisations. There were unexpected events taking place as well. There was a murder (New Age, 2023) which took place through the main gay dating app at the end of the fieldwork, which added concern while collecting data. Interview participants talked about the crime during their interview and shared their opinions, which provided a valuable contribution to the data.

Going from Bangladesh to Kolkata (India) for data collection was also a learning experience. I have been to Kolkata previously, but not to meet queer activists and attend queer events, including Pride. In the case of West Bengal, several participants mentioned that earlier generations of their family originated from Bangladesh. They asked me about the safety of the Hindu community in Bangladesh. I found this an awkward question, considering the history and political climate of these two places.

From my background and work in Bangladesh, confidentiality was a key focus from the beginning of the fieldwork, and that is why organisational premises were used for the interviews and workshops. However, in India, three interviews took place in a café recommended by the interviewee, and I prioritised their local knowledge and comfort. They were quite comfortable discussing their sexuality in the proximity of other customers in the café, which was never the case in Bangladesh. People from the queer community in Bangladesh were very cautious about raising their voices when they talked about sexuality. While recalling the city and the experience, Paul Boyce, who worked in the eastern Indian context, has also mentioned language and other particulars as an effect of legal changes, which were evident in the data collection process. This new experience during my fieldwork signals a

growing recognition and articulation of gender and sexual diversity in India, whereas in Bangladesh, their incorporation into everyday language suggests uneven acceptance and understanding.

Language changes were evident; words such as ‘queer’ and ‘transgender’ (used in both English and Bengali sentence constructions) have become more prominent in urban scenes now in a way that they were not before (back in the mid-1990s, for instance). Points of reference have altered, and laws have changed – positively and negatively (Boyce and Dasgupta, 2020, p 520).

The increased prominence of terms like non-binary and asexual during the interview in Kolkata highlights significant shifts in the sociolinguistic landscape, reflecting broader cultural and political transformations. It underscores the complex interplay between societal acknowledgement and systemic resistance. This evolution of language and law, as witnessed by Boyce and Dasgupta, reveals both the possibilities for inclusion and the persistent challenges of discrimination and marginalisation.

The Chukri group, who participated in the creative workshop, were not familiar with reading or writing in any language. As a result, they were unable to create a visual piece in the same manner as the other groups. They could barely write their names, and it was not important for them to read and write for the profession and performance they were engaged in. Their scripts are verbal, and they also learn the lyrics and dialogues by listening to each other. For me, it was a learning experience that the musicians in the entire team held their entire script in their memory, and they could keep track of which dialogue and scene followed which. Their dialogues and steps for the performance are transmitted through oral culture, rather than written culture. I sat alongside them and helped them make the visual, where they talked about

different stories, bringing some of the photographs from different performances. They made a collage with the photographs, and I wrote the discussion according to the order they suggested. Later, the entire visual was translated and scanned and is included in chapter five.

The fieldwork presented both challenges and valuable learning opportunities, which enriched the research process. From unexpected obstacles, such as limited participant interest and unforeseen incidents, to cross-cultural insights in India and Bangladesh, the experience highlighted the nuanced dynamics of gender and sexual diversity. The creative workshops and interviews revealed the significance of oral traditions, language shifts, and evolving societal perceptions, underscoring the interplay of inclusion and systemic resistance.

4.8 Fieldwork Risk Assessment

In this section, the discussion is about the safety and security situation and other circumstances that require precaution and preparation before the fieldwork starts on the ground. The location included two countries where some of the communication was time-consuming and difficult to predict. In addition, the political situation in Bangladesh could hinder the entire process, which is considered in the background of this plan.

The primary concern during my fieldwork was ensuring my safety and security, particularly given the risks of anti-queer discrimination and potential violence in Bangladesh and, to a lesser extent, in India. Past incidents of murders and arrests in Bangladesh, coupled with my long-standing role as a community organiser, meant that I could potentially be tracked and targeted, a risk carefully considered during the project's design. Random homophobic attacks on the street or targeted violence were a key concern for the risk

assessment. There has been a series of murders in Bangladesh between 2015 and 2017, where my friends and fellow activists were brutally killed. The murders also included those of freethinkers and religious minorities, which were reported on in the international media. Considering myself identifiable as a queer rights activist due to my previous online presence, it was crucial to ensure my safety and security for this project.

I had to provide my contact information to my parents or a friend when travelling away, which was required by the university. In consultation with my supervisors, I maintained a low profile throughout the fieldwork, refraining from presenting my work publicly or revealing my identity and research focus at events. Besides, I dressed in a low-key way to avoid being seen as queer when travelling to events and collecting data. Additionally, I avoided disclosing my location on digital platforms to minimise my digital footprint. As part of the University of Glasgow's policy, I completed a Fieldwork Risk Assessment (Appendix 19), and the graduate school required a trip-specific Travel Risk Assessment form for this project. This included an activity plan, location-specific contacts, and guidance from the UK Government's travel advisory for Bangladesh, a risk matrix and risk evaluation. Given the confidential and sensitive nature of the data I was collecting, I also developed a contingency plan to address potential risks, such as theft, to safeguard the materials. It was agreed with the supervisors and the Graduate School in the end to conduct this fieldwork after the successful completion of all application forms. I downloaded an application on my mobile for emergencies, and every month, there was a meeting with the supervisors where I updated the details of the situation and research progress.

The fieldwork took place in different locations in Bangladesh and India, which have a tropical climate, with an extreme monsoon season which can last up to

five months. Precautions to adjust to the climate were taken beforehand. In some seasons and some areas, there can be malaria or dengue fever from mosquito bites, for which there is a mosquito net and repellent as a precaution. Some of the organisations are located remotely, where accommodation was a challenge. As for data collection, it was utterly important to stay as close as possible, but there might not be any accommodation facility available with proper safety and security for the electronic devices. Preparation was taken to avoid circumstances, as some of the groups were in remote areas and I had no experience working in Kolkata (India).

The local religious groups or the government officials might not appreciate my work discussing sexuality issues, for which certain words were chosen, and some other words were avoided. In the methods and data collection process, interviews with any government officials were avoided, as this could disclose the sensitive nature of the work. Though this could give an important insight into the project to ensure the safety of the participants and the project, such interactions were avoided. There were events observed where government officials were in attendance, but no discussion about the project and process was revealed in front of them for strategic reasons.

Similarly, no presentation or discussion about the research was conducted during fieldwork, which could have disclosed the research topic. There is a certain tolerance for the visibility of the Hijra population in Bangladesh, but there is a hostile attitude towards gay and lesbian identities, which has been seen in many significant incidents, such as murder and arrests. All these precautions were taken and considered while designing the research methods and conducting the fieldwork.

4.9 Methodology for the entire project

In this chapter, I shared the methodological process that I have followed throughout my doctoral research. The initial call of the project, designed by Dr. Matthew Waites and Dr. Rohit Dasgupta, was about the contestation between decoloniality and digital culture in Bangladesh and India. From there, I proposed and derived the focus of forms of collective action whose design and focus are more aligned with my intellectual and analytical interests. It focuses on learning about and reflecting on the community journeys of different queer organisations. New work on methodologies in sexuality studies has emerged from a range of academic disciplines with different, and sometimes conflicting, approaches to doing research. It's a fluid comparison between different organisations according to their size, resources and status.

This approach reflects a deliberate departure from conventional comparative analyses of prominent, registered organisations in Bangladesh and West Bengal, focusing instead on amplifying marginalised and often overlooked voices. By including more than two organisations and prioritising small, isolated groups like the Chukris, the research challenges the dominant narratives that typically centre on larger, more established entities. This inclusivity enriches the analysis by incorporating diverse perspectives, particularly those of groups with limited visibility in existing scholarship. However, the choice to work with smaller groups may introduce challenges, such as access, representational limitations, and potential resistance to external scrutiny, which require careful ethical and methodological consideration. Ultimately, this approach foregrounds the value of decolonising research practices by highlighting voices that disrupt traditional hierarchies in movement-building studies.

The organisations were deliberately selected for their prominence in the movement, as identified during the initial phase of the field visit. This study included interviews with 25 organisation members, five creative workshops, observations of five community events, and observations of two social media groups. Among the twenty-five interviewees, twenty were from Bangladesh, and five were from West Bengal. Previous research has focused primarily on Hijra, persons living with HIV or MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) communities, but this study adopts a collective action perspective. As a result, a diverse range of organisations were selected, including not only Hijra or MSM groups but also social media groups, Chukri collectives, and archives working across all communities. Throughout my analysis, I have intentionally avoided revealing participants' identities. Firstly, this decision stems from my aim to highlight their collective emotions rather than individual identities. Secondly, I sought to move beyond a Eurocentric LGBT+ framework, focusing instead on the unique expressions of non-normative gender and sexuality found in South Asia. Additionally, many participants have fluid identities, for instance, some who previously identified as Hijra now identify as Trans, aligning with the global movement, while some Kothi individuals now identify as MSM for professional reasons. Participants' sexual and gender identities are disclosed only in the appendix.

Some aspects of collective actions were evident based on my activist experiences, but deeper details were needed. As a result, the research sub-questions included topics like the role of transnational funding, social media and various practices. Apart from collecting data from Kolkata (India), to gain insights from activists outside the capitals, field visits were conducted in three districts beyond Dhaka (Bangladesh) during 2022 and 2023. Spanning five phases over eight months, the fieldwork was carefully designed to facilitate event observations, workshops, and interviews at each location. Spending

several days in these areas provided a deeper understanding of the local context, which would have been difficult to achieve through day visits or online interactions. Transcriptions of the data were completed within the same month to maintain accuracy and relevance. While the Kolkata-based organisation operated in a metropolitan setting, many of its participants shared experiences of growing up outside the city, which shaped their perspectives. During discussions, they highlighted those collective actions, which are feasible in Kolkata, often remain unattainable in smaller cities due to the persistent social taboo surrounding such issues.

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the movements, it became clear that a multi-method approach was essential for achieving robust research outcomes. The four methods employed were carefully designed and received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow. These methods, along with the research experience, informed the selection of key topics presented in the analysis chapters, which are about queer digital life, the role of NGOs and queer events as a form of collective action.

Engaging with activists was a pivotal part of the study and involved purposive sampling to identify organisations primarily focused on LGBT+ issues. Creative workshops were also organised, fostering skill-sharing among participants. To complement the fieldwork data, event observations were conducted at five semi-private events, accessible via email invitations. Reflexive engagement, personal experiences, and memories were incorporated into the analysis but were limited to those directly relevant to the fieldwork data.

The thesis, grounded in interpretivism, offers a nuanced sociological perspective by analysing events and actions within the context of the values, norms, and beliefs specific to the cultures in which they occur. This approach

is valuable as it moves beyond a reductive focus on a single source of power, such as the state or colonial legacies like Section 377, and instead explores a multiplicity of power sources and negotiation dynamics. By doing so, it challenges traditional frameworks that often centralise state authority and legal structures as the sole drivers of social change.

The thesis also critically interrogates the dominance of NGOs located in the capital, which have frequently been prioritised in research. This emphasis on central NGOs has tended to marginalise grassroots organisations and regional voices, perpetuating an incomplete understanding of queer movements and collective actions. By diversifying its analytical focus, the thesis contributes to a broader, more inclusive narrative, highlighting the creative and decentralised ways power is negotiated within the queer communities of Bangladesh and West Bengal. However, this also raises questions about how effectively it incorporates regional disparities and whether it adequately captures the intersectionality of class, gender, and rural-urban divides within these movements.

Decolonial perspectives informed the entire research design, aligning my activist interests with scholarly calls to interrogate resistance and the enduring impacts of colonialism. While colonisation refers to the historical period of invasions and occupations under colonial administrations, decolonisation initially signified political independence. However, as early decolonisation scholars predicted, the ongoing influence of colonial structures necessitates continuous strategies to resist and dismantle these legacies. My study was deliberately crafted to reflect decolonial principles, integrating methodological choices that prioritised unpacking power dynamics, but this approach also introduced its complexities and tensions. Grounded in practices that challenge Western-dominated knowledge production, my framework emphasised

reciprocity, collaboration, and mutual recognition, making conventional methods like surveys insufficient and potentially disrespectful in this context. The creative methods employed aimed to disrupt traditional power hierarchies between researcher and participants, fostering a dialogical exchange that acknowledged and valued the collective knowledge held by participants.

As a community member, I designed the entire project with a focus on relationships, co-creation, and empathy, which is reflected in the methods I selected. My primary aim was to deeply explore the collectives, their behaviours, and their cultures, ensuring the analysis was richly contextualised.

My methodological journey has been an ongoing process of critical reflection—both confrontational and interrogative—on the implications and responsibilities inherent in producing knowledge. This has involved a careful examination of forms, substance, context, and the interplay between personal and collective interests, as well as the temporal dimensions of research—from the fleeting nature of encounters to the enduring impact of memories and the vulnerability of shared emotions. I embraced a flexible approach, allowing insights to emerge organically from observations. For analysis, I prioritised South Asian social research literature, aligning with my intention to design the project through a decolonial lens. Having outlined the conceptualisation of the methodology in the thesis in this section, the following section will turn to conceptualising the specific issue of data analysis.

4.10 Data Analysis Process

For the entire project, several activities were observed along with different data collection methods. I learnt that each organisation has a different culture. From the fieldwork, I gathered different forms of data, which were interview

recordings, creative workshop outputs (zines, posters, wall newspapers, and recordings), ethnographic thick fieldnotes from event observation and data gathered from social media. Systematic coding was not appropriate for all the data, and as a result, different methods of analysis were used. In the social media chapter, there is a discussion of two case studies. The detailed investigation of these specific cases was not best served through systematic coding in data analysis. Similarly, for ethnographic fieldwork about events, it is common practice for researchers to provide a detailed discussion of specific events for which systematic data analysis seeking patterns using coding is not required. All these required different kinds of data analysis techniques are stated in the table below:

Chapter number	Forms of data	Data Analysis
Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7	Interview recordings	Thematic analysis
Chapter 5	Creative workshop audio recording and visuals	Critical visual and textual analysis
Chapter 5	Fieldnotes from event observation	Ethnographic thick description
Chapter 6	Social media observation	Ethnographic thick description

Table 3: Chapter names with data analysis methods

Different types of data analysis are drawn in four data chapters. The key issues of concern that have appeared from all the data collected are stated below:

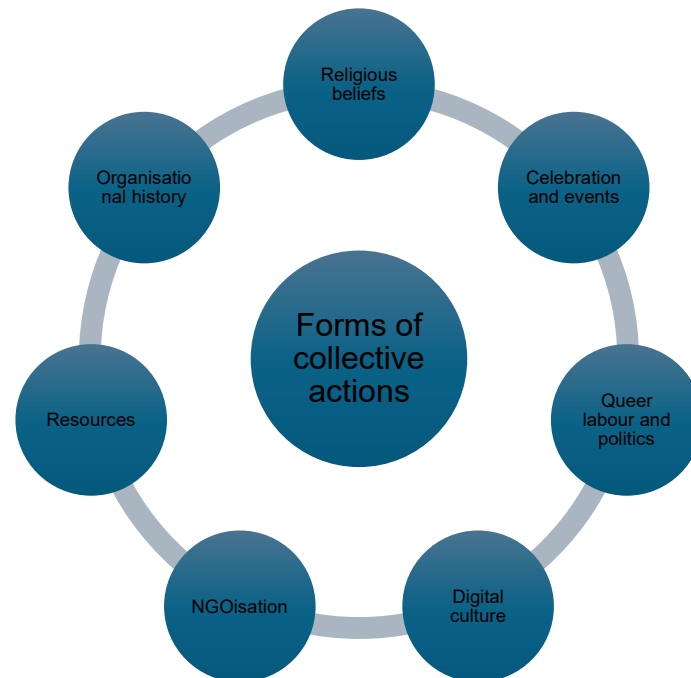


Image 3: Different issues of concern that appeared during the data collection

Based on the existing literature on forms of collective actions and the data collected during fieldwork, different analysis processes were engaged for qualitative data analysis. It was focused on identifying patterns and meaning within this data. The broader issues of concern about the forms of collective actions that came out of all the different data are shown in the image above. Here, issues of concern are the ideas and experiences that describe and organise the data.

In this project, the chapters were also identified based on the research sub-questions. The sub-questions are stated below:

- What is the role of digital culture in contemporary forms of collective action?
- How is transnational resource sharing in an NGOised space creating an impact on movement building?
- How is traditional culture, in the context of queer collective action, reflected in the oral history of community members?

Based on the existing literature and research questions, I selected these key themes for the main analysis chapters. The researcher's experience in the field and the research context also influenced how I arrived at the key themes for the three main analysis chapters.

4.10.1 Method 1: Creative workshops

The critical visual analysis method was used to interpret the visuals created in different workshops. While making visuals, the group chose a topic and sometimes talked about related ideas. The debate and the discussion were important for the analysis through semiotics. The workshop's outcomes consisted of different visuals, including zines, wall newspapers, posters and hand-painted canvas. In the systematic analysis, it was not only the visual content of the work which played a role, but also the discussions, which were recorded and transcribed. The recordings were part of the data but were not analysed independently; they were used together with the visual data. This gives a vivid idea of the forms of collective actions with visuals. The starting point for the analysis was to identify and describe persons, objects, places, or events in a visual.

Russell W Belk (2006), in their journal article on critical visual analysis, said that basic descriptive work requires articulation of form, subject matter, genre, medium, colour, light, line, and size – the building blocks of images (Belk,

2006, p 304). These building blocks—' form, subject matter, genre, medium, colour, light, line, and size'—were essential in understanding not just what is depicted, but how it is displayed, and why these choices matter. By critical visual analysis, as a researcher, I could uncover the intentions behind the work, and the techniques used to convey those intentions, which were nuanced and unspoken in other methods. By connecting images to the cultural context, I gained a more thorough understanding of how images embody and express cultural values and contradictions. Visual images thus take specific forms linked to political, economic and social relations, which determine both their process of production and their ability to constitute the social world itself. The language of visual presentation drew from broader cultural perceptions and metaphorical categories, offering perspectives on how things are or ought to be.

4.10.2 Method 2: Event observation

I analysed ethnographic thick descriptions from event observations by meticulously interpreting the detailed, context-rich accounts to uncover deeper cultural meanings and social dynamics. Thick descriptions went beyond simply documenting what happened; they included the nuanced interactions, symbols, emotions, and contextual factors that provided a holistic understanding of the event. Analysis identified recurring patterns and relationships, considering how participants' actions and words reflected underlying cultural norms, values, and power structures. The process often involved iterative engagement with the data, connecting observed behaviours to theoretical frameworks, while remaining sensitive to the perspectives and experiences of the participants. By doing so, I constructed a comprehensive narrative that conveys not only what is occurring but also why it is significant within the specific cultural and social setting being studied.

South Asian cultures are rich in rituals, festivals, and symbolic practices. Ethnographic thick description focuses on understanding the meanings behind these rituals, which is crucial for appreciating their significance within the broader cultural and religious context. In South Asia, where social norms and practices can be deeply embedded in everyday life, being an active participant allowed me as a researcher to understand the subtleties of behaviour, communication, and social interaction that might not be apparent to outsiders. The method was particularly useful in understanding the local contexts in which cultural practices are embedded. The anthropological method allows for an exploration of these contexts in a holistic way.

The researcher's diary contained the record of the names, locations and dates, and later the names of the participants, locations and dates were anonymised. Thus, the observation captured the different practices and the use of various resources that exist behind the scenes. The resources used for organising the events were listed and discussed in the analysis process. The data from the event observations are analysed through decolonial theories to compare different forms of collective actions. It was important to include this method as these insights of participant observation are based not only on what is said, but also on that which is left unsaid and demonstrated only through action.

4.10.3 Method 3: In-depth interview of members of five organisations

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for understanding patterns of meaning and thoughts, beliefs and opinions, which is relevant considering the research question here. My interest in patterns of meaning played a vital role in organising the data. Here 'initial themes' were labelling the key topics that appear in the

conversation with the interviewee, such as interview transcripts. By labelling, the patterns were identified, which is the foundation of the 'final theme'.

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke also talked about patterns when they mentioned that thematic analysis is a method for developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p 39). To structure the data after fieldwork, coding was the process used, and through close data engagements, data meanings were tagged with code labels. The key themes of the research, which emerged, are divided into three analysis chapters of this research. These key themes are queer celebration events, queer digital life and NGOisation. These themes emerged after the coding process in NVivo when the entire mapping was complete. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, a theme in reflexive thematic analysis is a pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p 77).

The qualitative data were processed through NVivo, where codes were given and based on that, chapters were designed. Through NVivo, the final version of themes is derived, which retains the richness, depth, and context of the original data. Reflexive thematic analysis is effective in capturing the complexity of human experiences, making it ideal for interview data where participants' perspectives are rich and multifaceted. It offers a flexible, in-depth, and reflexive approach to analysing interview data, allowing me to explore the richness of experiences while acknowledging my role as a researcher in shaping the analysis. For reflexive thematic analysis, the data gathered were analysed, maintaining certain steps as stated below. It allows for a data-driven approach where themes emerge from the data. This method encourages ongoing reflection on how my background, biases, and

experiences influenced the coding and theme development, promoting a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the data

- Dataset familiarisation: In the initial phase, data were familiarised by transcribing them into English.
- Coding: While transcribing, certain codes were given based on the interviews as well as research sub-questions.
- Developing themes: Based on the codes, a few themes were chosen for the three analysis chapters.
- Writing the thematic analysis report: Based on the themes, three were chosen to analyse in detail.

The process of coding and theme development in reflexive thematic analysis is iterative, where I can revisit and revise codes and themes as my understanding of the data evolves.

The analysis did not follow content analysis, where one can count the number of times a particular word or concept occurs in the narrative. Rather, it went for a thematic analysis of this data, where interview data were given an identifier, extracted, and examined in more detail.

Thematic analysis was chosen as it offers a set of techniques, concepts, practices and guidelines to organise, interrogate and interpret datasets but using this involves thinking and making choices about other aspects of the research project and process (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p 39) While labelling the key topics, it depended on various factors as mentioned by Braun and Clarke where they talked about research subject, research question, context, theoretical location and positionality. Since the interviews were in Bangla, my knowledge of the language and cultural context helped me to translate transcripts accurately and interpret them precisely.

Additionally, apart from the academic contribution, one of the key features of thematic research is its accessibility, which makes it easy for people outside academia to understand. My positionality was also important. Braun also indicated that by saying that thematic analysis offers a useful qualitative approach for those doing more applied research, which some health research is, or when doing research that steps outside of academia, such as into the policy or practice arenas. Thematic analysis, therefore, offers a toolkit for researchers who want to do robust and even sophisticated analyses of qualitative data and wish to present them in a way which is readily accessible to those who aren't part of academic communities (Braun, 2014, p 2). In the earlier sections of this chapter, I mentioned that one of the key objectives of this research is to make it useful for donor organisations, as well as policymakers and activists, who are not a part of the academic community.

4.10.4 Method 4: Social media observation

As a researcher of two hidden social media groups of queer collectives in Bangladesh and West Bengal, I developed an ethnographic description by interpreting the detailed, context-rich accounts of online interactions to uncover deeper cultural, social, and behavioural patterns. Collecting data from social media was an everyday process by looking at the screen and saving some which are relevant for the project. Some of the comments and discussions were taken as notes, where they are not only anonymised but also rephrased, as, according to the ethical clearance, I am not using any direct quotation from social media. Sarah Pink claimed that by engaging in social media discussions, the ethnographer becomes both participant and observer, navigating the digital as a lived space that reflects and influences broader societal dynamics:

The everyday life of a social media ethnographer involves living part of one's life on the internet, keeping up to date with and participating in and collaborating in social media discussions. This is not simply a virtual experience but is connected to the material world in important ways (Pink, 2012, p 128)

The everyday life of a social media ethnographer exemplifies the collapse of boundaries between the virtual and material worlds, highlighting how online interactions are deeply entangled with offline realities. This dual role underscores the ontological shift where the internet is not merely a virtual domain but an extension of the material world, shaping identities, relationships, and power structures. Thus, the groups were observed regularly to see different interactions between people and how they reacted and interacted in different incidents taking place in this period. Besides important events in real life, the reaction on Facebook was also observed in this process.

I focused on the nuances of language, imagery, symbols, and user interactions, embedding these elements within the broader socio-cultural and historical contexts they reflect. By systematically examining posts, comments, and other reactions, I identified recurring themes, values, and tensions that define a community's identity and dynamics. Thick descriptions also allowed me to explore the interplay between individual agency and collective narratives, providing insights into how meaning is constructed, contested, and shared in digital spaces. This process often involves triangulating social media data with offline ethnographic findings to validate interpretations and construct a holistic understanding of the observed phenomena.

The group rules, as well as how the comments and posts were placed as a reaction to incidents, were observed and analysed in this method. No images or posts were directly used from the group for analysis; rather, the interaction

was observed, and the impression from the interaction and images was interpreted, such as discussion topic, perspective, positioning, and representation. The impression made was used to develop a chapter on queer digital life, in which two case studies are presented and analysed in chapter six.

4.11 Conclusion

This research design chapter provides a comprehensive structure, addressing key components essential to the study's rigour and originality. By beginning with an overview of the research questions, the study establishes a clear framework, highlighting the central issues it aims to address. The subsequent focus on the researcher's positionality, reflexivity, and ethics underscores the critical importance of situating the researcher within the context, ensuring transparency and accountability. This self-reflective approach allows for an acknowledgement of potential biases and their impact on the research process. Detailed analysis of data collection methods demonstrates a deliberate and systematic approach, highlighting the use of diverse tools and techniques tailored to capture the complexities of collective action in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

The sections on fieldwork, risk assessment, and methodology offer an in-depth examination of the practical and theoretical underpinnings of the study. By addressing the challenges and strategies involved in fieldwork, the research underscores its adaptability and preparedness in dealing with potential risks. The section on data analysis demonstrates a methodical approach to interpreting the collected information, ensuring the study's findings are robust and credible. Together, these elements showcase the originality of the research, as it addresses a previously unexplored crossing of collective action

in Bangladesh and West Bengal. This systematic design not only strengthens the study's validity but also provides a vivid and nuanced understanding of the sociocultural dynamics underpinning collective action in these places.

The collection of data took eight months in Bangladesh and West Bengal. The relationship of participants to sexuality and gender relations with the organisations, different regulations and finally the social attitudes were complex, and the fieldwork captured nuanced, multifaceted and dynamic processes of various forms of collective actions. In the existing literature, there is a gap in collective actions initiated by different queer community members in Bangladesh and West Bengal. The data collection has focused on different organisations to find out the narratives. Since the planning of the data collection process, rigorous cautions were considered because of the socio-political context, and that is why the ethics committee approved the data collection procedure.

The number of methods fits this project's purpose and research question, as it also captured organisations located in different corners of Bangladesh and West Bengal. The variety of analyses provides a purely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced account of data. A set of techniques and concepts was used to analyse, organise, interrogate and interpret the dataset collected through fieldwork. It also involved thinking and making choices about other aspects of the research project and process, which is a key reason for choosing different analysis methods for the interpretation.

Previous research has explored Hijra communities and the work of NGOs striving for social change, as well as aspects of the women's rights movement. However, there has been a significant gap in academic literature addressing collective actions led by queer community organisations. This research stands out as an original contribution by addressing that gap through an innovative

and multifaceted design. Utilising a combination of four distinct methods, this project offers a nuanced understanding of queer collective action that surpasses the scope of conventional studies. The inclusion of non-traditional methods enabled the capture of unique insights into organisational dynamics and strategies, particularly in contexts like Bangladesh and West Bengal, where such methodological approaches are rare. Moreover, by focusing on the underrepresented voices of queer communities outside metropolitan centres, the research challenges the dominant, urban-centric narrative prevalent in existing studies, offering a broader, more inclusive perspective.

Another distinctive feature of this research is its comparative approach, bridging Bangladesh and West Bengal—regions with shared cultural and historical ties but distinct socio-political contexts. This dual-region focus is uncommon in academic work and provides a richer, cross-border understanding of queer activism and organisational practices. By emphasising the use of innovative methods, such as creative workshops and oral histories, this research disrupts traditional academic methodologies, bringing forward insights that conventional tools might overlook. The complex research design not only underscores the originality of the project but also aligns with the core PhD requirement of contributing new knowledge to the field. It is critical to emphasise how this design sets the study apart, illustrating its uniqueness within existing literature and highlighting its capacity to expand the understanding of queer collective action in the Global South. The findings are intended to inform policymakers, social workers, activists and researchers working toward improving the lives of queer community members and may catalyse further research in this area.

Chapter 5

Queer Organisations in Bangladesh and West Bengal: Introducing and Comparing Organisational Forms

5.1 Introduction

In the literature review (Chapter 2), it was shown that many of the organisations do not document their forms of collective actions in the South Asian cultural context. During the fieldwork, this project looked at the changes which occurred over time in these organisations, as it is also connected with the socio-cultural context and the changes which took place over time. This chapter is about introducing and offering a comparative analysis of different organisations that were observed during the fieldwork of the project, which is a critical social analysis to interpret the forms of collective actions. Through the data from the field visit, this chapter will present different kinds of organising. A total of five organisations and two social media groups were a part of the data collection process. These will be introduced in this chapter, which is the first data chapter of this thesis.

This chapter also deals with registration, which in general refers to government registration that allows them to bring in funds from abroad. In India and Bangladesh, government registration for an NGO is a legal process through which an organisation is officially recognised by the state to operate for social, charitable, or developmental purposes. The registration process varies by country but generally involves submitting documents such as a memorandum of association, articles of association, and proof of address, along with a list of founding members. NGOs can register as trusts, societies, or non-profit companies, depending on the country's regulations. After

approval from the relevant government authority, such as the registrar of societies or company registrar, NGOs receive a registration certificate, enabling them to legally function, raise funds, and access tax exemptions. In many countries, NGOs must also comply with ongoing legal requirements, such as audits, annual reports, and, if receiving foreign donations, additional registrations under laws like the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) in India or similar regulations in other South Asian nations.

There are formal organisations such as NGOs and trusts. At the same time, informal organising exists, where queer community members form a group and make a home outside their home through kinship and queer labour. The chapter will give a vivid narration of seven different organisations and their background. The description also contains details of how the organisations were formed initially and how they became established. Many of the details are taken from the memories of research participants and organisation founders who could remember about the early days of the foundation of their organisation.

5.2 Two Bengals and the Border: A Transborder Perspective

The Bengal region was a major power in the medieval Islamic East, with early Muslim traders establishing religious and commercial connections before the 13th-century spread of Islam by Sufi missionaries. Bengal's economy thrived but later declined under high colonial taxation, with industries and cities impoverished within decades. The East India Company disrupted traditional Muslim-Hindu cooperation through exploitative practices like opium and indigo cultivation and permanent settlement policies. The late 19th and early 20th-century Indian Renaissance introduced Western law, education, and

governance, fostering a politically conscious middle class and leaders in various fields. These historical disruptions and internalised colonial values have left enduring impacts, including tensions seen in modern queer collectives.

The Bengal Presidency was first partitioned in 1905 by Lord Curzon, creating West and East Bengal to ease governance and weaken the nationalist movement. In 1947, Bengal was partitioned again, this time along religious lines, as part of India's Partition. East Bengal became part of Pakistan, joining other Muslim-majority provinces. By the 1970s, the envisioned society was based on socialism, nationalism, and democracy, moving beyond solely religious identities. While Islam and Hinduism remained significant in culture, they no longer exclusively defined the national identity. However, if we investigate the recent past, both regimes are trying to promote Hindutva and Islam as their main cultural identity, which is also playing a role in the forms of collective actions discussed in this thesis.

Populations from Bangladesh migrated to West Bengal (India) and many other cities of West Bengal (India) between 1947 and 1971. Some of the Hijra and other community members temporarily migrated to West Bengal (India) for economic and other opportunities. Bangladesh got its independence from Pakistan and started as an independent country in 1971, whereas CPM, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), was formally the governing party in the West Bengal (India) Legislative Assembly from 1977 to 2011. The ruling of the communist party for more than 30 years has had some impact on the collective actions discussed in the thesis.

Sworn in in 2011, Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee is West Bengal's incumbent chief minister, the first woman to hold the office. She was subsequently voted to power in the 2016 and 2021 assembly

elections. Similarly, Sheikh Hasina is a Bangladeshi politician who served as the tenth prime minister of Bangladesh from June 1996 to July 2001 and again from January 2009 to August 2024. Bangladesh's longest-serving prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, resigned amid a powerful student movement in August 2024, which took place after the fieldwork for this project had been completed. Two prominent leaders, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal (India) and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, have dominated the political landscape in their respective regions. Both leaders represent a form of political continuity that can be seen as authoritarian, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and political opposition is often marginalised. This centralisation of power often leads to the creation of a personality cult, where the leader's identity becomes synonymous with the state's identity, reinforcing their political dominance.

State policies in both regions might exacerbate ethnic and communal divisions. In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, nationalism has played a significant role in shaping political discourse, often at the expense of minority groups. In Bangladesh, for instance, the Rohingya crisis and the treatment of indigenous communities reflect broader issues of exclusion and marginalisation within a nationalist framework. In West Bengal, communal tensions have also been manipulated for political gain, particularly in the context of the state's relationship with the central government of India.

The emphasis on promoting and preserving indigenous languages reflects a broader sociopolitical effort to reclaim cultural identities suppressed during colonial times. In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, language has been a powerful tool for political mobilisation and cultural assertion. The Bengali Language Movement in Bangladesh, for instance, played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence. Similarly, in West Bengal, there has been

a sustained effort to promote Bengali as a marker of regional identity. This focus on language is not just about cultural preservation but also about resisting the homogenising forces of globalisation and centralisation.

Many of the community members who were interviewed for this study mentioned their roots, as well as their movement across the border for various purposes. Some of them mentioned the connection they kept with the other side of the border. The image below consists of such narration where interviewees from different organisations talked about their relationship with the other side of the physical border:

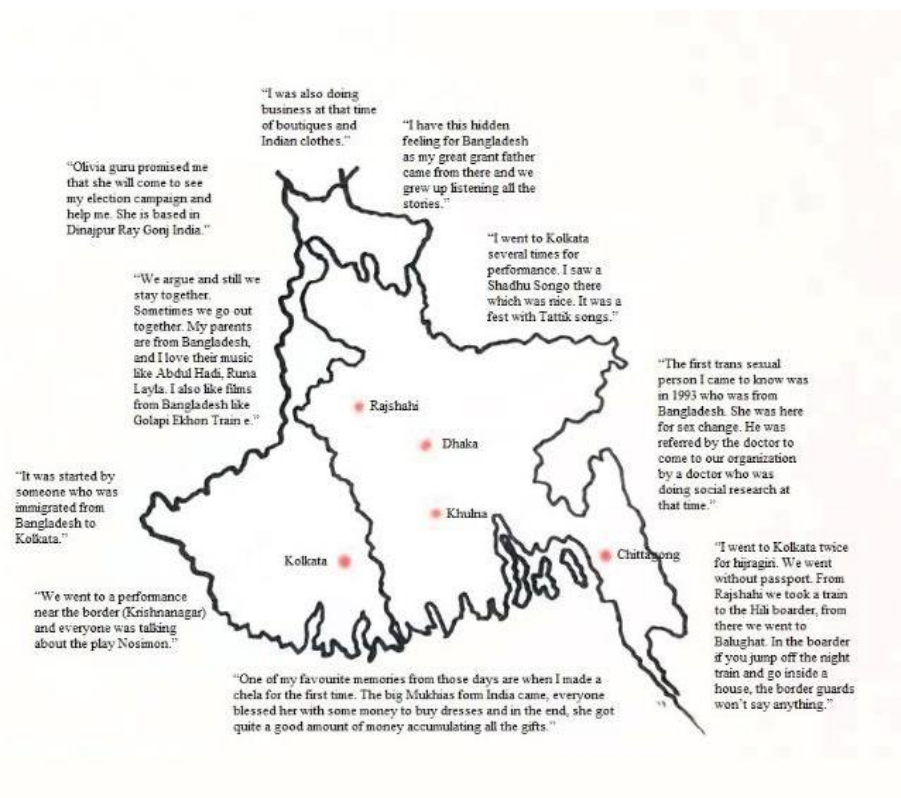


Image 4: Map of two Bengals with quotes from fieldwork. The quotes are the data from interviews; each associated with a different location. These

quotes focus on cultural, social, and personal connections between Bangladesh and India, particularly around themes of migration, cultural exchange, and identity. A detailed list of the quotes is in Appendix 18 for convenience.

Due to interaction from both sides of the border, the division is fragile and is discussed in various academic research literature. There is a shared linguistic and cultural proximity, as well as transnational connections, which exist between these two regions. There is a push for more accurate and empowering representations of local cultures, histories, and identities in media and literature, moving away from the stereotypes and biases introduced during colonial times.

The quotes here from the fieldwork reference people travelling across borders, engaging in cultural performances, and maintaining familial or cultural ties with both Bengals. Several quotes mention migration, either from Bangladesh to Kolkata (India) or vice versa. This highlights the experiences of communities and how they maintain their cultural practices and identities despite geographical displacement. In these narratives, references to music, films, and performances from Bangladesh point to how cultural heritage is preserved and transmitted within diasporic communities. The quote about the transgender person, who migrated for a sex change, touches on the intersection of gender, migration, and healthcare across the border. The quotes mentioning crossing borders without a passport relate to the contested nature of national boundaries in South Asia. Understanding these narratives within the context of postcolonial nation-building is also about learning the legacy of partition in South Asia. The image reflects the representation of the complex, layered experiences of individuals navigating the socio-cultural landscapes where

solidarity in the forms of collective action, transnational activism, friendship and collaborations are the highlights. Such highlights are not uncommon in academic literature, where Debjani Sengupta talked about the fragile partition of Bengal. In her book, Sengupta highlights the violent realities of excessive force used by border guards and the profound impact of border fences on migrant bodies, illustrating how border maps become body maps. Despite these boundaries, they fail to completely restrict movement, leaving religious minorities and enclave residents in contested zones of belonging.

The land surveyed, mapped and ruled by an imperial power and now left divided, becomes the site of differing practices of the self and a postcolonial search for justice and equality. The divided land becomes a site of contestation and recuperation for people who are suddenly left on the wrong side of the borders but who try to construct a geography of space that is contingent yet critical of the terrain of the state's sovereignty. The resistance to colonial rule that meant a reclamation and re-inhabitation of the land is deferred for these subjects who, in postcolonial times, come to inhabit a divided land, or a land contested or disputed. In the new nations, religious identities become entangled with national identities, and people find themselves forced to move because they are considered aliens by a particular nation. Even after many months after the division of the country, Muslim families left their homes to move to Pakistan while Hindus moved to India (Sengupta, 2015, p 221).

Sengupta argues that the postcolonial division of land, once mapped and ruled by imperial powers, creates a terrain of conflict where marginalised groups struggle for justice and equality. For those suddenly positioned on the "wrong" side of the border, the land becomes a space of resistance and reclamation,

challenging the state's sovereignty. Religious and national identities in the new nations become deeply intertwined, forcing people to migrate as they are deemed outsiders by their governments. Even months after Partition, the mass displacement continued, with Muslims relocating to Pakistan and Hindus to India, underscoring the enduring human cost of these divisions.

Despite the political and ethnic tensions, the quotes reflect an ongoing exchange among the population, driven by trust. This suggests that social ties and cultural connections between people in Bangladesh and West Bengal (India) persist, transcending political boundaries. These ties can be seen in the shared history, language, and culture of the Bengali-speaking population on both sides of the border. This trust may serve as a counterbalance to the divisive politics of the region, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared identity. Having outlined the conceptualisation of transnational borders in the thesis in this section, the following section will turn to introduce the organisations one after another, with the data that talks about the early history of the organisations and how they mobilise various forms of collective actions.

5.3 Organisation A - Turning Point

After Dhaka, Chittagong is called the second capital of Bangladesh. It is a port city in which I grew up. For a long time, in contrast to the capital, there were no friend groups for queer community members, as it is a very religious and close-knit society. Facebook played an important role in the formation of these friend groups during COVID-19. Some of the members of these groups had alternative IDs back in 2012. At that time, they were also meeting each other as friends, although it took time for them to gain courage and come out and meet in a public space.

In 2015, the first LGBT+ magazine was published in Dhaka, which some community members had read. However, this circle disappeared after the murder of two activists in 2016. In 2018, group members went to a program in Dhaka, organised by another group, and were inspired to form a similar initiative. In 2019, one of the members initiated a Facebook Messenger group with some like-minded people and named it 'U Turn'. They organised their first get-together in November 2019 at a harbour in the city, which is a public space.

In 2020, they organised a dinner program, and in the same year, they had several online meetings. It is important to note that this was during COVID-19, when there was a lockdown. It was not an easy time for a lot of queer community members who often had to spend a lot of their time with their families, who do not approve of their identity. Poushali, Debika, Koyel, Kolika & Archee mentioned this vulnerability and the importance of keeping social connections in their journal on 'Queer living and building social connections'. This is part of the collection titled 'Pandemic and Us' edited by Banerjee, Boyce, Dasgupta & Puar. The pandemic and its effects on queer communities in India have raised such issues:

'There were frequent instances of violence faced by queer and trans persons by their families. The pandemic and the lockdown only increased our vulnerabilities ... People were being forced to get married, thrown out of their jobs, made to work on meagre wages, abandoned by biological families and forced to live on the streets... We slowly started meeting our queer kin following all protocols of 'social distancing'... Sometimes there are moments of epiphany that dawn upon us when we face adversities. For me, it was this time that

strengthened my bonds and helped reinstate my faith in the people
I call my home.’ (Banerjea, Boyce, Dasgupta & Puar, 2022, p 121).

Such narratives highlight the compounded vulnerabilities faced by queer and trans individuals during the pandemic, emphasising the intensified risks of familial violence, economic instability, and forced isolation in Kolkata (India). Yet, amid adversity, community members found solidarity and resilience within their chosen community, underscoring the importance of found family in countering systemic and personal crises.

During this difficult period, the online friendship in the group chat provided them with a breathing space, which was helpful for many of them, and this resonated repeatedly during workshop conversations. They also consider 2020 as the year when Turning Point started shaping them as an organisation. Lockdown was a significant period for them to strengthen their bonds, and that is also echoed in their initiatives. In an interview, Arnob, who has been one of the key organisers of the group from the outset, mentioned the following. He is a lawyer and came to know about the members through his alternative profile. But later, when he found that many of them were reliable, he added them to his original profile.

During lockdown, I ensured that we had a group call every day in the messenger group we had. From there, people began forming bonds with one another.

This was also the time when the members started to post about their work and promote their initiatives in the group. There is one who bakes sweets and one who designs costumes. They shared images of their products in the Facebook group, and from all these shares, we came to know each other better. (Interview, Arnob/Bangladesh).

His statement illustrates the role of digital spaces in fostering social cohesion and community building, especially during times of physical isolation like the COVID-19 pandemic. The daily group calls and sharing of personal and professional updates in the messenger group facilitated the creation of strong social bonds among members. This interaction transformed a loosely connected group into a close-knit community, where individuals supported each other's initiatives and gained deeper insights into each other's lives. The act of sharing work and promoting initiatives also highlights the importance of social capital within the group, where members leverage their connections for mutual benefit. This not only strengthened individual ties but also reinforced the group's collective identity, contributing to a sense of belonging and solidarity.

In 2021, some of the friends came together for an Iftar⁸ party and Eid get-together. In the same year, they did a tour of the nearby lake, which is two hours from the main city. In between, they also organised other meetings and discussions with the support of Dhaka-based queer organisations under their outreach activities. At the end of 2021, they organised their first yearly get-together with another partner organisation in the capital. The support was provided by the GLIFAA⁹ award from the US Embassy in Dhaka.

In 2022, they became a part of the coalition, which is a platform funded by COC Netherlands. They planned for a yearly gathering and an English learning program. In 2023, they also secured funding from a registered capital-

⁸ Iftar is one of the religious observances of Ramadan, and is often done as a community, with people gathering to break their fast together. The meal is taken just after the call to the Maghrib prayer, which is around sunset.

⁹ GLIFAA (Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies) is the officially recognized organisation representing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender etc. (LGBTIAQ+QIA+) personnel and their families in the United States Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Foreign Commercial Service, Foreign Agricultural Service, and other agencies and entities working in foreign affairs in the U.S. Government.

based NGO called Shojon, whose activities are based around family counselling and awareness-building campaigns.

Their mission (Appendix 12) says that the organisation will work towards building a strong 'Queer'/ 'LGBTQIA+'/ 'SOGI' circle in the southeast of Bangladesh as part of regional development. It aims to be a platform for friendship, human rights, and the arts. Simultaneously, the group will encourage decentralisation in other regional levels of Bangladesh. As per the existing rules, a few panels will work to manage group activities. These are the advisor and admin panel, event management, finance, and the executive panel.

Although they do work offline, their code of conduct and constitution are mostly focused on their online Facebook platform, as most group interaction takes place there. Some of the regulations (Appendix 12) that are briefly discussed in their constitution are stated below:

1. Not to hamper anyone's privacy (not to leave group screenshots or information, and not to share personal screenshots or information in groups without permission).
2. Not to incite conflict in the group, maintain unity. If there is a complaint, solve it in the inbox with the admin instead of complaining in the group.
3. Leave cannot be taken suddenly. If there is any problem, if you want to take leave, you must try the solution in the inbox with the admin first.
4. Being active occasionally (online-offline) even if not regularly
5. Since the group consists of real IDs, there should be no pornographic content shared, but there can be fun posts without offending anyone.

6. Dealing with someone should be based on how deep their relationship with you is. Consent should be prioritised, and everyone should not be treated the same.

According to an interview with Bhandari, who is the founder of the organisation, among the resources of the organisation, there are financial resources. They receive funding from COC Netherlands and USAID Bangladesh through fiscal sponsors. Additionally, they have the human resources of a few staff members and many volunteers for their collective actions. They also have cultural resources through which they design their program content sensitively.

5.4 Organisation B - Shojon

I learned about Shojon Social Welfare Society when I was first involved in activism in Bangladesh. They were the only registered NGO in Bangladesh for a long time. They started in 1996 as a community-led, non-profit registered organisation in Bangladesh dedicated towards people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), known as gender diverse people (GDP). They have been registered by the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) of the Government of Bangladesh.

In 1999, they scaled up their MSM, transgender and Hijra programs in Chittagong, Sylhet and Mymensingh, supported by the Government of Bangladesh, UNDP, USAID and FHI. At this stage of their journey, their mission statement is, ‘ensuring a dignified life by protecting human rights, promoting a sustainable livelihood, improving access to quality health care and enhancing access to social security & gender justice’.

Naz Foundation¹⁰, a distinguished UK-based global non-profit organisation, undertook a comprehensive study on the intricate landscape of sexual and reproductive health needs of gender and sexual minority (GSM) communities in Bangladesh from October 1996 to March 1997 in Bangladesh, thoughtfully supported by the Ford Foundation. In addition to a variety of risky sexual practices, which increase the risk of STI/HIV infection, the study showed how the GSM groups in Bangladesh endure social marginalisation, discrimination, and condemnation in their access to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The study showed that people from these communities are compelled to conceal their diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and SRHR concerns to prevent social persecution, harassment, and violence. A circle of friends realised the vulnerability of this community, considering the intolerance against this community, and pioneered the effort to support their SRHR and human rights.

This was also echoed when I interviewed their Executive Director at their head office in Dhaka. While I was waiting outside the meeting room, I heard one person on the phone arguing why the closed-circuit camera was not working and why it was not fixed immediately. Ahmed started his conversation with his hands closed but as soon as the discussion progressed, he was using his hands to explain the foundation of the group from his memory. His statement

¹⁰ NAZ was formed in the early 1990s by the late HIV and gay rights activist Shivananda Khan in memory of Nazir. Nazir was a Pakistani Muslim, married with two children. He was also a closeted gay man who had AIDS. When his status became public, he was rejected by his mosque, ostracised by his community, and found no social support that understood that he had more than one identity.

NAZ was set up in his memory and is one of the largest sexual health charities in London, initiated and led by ethnic minority staff. It is also one of the longest-established charities of this type and focuses predominantly on sexual health improvement and HIV support services for Black, Brown and Global Majority communities.

highlights the process of community-driven problem identification and solution-seeking in a context where marginalised groups, such as those affected by STIs, lack access to adequate healthcare services. It illustrates how the community, in response to unmet needs, began to organise and seek culturally appropriate solutions:

At that time, in the community and amongst our friends, there were those suffering from STIs. From that point, we thought of doing something for these friends. In the meantime, our chairperson, Islam, met Shivananda Khan, the chair of Naz Foundation London. He is also a good Kathak¹¹ dancer. Shivananda visited Bangladesh in 1996, and we discussed our problems. He showed interest first by saying we could set up a small drop-in centre where there would be a physician. We liked the idea, but we set some conditions, as some of his ideas were very Western (Interview, Ahmed/Bangladesh).

The mention of Shivananda Khan and the conditions placed on his ideas reflects a tension between local knowledge and external influence. The community appreciated external support but insisted on adapting the solutions to fit their cultural context, resisting the imposition of Western ideas that might not align with their realities. This reflects a broader theme in sociology about the importance of cultural relevance and local agency in addressing social issues.

I also talked to their Chairperson, Islam, to hear about how he made the connection with Shivananda Khan¹² as a dancer. He is in his sixties now. He

¹¹ Kathak is one of the eight major forms of Indian classical dance.

¹² Shivananda Khan was a global LGBT rights pioneer who worked to improve laws and legislation regarding the LGBT community in diverse geographies from Europe to Asia to the Pacific.

was wearing tight denim and a polo, and he was smiling in a very relaxed manner during the interview. It illustrates the interconnectedness of global networks, cultural exchange, and the emergence of grassroots activism, particularly in the context of public health and LGBT+ rights.

I saw Shivananda Khan for the first time in a TV interview program called News Track in Delhi when I was a student. It was 1992.

In 1988, I was an ICCR¹³ scholar studying Bharatnatyam¹⁴ dance in India. While studying in India, I met a student from London. In 1995, while travelling to Austria for a ballet course, I stopped in London and visited that friend, who introduced me to Shivananda. During our meeting, Shiva asked about HIV work in Bangladesh and asked, "Will you help me if I come there for this work?"

He booked two rooms in a hotel in the capital, and the workshop took place there. We were 7/8 people, and the talk was about his work and how he is doing it. He stayed for a week on that visit, and soon after he returned, he got us a fund from the FORD Foundation (Interview, Islam/Bangladesh).

The interview highlights how cultural exchanges, such as studying dance forms like Bharatnatyam and Kathak, foster global connections between individuals from different backgrounds. These connections often extend beyond the original purpose of cultural learning, leading to broader collaborations and friendships that cross national boundaries.

¹³ The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, is an autonomous organisation of the Government of India, involved in India's global cultural relations, through cultural exchange with other countries and their people.

¹⁴ Bharatanatyam is an Indian classical dance form which is also one of eight Indian classical dance forms.

The interaction between the narrator and Shivananda shows how global networks can facilitate the spread of activism and ideas. Shivananda's work on HIV/AIDS, a pressing global health issue, finds a new foothold in Bangladesh through these personal connections, demonstrating how activism can be initiated and supported through transnational linkages.

The narrative also illustrates how global health concerns, like HIV/AIDS, are addressed at the local level through the involvement of international organisations (e.g., FORD Foundation) and local actors. The collaboration led to the establishment of a grassroots movement in Bangladesh, indicating how global issues are localised through such partnerships. The formation of an organisation with senior officials from the narrator's circle suggests how informal networks and personal relationships can lead to the establishment of formal institutions, which play a significant role in addressing societal issues like public health.

From the interview with Ahmed, the Executive Director of Shojon, I also learnt that the FORD Foundation supported the research initially and later they developed a project proposal which was Dhaka-based with the help of Shivananda. Fortunately, they got support from the Norwegian embassy for three years, and later they extended three more years. The support was for organisational development with activities such as A) outreach and fieldwork, B) clinical and counselling work and C) community development. Ahmed, who is now the Executive Director of the organisation worked under the Naz Foundation for the first two years.

For a quarter-century, Shojon has been dedicated to effecting positive change in the lives of the Gender Diverse Population (GDP) to create a society where individuals of diverse identities can enjoy a high quality of life. They have actively advocated for policy reforms, sought access to justice, worked to

reduce sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and promoted social acceptance, among other initiatives, to champion the human rights of GDP individuals. In addition to these endeavours, they have worked towards ensuring access to social entitlements, education, capacity building, and economic empowerment for the sustainable well-being of the GDP community in Bangladesh. Their contributions extend to strategies for GDP recognition, community engagement, research and knowledge management, holistic safety and security, and digital advancements that leverage impactful modern ideas to fortify the movement.

Their projects and activities are implemented through thirty-six field offices in twenty-two districts overseen by eight integrated departments at the Central Office in Dhaka. But in their initial phase, they were only a two-room office, which became clear in the interview with their Executive Director, Ahmed. His interview illustrates the intersection of community-led initiatives, the need for formal recognition, resource dependency, and the evolving nature of social organising within marginalised groups.

The office was two rooms; it was a peer support space where social gathering events like *Kothi*¹⁵ performances used to take place every week. We realised the need for registration and agreed to register under social welfare.

Funding came from member donations, with Shivananda Khan contributing to rent and medical expenses. Without a bank account, he provided cash while travelling, and we submitted bills upon his return. After establishing the drop-in center, he initiated a study and formed a four-member outreach team of community members to connect with

¹⁵ An effeminate male

others. While cruising spaces existed before, everything is now managed via smartphones (Interview, Ahmed/Bangladesh).

His narrative highlights the grassroots development of a community support space, reflecting how marginalised groups, particularly in queer communities, organise and sustain themselves. The space served as a peer support centre, fostering social connections and cultural expression through events like *Kothi* performances. This indicates the importance of physical spaces for community bonding and identity affirmation. The need to register the centre under 'social welfare' reflects the transition from informal community support to formal organisation. This institutionalisation was necessary to gain legitimacy and access to resources, demonstrating how marginalised communities navigate formal systems to sustain their activities.

Their centre relied on internal donations and external support from individuals like Shivananda Khan, showing how community initiatives often depend on both internal solidarity and external benefactors. The creation of an outreach team and the emphasis on evidence creation through studies underscore the strategic efforts to expand community support and advocacy. Such narrations and the forms of collective actions are important when conducting sociological analysis to document how movements grow.

Now, they (Shojon) are governed by a constitution with a General Committee which elects a seven-member Executive Committee every two years. The Executive Committee has a designated chairperson and treasurer with signatory authority. The general secretary coordinates the activities of the Executive Committee. They have a technical advisory committee for strategic guidance. The Executive Director bridges the organisation's endeavours with the EC and administers the overall operation of the organisation with the assistance of two directors, the programme director and the director of finance

& administration. The Senior Management Team, as heads of each department, remains involved in the decision-making process.

Among their resources are financial and human resources in their two offices in the capital and several field offices all around the country. According to their profile brochure (Appendix 17), their donors are the Global Fund, SIDA, RFSU, UNICEF, FRI, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Mama Cash, UNDP, UN AIDS, Ford Foundation, British High Commission, fhi360, Australian High Commission in Bangladesh, GIZ, and many more. Besides their program and activities over many years, they have developed a variety of social, organisational and cultural resources. All projects and activities are implemented through 36 field offices in 22 districts in coordination with 8 integrated departments.

5.5 Organisation C - History Trust

Pawan Dhall, in his book about the earliest forms of collective actions in India, wrote about the History Trust. According to his narration, History Trust is an NGO which was co-founded in 2012 to publish, research and advocate on gender and sexuality issues and, in some ways, carry forward the work of the club and the journal (Dhall, 2020, p. 18).

I first came to know about History Trust as a Facebook page back in 2015 and started following them, but they were not very active on social media. Later, I attended a conference in Brighton in 2022, where I met academic Paul Boyce (University of Sussex) after the conference. Hearing about my project, he mentioned that History Trust would be an interesting fit for my project, as it is a queer archive with a lot of documents. Boyce has a long background of working in West Bengal (India), and from that point, I started communicating

with History Trust and checking if they were interested in being a part of this project.

Though I have been working for a long time with the queer groups in Bangladesh, I had a very hazy idea about the form of collective actions in Kolkata (India), and I was only aware of a few groups and initiatives which are visible on social media. Initially, there was some tension when the organisation suggested including a research assistant, which was outside the scope of my work. However, upon meeting in person, I found that the organisation was well-prepared, with all members understanding the research process and expectations. Singh's surprise at the informal nature of the initial meeting—expecting it to be a data collection session—highlighted the organisation's familiarity with typical research protocols, where the focus is often on gathering data rather than building rapport and understanding the organisation's context. This interaction underscores the importance of relationship-building in research and how expectations can differ between researchers and those being researched.

The discussion highlighted the process of the group's formation and the initial stages of its development. It also explored the transformations that occurred during its early establishment. Later in his interview, Singh analysed the journey, which is a microcosm of the community-building efforts within the queer movement in South Asia during the early 1990s.

Arun, from a wealthy business family in Bangladesh, immigrated to Kolkata and started *Club de Messieurs* to connect with others. A newspaper ad caught my attention, but I soon realised it was a front, with founders insisting newcomers sexually engage with them. The club was eventually shut down.

In December 1990, Arun launched *Fun Club*, renting two rooms—one for chatting and another for physical interactions. By 1991, my circle expanded, and I was introduced at a gathering, where I spoke about emerging community groups across India. I was honoured with a membership, became secretary, and decided to contribute by creating a newsletter. Inspired by *Tricone*, *Bombay Dost*, and *Shakti Kahabar*, I compiled updates on a portable typewriter gifted by my father. One day, I pinned it to the Fun Club notice board, and everyone was thrilled (Interview, Singh/India).

The founder, Singh, comes from a well-off background, which suggests that his privilege allowed him to have the resources and social capital necessary to initiate queer organising in the middle-class circles of Kolkata (India). His friendship with Arun adds a layer of transnational experience, which has influenced his perspectives on sexuality and community-building. The need to camouflage the true nature of the Club de Messieurs reflects the societal stigmatisation of homosexuality during that time. The club's evolution into a more explicit sexual space also highlights the tension between public secrecy and private sexual exploration within the queer community.

The creation of the Fun Club and later initiatives, like the newsletter, indicate the organic growth of a queer community that was seeking both a safe space for social and sexual interactions and a platform for activism and information sharing. The mention of newsletters and other publications like *Trikone* and *Bombay Dost* emphasises the importance of print media as a tool for queer activism, especially in the pre-digital era. It served to disseminate information, raise awareness about issues like HIV/AIDS, and connect isolated individuals.

The narrator's journey, from being a participant to taking on a leadership role as a secretary and launching a newsletter, displays the emergence of queer

leadership and agency. This reflects a broader trend of individuals within marginalised communities stepping up to advocate for their rights and create structures of support.

The first queer journal in Kolkata (India) was introduced in this manner. It started as an independent publication by a group of individuals in 1991-92 and was later published by the Guidance Club as their house journal from 1993-2000. In the book 'Out of Line and Offline', Pawan Dhall elaborated on the history of the evolving forms of collective actions:

The letters in question were mainly addressed as a queer support group that five gay and bisexual men, including me, founded in August 1993 in Kolkata (India): Counsel Club was one of the earliest forms of its kind in India which existed till 2002 ... I published the first three issues of the journal in late 1991 and early 1992 in an individual capacity ...after a gap, it was revived by Counsel Club as its house journal in 1993, this time with the addition of Bengali and occasional Hindi content (Dhall, 2020, p 7).

Guidance Club, in its earlier days, was a queer support group in Kolkata (India). When they moved towards organised mobilisation, one of their biggest challenges was to achieve large-scale outreach. Beyond word of mouth or striking luck in the cruising areas and the opportunities provided by a homosexual environment in familial, friendship and community networks, what worked best was if the groups' post-bag numbers were mentioned in the newspaper and magazine articles (Dhall, 2020, p 13). However, the initial formation of the organisation was mostly in different private meeting spaces, as analysed in the book:

Introduced to the Guidance Club through a founder member in early 1994, Suresh integrated quickly into the group. When Counsel Club started its first Sunday monthly meetings in September 1994, it was Suresh's living room that became the default meeting venue – a safe space and precious resource for the community. Many of the group's collections of books and magazines were also stocked at his place, and the members would read or borrow these during the monthly meetings (Dhall, 2020, p 58).

The roots of History Trust lie in the work done by Guidance Club (1993-2002), and Combination Society (sibling NGO of Guidance Club, 1999 to around 2005) – all among the earliest queer support initiatives in India. A founding trustee of History Trust, Prashanto, elaborated on how forms of collective actions played a role in the growth of History Trust and movement building. We had our conversation in a small office room of the History Trust, where he said that they had another sister concern called Integration, from where they used to plan events and activities, especially the funded ones. Small projects such as helplines, research, and advocacy were initiated from there, such as how to use condoms and sexual health discussions. They learnt from the activities of Humsafar Trust, Bombay Dost, and he also mentioned that they used to follow these activities. They had a small amount of funds from the local government at that time.

History Trust was registered as a trust on May 14, 2014. Currently, the larger History Trust team is a group of twenty-six people from the fields of journalism, social work, social and biomedical research, human rights and law, health, academics, art, information technology, engineering, business, financial management and queer community mobilisation. As a registered trust, it is led by a five-member Board of Trustees.

History Trust has two members of staff who work from a shared working space, and their funds now also come from donations and philanthropy. However, for a long time, they have had a volunteer pool apart from their trustee members. They also have social, organisational and cultural resources which are discussed later in this thesis. Through these resources, they have access to many spaces and can still organise a series of events.

5.6 Organisation D - Shurjer Alo

I heard of Shurjer Alo organisation when I attended a Women of the World (WOW) festival¹⁶ in 2018. Jolly, the joint secretary of Shurjer Alo, was talking about empowerment and her enterprise. Based in Rajshahi in the Northwest of Bangladesh, Jolly employs more than 300 artisans in her establishment, DA Boutique House and is a proud recipient of the government-sponsored Joyeeta Award. Jolly has trained more than nine hundred artisans herself and made a name as a successful entrepreneur in festivals and projects across the country. Her article highlighted the challenges faced by Hijra individuals like Jolly in accessing resources and opportunities in a society structured by various forms of discrimination. Jolly's work exemplifies intersectional organising by addressing multiple layers of marginalisation, gender, economic status, and social exclusion. Despite her

¹⁶ WOW – Women of the World Festival (WOW) is a network of arts festivals that celebrate the achievements of women and girls as well as highlight the obstacles that face them and are part of a global feminist movement. The festival was founded in London in 2010 at the South Bank Centre and since 2015, Queen Camilla has been WOW's president. WOW in Bangladesh is organised by the British Council Bangladesh.

significant contributions to her community and official recognition, she encounters systemic barriers due to her gender identity.

Shurjer Alo is in the centre of Rajshahi, where they have a total of three offices, and local people are very aware of their work. I learnt about their history from one of my interviews, which elaborates on how a *Hijra dera*¹⁷ they have become a funded organisation, now with registration under three categories. In her interview, Ahona, the secretary of the organisation, detailed their journey sitting in her office, where there is a framed photograph of their late guru Maya Khan on the wall:

Previously, our members were involved in *cholla*¹⁸. Dhaka-based donor organisations were looking for an organisation in this area for their project and offered us some funds, but our *guru*¹⁹ Maya Khan was not interested in going to Dhaka and doing all this coordination to run a project to receive funding. She was not thinking about it deeply as she was a Hijra guru. Her idea was that her *chelas* (disciples) would earn, and she would carry on the tradition that way with her *para birit*²⁰ (Interview, Ahona/Bangladesh).

From her narration, I came to know that CARE²¹ Bangladesh made Shurjer Alo a part of their long-term plan in 2002, and with reluctance, Maya Khan accepted the process. They were registered in 2005 by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs as Shurjer Alo Hijra Mohila Unnoyon Shonstha. From the Ministry of Social Welfare, they were registered in 2007 as only Shurjer

¹⁷ Home or house in a working-class area where a group of Hijras live together.

¹⁸ Money and foodstuffs demanded and collected by Hijras from the bazaar. The ritual is like collecting alms in many religions however is perceived as extortion in recent narratives.

¹⁹ Lead of a Hijra group who takes care of the Hijras under her.

²⁰ The ritual jurisdiction within which Hijras carry out their occupation involving rituals.

²¹ CARE is one of the world's largest international humanitarian organisations, committed to helping families in poor communities improve their lives and alleviate poverty.

Alo. It is important to note that all these registrations allowed them to avail themselves of different, smaller resources from government offices. However, it did not allow the organisation to receive transnational funds.

In her interview, Ahona also talked about her views on tradition and how that has impacted the name change of the organisation. The shift in leadership brought changes in how the organisation was managed and its strategic direction. The new leader faced the challenge of maintaining the organisation's legacy while also adapting to new circumstances. The continuation of the traditional *guru-chela* (mentor-disciple) relationship within the Hijra community highlights the tension between maintaining cultural traditions and navigating modern organisational management. This tradition plays a significant role in both personal and community identity within the group. Her statement illustrates the intersection of traditional cultural practices, modern organisational challenges, and the struggle for survival and recognition within a marginalised community.

In 2014, after our founder, Maya Khan, passed away, I embraced the guru-chela tradition and became secretary. I renamed the group *Shurjer Alo Hijra Shongho* to clarify its identity as a community-based organisation. With no funding, we struggled to pay rent, relying on *Shojon* for occasional support of GBP 30, though payments were irregular. After Maya Khan's death, I moved the office from the slum to its current space, often covering costs from our own pockets amid constant financial challenges (Interview, Ahona/Bangladesh).

Her statement reflects the complex dynamics of leadership, identity, and community within a marginalised group, specifically within a Hijra organisation in South Asia. After the death of the founder, Maya Khan, the organisation faced internal challenges related to leadership transition, financial

instability, and identity politics. The organisation's financial difficulties and reliance on personal funds from the leader and her *chelas* reflect the broader economic marginalisation faced by the Hijra community. It also underscores the importance of informal networks and community solidarity in sustaining the organisation. The dissatisfaction among members about the organisation's state, particularly regarding financial management and project activity, highlights the challenges of maintaining cohesion and trust within a marginalised community, especially during times of leadership transition and financial crisis.

The decision to include the word 'Hijra' in the organisation's name, despite its perception as a slur, indicates a complex negotiation of identity and external recognition. The new leader recognised the need for visibility and community cohesion, even if it meant using a contested term.

Now Shurjer Alo is a big organisation with several donor-funded projects. It is preparing for NGO bureau registration so that it can access transnational funding without any fiscal partner. I talked to the finance and an administration officer to have some more idea of the organisational structure during my field visit. Ishtiaque was very reluctant to talk to me, and he kept me sitting outside for an hour while he was working. Later, Jolly came, and he agreed to give the interview. Ishtiaque previously worked at NETZ²² Bangladesh, which is a renowned German NGO, and he is a practising lawyer.

I joined Shurjer Alo in 2020 and now oversee finance and administration. Global Affairs Canada funds us through a fiscal sponsor. Our advisory board includes journalists, government officials' families, and other notable figures.

²² NETZ, is a charitable and independent organisation registered in Germany and Bangladesh.

We follow a quarterly work plan, coordinating with our Executive Director. Leadership training and family counselling are funded through our office, with smaller organisations assisting in event organisation. Across nine upazilas, community groups host meetings, and mobilisers distribute funds locally while reporting daily to the office. The fiscal sponsor requires requisitions for expenses, and we operate accordingly.

In our monthly staff meetings, we update mobilizers, officers, and coordinators. With the support of our fiscal sponsor, we have established finance, gender, and procurement policies, along with strategic plans (Interview, Ishtiaque/Bangladesh).

Shurjer Alo, funded by Global Affairs Canada through a fiscal sponsor, operates with structured financial and administrative planning. The organisation follows a quarterly work plan, collaborates with community groups for leadership training and family counselling, and ensures financial accountability through requisitions and reporting, while also developing policies and strategic plans with the support of the fiscal sponsor. Among their material resources, the organisation has three offices in the city. They have twelve members of staff who run all their projects with their cultural and social organisational resources.

5.7 Organisation E - Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi

In popular narratives, *chukri* dance (literally, dance by young girls) features youths playing the roles of women and accompanying songs. It has been in vogue in Bengal for a long time. This dance is performed on a canopied stage in a ma

NGO grove or an open field. It is directed by a master who leads a large team of singers, musicians, and players. Young boys dressed as girls take part in this dance. The coexistence of the *Chukri*-identified people in their community might look very colourful from a distance, but it might not be the same in their lived reality. If they have no call for performance, they work as construction workers or in the fields with the farmers. People in that locality strongly believe that the performance can heal them from snake bites and many other evil eyes surrounding them.

I first came to know about the group back in 2020 from a news report. I visited them in 2021 in a remote village located in the southwest of Bangladesh. The group consists of several *chukris*, and as a founding member of the group, Alok defined *Chukri* in the following manner.

Chukris are those who are male but dress up as females to play the role of a *chukri* in the folk theatre play. People start performing like this because of their passion at a young age, but later keep on performing as they can support their livelihood through it. Generally, people who perform as *chukri* are good-looking (Interview, Alok/Bangladesh).

The definition of *chukri* is very clear here in his narration. Other *kothi* members in the group, however, defined it differently during my fieldwork, when I talked about the passion for performance. There are no set guidelines or registration in their way of organising, and many of their members talked about their beginnings in their interviews as an ordinary event in their teenage years, when they were not very aware that they would become a *chukri* in their life.

Alok, who is a Founding Member of the organisation, was born in 1958 and runs a sound system store in the local market of his village. It was an

incredibly old shop with a lot of dust on the electronics. The other shopkeepers were all young with newly decorated stores around. There was a tractor going through the road in the village market, which was noisy, and he was also working with a cable while giving his interview. His narrative underscores the intersection of culture, tradition, and social dynamics in the preservation and evolution of local performance arts.

Our village was very cultural and was renowned for *Jhumur Jatra*²³. I heard my great-grandfather was also into performance, and I even performed with my father. Back then, there were no female performers. It was always the guys who used to perform in all these plays. Muslims are the majority in this locality, and back then, women were not allowed to go outside the house...Akbar Ali was the leader of the team initially. His son was a *khol*²⁴ player. They know the entire script, which is often not in a written format. He had arguments with his son all the time. The team was divided by all those arguments. This was mostly for financial reasons, and I oversaw Akborer Dol for many years. Later, in recent years, when I left the group due to my age, I requested that Bulbul keep the group running. The group got this new name Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi, when Bulbul took it over (Interview, Alok/Bangladesh).

His narrative highlights the cultural significance of *Jhumur Jatra*, a traditional performance art, in a village where it was renowned. Historically, the performances were male-dominated, reflecting the societal norms of the time,

²³ a popular folk-theatre form Bengali theatre, spread throughout most of Bengali-speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Odisha and Tripura.

²⁴ Khol is a percussion instrument made of leather, clay, parchment and rice dust. This traditional instrument is found in West Bengal. Majorly used in traditional and devotional music forms.

particularly in a Muslim-majority area where women were restricted from public life. The narrative also touches on the intergenerational transfer of this cultural practice within a family, with leadership roles and artistic knowledge being passed down, though not without conflict. Financial disagreements led to a split within the original group. The group's continuity was ensured through leadership changes, with the group being rebranded as Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi under the new leader, Bulbul.

During the interview, I learnt that he has expertise in herbal medicine. This is important for their practice as they often get a request for a performance when someone has been bitten by a snake. The performance is also about a mythical²⁵ story around it. I also met Bulbul, who was the main interlocutor for this part of my fieldwork. It was a horrendous bus journey to his place, and I asked people to show me the house. They did not recognise his name, but when I mentioned his performance, they recognised him at once. When I arrived, he was having a shower after his day job as a construction worker, and his wife was waiting with a towel. After his prayer, Bulbul took me to his colleague Jana, where I came to learn more about the group. He was sitting in a tea stall. Now he is a van puller by profession, but he was a *chukri* in his youth. They took me to his house, which is under construction. His family members were around when he was talking about his memories. His desire to become a *chukri* (a male performer of femaleness) illustrates how social roles

²⁵ The origin of Manasha's worship may be linked to ancient Buddhist snake cults. Nagarajas and Nagins (serpent deities) were depicted in early Buddhist sculpture. Manasha's cult was well established by the AD 700s, and she was worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists. Her personality is both caring (she protects people from snakes) and malign (she inflicts the deadly snake bite). When people kill a snake, they sometimes find that its body has mysteriously disappeared, leading to the belief that the snake's spirit can possess humans. Those who are possessed behave like snakes, such as rolling on the floor. To address this, the household seeks the help of ritual specialists to perform the Manasha Puja, a religious ceremony intended to appease the goddess and remove the spirit from the possessed person.

and identities can be shaped by early experiences and family influence, reflecting the intersection of personal aspiration with cultural heritage:

I first saw the group in my childhood when they came for the treatment of my mum. She had a skin infection, so to cure that, our family invited the group for the ritual of *Monosha*.

Back then, even parents were taking children to these performance groups if they were talented. There's a lot of *jatra* in this area before, and my uncle used to take me there when I was 13. He was a performer too. We used to stay there even after the show. He was into all kinds of performance, not only music. I had a beautiful voice. Once he asked me to wear the dress, and that was the beginning. I wanted to be a *chukri* as I liked their dresses and music (Interview, Jana/Bangladesh).

He reflected on the dynamics of cultural traditions and socialisation within a community. It highlights the role of performance groups in rituals and entertainment, particularly in rural or traditional settings. Bulbul's early exposure to these groups, especially through family involvement, underscores how cultural practices are passed down and embraced by younger generations. The ritual of *Monosha*, a local religious practice, is central to the community's health and spiritual beliefs, showing how religion and culture are intertwined.

Though there are no written guidelines, contracts, or policies for such groups, Jui talked about oral tradition and the rules and regulations which reflect the way these groups perform. Jui portrays a close-knit, hierarchical community that combines elements of performance, ritual, and familial bonds under the guidance of a leader who ensures the group's well-being.

Our group has twelve members, including five Chukri, while the rest are men. Makeup and dresses are only allowed during performances.

Unlike *jatra*, where contracts last a year, we have the flexibility to take leave or find replacements. We get gigs through references, and my pay was initially low as the youngest dancer.

In our group, *Ostad* means father—he cares for us like family. We share a close bond, and during our seven-day stay, he ensures we have special meals. On the last day, the house owner hosts a feast before we depart. However, if we eat fish or meat outside during the week, we must shower and leave the group (Interview, Jui/Bangladesh).

Jui provides insights into a group of performers, likely involved in ritualistic performances. The group consists of twelve members, five of whom identify as *Chukri*, with the remaining being men. The *Chukri* may have a specific role within the group, which is evident from the restrictions placed on them, such as only being allowed to wear makeup and dresses during performances. This reflects the group's adherence to specific ritualistic norms.

The group operates differently from a more formalised setup like *jatra* (a traditional Indian theatre form), where contracts bind performers. Here, the work is more flexible, allowing members to take leave or find replacements as needed. The group's work is often initiated through referrals, especially when someone requires a ritual after witnessing a family member exhibiting unusual behaviour, such as 'rolling like a snake,' possibly indicative of possession or spiritual influence.

Initially, Jui faced lower pay as a dancer and felt motivated to learn acting to earn more, highlighting a hierarchy based on skill and experience within the group. The group's leader, referred to as *Ostad* (meaning master or teacher), is seen as a paternal figure who cares for the group like a family, providing for them during their seven-day performances. The group follows strict rituals,

including dietary restrictions, where consuming fish or meat outside the designated context requires purification.

The group can rehearse in a space that they organise using their cultural resources. Apart from that space, they have musical instruments, costumes and jewellery as their material resource. There is no human resource in the team in a predictable manner, but the group leader manages the group as well as finances, rehearsals, and the recruitment of new group members. The group members work together for their production and weeklong performances, which does not fit the conventional way human resources are perceived.

The *Chukri* collective is a part of this project to bring light to the pre-colonial traditions, which is also a sub-question of the project. Including the group as a part of various forms of collective actions was intentional to discuss the positioning of queerness from varied perspectives, particularly in postcolonial societies. Po-Han Lee emphasises that queer theory in Asia faces a dual challenge: queering postcolonial societies while simultaneously decolonising queer theory from Western frameworks. This critique highlights how queer colonial politics often erase indigenous ways of understanding gender and sexuality, attempting to impose Western paradigms. It underscores the need to adapt queer theory to Eastern contexts, recognising that queerness has long existed there without formal labels. However, the fragmentation and challenges in aligning queer theory with local cultural frameworks create inconsistencies, explored further in the thesis.

5.8 Organisation F - Azadi Festival

This Kolkata-based social media group describes itself as an open collective of individuals, networks, and organisations that believe sexuality is a

fundamental aspect of human existence, fulfilment, and enjoyment. They advocate that no individual, community, or section of society should face stigma, discrimination, or violence based on their gender or sexuality. In various documents of the organisation's social media group, the subheading reads: *Solidarity, Art, and Sexuality for Dignity and Equality*.

Azadi Festival deploys a variety of art forms, media, and mass awareness activities to generate the dialogue necessary to achieve its objectives. Each year, Azadi Festival takes the lead in mobilising participation for the Pride Walk.

Azaadi Festival (AF) started its journey in 2010. It was started by an individual named Shome. He called the people he knew and asked about initiating a collective to mobilise the social spaces of Kolkata (India), bringing community members under one umbrella and continuing the conversation. At that time, there were no programs in Kolkata (India) mobilising social spaces like exhibition centres or libraries, except for the training and workshops organised by the NGOs. By then, many activists had experienced disputes between different NGOs (discussed in Chapter 7). Friendship Walk²⁶, which is

²⁶ Kolkata (India)'s Pride March 1999 was the first ever such march in India, organised on 2 July 1999. The walk was called The Friendship Walk. The march began with hardly fifteen participants. The participants were wearing specially designed, bright yellow T-shirts with graphics of footsteps and a caption reading "Walk on the Rainbow".

The participants of The Friendship Walk went to various NGOs, including WB SACS, Human Rights Organisation and other NGOs working for the prevention of AIDS and put forward their agenda and demands.

By the time the two teams had reached George Bhavan, the destination of the march, all the major English and regional newspapers and television channels had reached there to cover the event. The participants talked to the media about the reason behind the walk and issues they wanted the government to look at and handed them the media release and other literature about the march. It was followed by an impromptu walk for the shutterbugs by those participants who were comfortable being photographed. The media coverage of the walk spread far and wide and the participants received a lot of support from within the country as well as from other South Asian countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh.

one of the oldest Pride marches in Asia, was started in 1999. It, nevertheless, came to a halt when the group realised the politics of Pride in Kolkata (India).

Shome, the founder of the group, was neither involved in activism nor an NGO. He first made a Facebook group called 'LGBT India'. Through this Facebook group, Ashok Rao and many other prominent activists mobilised resources for organising the community. These prominent activists also influenced the local community, asking why they are not doing Pride again. From there discussion began. Sing, Ashish and other prominent leaders also inspired Shome in the process. They made two entities in social media: one for the Pride Walk and the yearlong festival (Azaadi Festival). These two social media groups were separated by the organiser so that people cannot say that the Azaadi Festival organises Pride Walk.

All the social events were announced through the social media group 'Azaadi Festival', which was very active at that time. Azaadi Festival has organised regular fundraising parties through social media, on 14 February or 31st December, since its inception in 2011. The importance of Facebook events in queer collective actions became clear during fieldwork both in Bangladesh and India. Facebook allows users to create events. These events can remain secret or be by invitation only, so that only a specific group with the same interests can be invited. Thus, assembling a specific group is possible, and it can remain a secret from others. The impact of Facebook events is also significant in other geographic locations, and this has been explored in different social research literature. Paulo Gerbaudo talked about social media and contemporary activism in his book, when he mentions that the act of assembling came to be underscored by complex communicative and organisational practices, allowing for groups which are spatially dispersed but united by the same interests or convictions to act together. Within the field of

social media, the most obvious examples of such a process come from websites like the popular Facebook event function, used to invite people to various activities. He also added that these services are a testament to the extent to which the assembling of social groupings in our fragmented and dispersed societies relies on a complex process of symbolic and technical mediation. In his narration, he refers to it as a ‘choreography of assembly’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p 40). This choreography of assembly is also visible in the parties and events organised by the queer groups of India and Bangladesh.

The social media group was formed in May 2011 on Facebook to take the initiative of organising the Pride Walk. When the Azadi Festival started its journey, the Pride Walk received a footfall of 500 people. By the following year, attendance grew to 1500. Mondol, who is one of the founding members of the social media group, spoke about their objective:

Inclusiveness is the collective’s mantra – all are welcome who agree with Azadi Festival’s objectives and want to volunteer time, skills, ideas, legwork, funds, and other resources (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

Mondol spoke about the formation of the Azadi Festival collective, which helped bring in the involvement of the wider queer community beyond NGOs in the organising of the Pride Walk from 2011 onwards. For the next eight years or so, the Azadi Festival was the prime force behind organising Pride, which grew fast and attracted nearly 5,000 participants in 2017, an impressive number in India.

In an interview, Mondol, who is one of the earliest organisers of the group, talked about the inception and role of social media and networking at that period. Their initiative sparked discussions about organising a Pride event in

Kolkata (India), inspiring others to join the conversation and ultimately contributing to community building within the queer movement.

We had a friend called Shome who called all the people he knew and asked about initiating a collective to think about Pride. It was 2010, and this was also to use our social skills in community building. Shome was never involved in activism or an NGO. He first made a Facebook group called LGBT India. Through this, Ashok Row Kavi²⁷ and many other big names could mobilise their work in different regions. At one point, they talked about doing Pride in Kolkata (India) again. From there started the discussion. Sing, Ashish and others were also inspired by the discussion (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

He described a grassroots initiative led by a friend named Shome in 2010. Shome, who had no prior experience in activism or involvement with NGOs, decided to use his social network to start a collective focused on Pride. He created a Facebook group called 'LGBT India', which became a platform for prominent figures like Ashok Row Kavi to mobilise efforts across different regions of India.

Mondal and his colleagues were instrumental in making Pride free from all organisational banners, logos, and promotional material, including those belonging to the Azadi Festival itself. This was quite against the tide of commercialisation, impacting many other Pride marches in India.

Apart from photos of the Pride Walk, some of the key topics in the Facebook group include the marriage equality bill, film discussion, breaking gender stereotypes, book reviews, skills development workshops, announcements and

²⁷ Row Kavi, who founded the Mumbai-based LGBT+ rights NGO Humsafar Trust in 1994, is one of the many who have petitioned for the removal of Section 377, which criminalises homosexuality.

special day celebration messages. During the conversation with Mondol, it came out that through social media, they started organising social events such as ‘Hang Out with Azadi Festival’, where they used to invite people to potluck dinners. Another initiative was Azadi Festival Adda in the Academy of Fine Arts conference room, which was an issue-based discussion where community members were invited for discussion around 377, mental health, violence against women, transphobia, biphobia, and many other issues.

The main idea was to create a social space apart from existing organisations and their activities. Mondol, in his interview, said that disputes often turned confrontational, overshadowing the original goal of creating a social space for activism:

The NGOs had a contest amongst themselves. I heard about the conflict in Manosh Bangla, where there were power-centric nodes. These nodes were exploitative to the community. Often in these disputes, the person leading an NGO was superior to the NGO or how it functions. There was also a competition: if other organisations are getting funds, why not my organisation? It was not a healthy competition. In addition, the ideology of left-wing or right-wing in their activities was problematic; however, the main problem was regarding funds and accountability with those funds. I have seen people attacking each other and becoming confrontational in our meetings for the Manosh Bangla experience. There are many people for activism, but we wanted to create a social space (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

Ideological differences, such as left-wing versus right-wing approaches, also contributed to the tension, but the primary issues were related to financial accountability and the misuse of funds. Mondol described the internal

conflicts and competition among NGOs in the context of Manosh Bangla, a community setting. These conflicts were largely driven by power struggles and competition for funding, which led to unhealthy rivalries rather than collaborative efforts. The leadership within NGOs often became more focused on personal power than on the organisation's mission, creating exploitative dynamics. He highlighted issues of power dynamics and the importance of collective decision-making in social movements.

It was a big discomfort for many NGOs that the Pride Walk would be led by the Azadi Festival, as they are initiating it, but the NGOs are supporting it with funds. The organisers were very careful to avoid disputes and wanted Pride to be organised by group decision, and that is why it was a separate entity (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

Mondol's interview reflected the tension between a dominant NGO, which was providing both leadership and funding for Pride, and the broader community involved. While the Azadi Festival played a significant role, there were concerns about its potential to dominate the event. To address this, the organisers intentionally ensured that Pride was organised collectively, with decisions made by the group rather than a single entity, to prevent disputes and maintain the event's inclusive and collaborative nature.

In his interview, Mondol also talked about how social media and Facebook were used to bring together all these activists and how the meeting minutes were circulated. Their approach reflects a collective and participatory process, where transparency was maintained by sharing meeting minutes via email and on a Facebook group, ensuring everyone had access to the information:

There were around ten volunteers initially who were regularly attending the meetings, but this group was not deciding about Pride.

That was considered by an open call on social media. It was to inform everyone saying there is a meeting about Pride, and if you want to join in to share your suggestions, you can join in. Decisions about Pride were taken in that meeting. We used to share the meeting minutes via email and upload them to a Facebook group so that everyone could see them (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

Mondol underlined the democratic and inclusive nature of decision-making within a community. Initially, a core group of volunteers attended meetings regularly, but they did not make decisions about the Pride event alone. Instead, decisions were made through an open call on social media, inviting anyone interested to join and share their suggestions.

The Facebook Group Azadi Festival initially started without manpower, so it was just a basic group without any formal information. By 2016, the organisers recognised the importance of social media to better promote their cause and activities.

Facebook Group Azadi Festival initially did not have any manpower, so the group was only created for documentation. In 2016, we realised we needed a more organised social media presence (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

This shift, described by Mondol, reflects the growing recognition of the need for broader online visibility to support social movements and community engagement. However, the Pride that is organised has certain rules and regulations which indicate the cultural identity of collective actions in the digital sphere. For instance, one of the posts about the Pride Walk says the following:

I was shocked to see that Pride was first banned for sending messages of political and anti-religious brutality and then lifted again.

The initial ban on Pride for allegedly promoting political and anti-religious messages highlights the tension between dominant cultural narratives and marginalised identities. The temporary ban reflects how societal power structures often seek to regulate expressions of identity that challenge established norms.

Azadi Festival, as a social media group, has a large member base of 7,500, with whom they can share information. The group has a lot of important documents like the earlier constitution or meeting minutes, which have archival value and can be considered as their material resource. It is managed by two administrators, who can be considered their human resources. They have had a lot of content and discussion in the group since their founding, which is their cultural resource in the context of this thesis.

5.9 Organisation G - Equality Network Family

Equality Network Family is a social media group that strives to increase the quality of life for members of the transgender community across Bangladesh. As a bisexual identified individual, Anha, the founder of the social media group, and her team are involved in different offline activities such as relief distribution and entrepreneurship building. However, the core of their group management is based on social media.

Anha talked about their journey and how social media platforms helped them to mobilise different resources from their network. Her interview mirrored the significance of community, collaboration, and resourcefulness in addressing social issues during challenging times:

A very big exposure was during the pandemic, as we distributed relief to around 3000 people. I used to follow up after sending the relief, and that is how I came closer to them.

In the very beginning, I designed the logo by myself and made a website in WIX and a Facebook group. Later, my partner and I recruited some volunteers. In the first few weeks, I asked my close friends in my class to help with the idea. They had a small business online. As they were small, they could not employ transgender individuals, but they proposed using them as models, and thus, we managed to provide them with an honorarium. That is how we started (Interview, Anha/Bangladesh).

She stressed the social concept of grassroots community support and social entrepreneurship during times of crisis. Her involvement in building a team in social media and distributing relief during the pandemic allowed them to build close connections with those they were helping, demonstrating the role of personal relationships in social initiatives. The project was funded through personal social media networks, showcasing the importance of collective action and resource mobilisation within small communities.

Anha also emphasises the collaborative nature of the project, which involved creating a social media brand identity and recruiting members. The involvement of close friends who ran small businesses reflects the use of social capital and existing networks to support marginalised groups, such as employing trans people as models. This approach illustrates how community-driven efforts in social media platforms can provide economic opportunities and foster inclusivity, even on a small scale.

The Facebook group is called Equality Network Family, and when forming her social venture, Anha was fuelled by the premise that by assisting transgender communities in Bangladesh to achieve social and financial independence, together they could start bridging the divide between the transgender community and mainstream society. Anha gathered a team of four passionate and driven peers in social media, and each of them was assigned to lead different departments. The departments are Design, Campaign, Content and Public Relations. Every year, they recruit volunteers under these four departments, and all the departments work separately. With Facebook, they also have a common group to coordinate and combine their effort.

Their first activity was to survey members of the transgender community in their area to better understand their needs and identify opportunities for solutions. Their findings showed that many individuals rely on their inner and outer beauty for self-expression. Consequently, the team partnered with online jewellery and apparel entrepreneurs on social media for employment opportunities. Their research also demonstrated a pressing demand for public awareness about gender. In response, the team regularly organises awareness campaigns on social media to educate a general audience on the gender spectrum, encouraging open conversations and discourse to break social stigmas.

The team strives to break the taboos and stigmas placed on the queer community by uplifting more community-driven solutions on social media. Joining hands with other ally organisations, they often organise fundraising events online (Facebook) for the transgender community. In addition, the Equality Network team is engaging renowned activists on their Facebook page to continually build awareness and mobilise them as their moral resource.

Some of the key topics in the Facebook group include a special day celebration, vendor enlistment for entrepreneurship, mental health first aid training, webinars, advocacy meetings, the inclusion of Hijra in the population census and storytelling initiatives.

I talked to Raki, who is their head of social media and PR. She mentioned that most of the communication is through their Facebook groups. In the group of all the heads, they post and manage the approval of their posts, which reflects how they have customised social media for their work. She talked about a set of volunteers they recruit and how they go through an induction program. In the interview, she also talked about backlash related to identities and how they have a strategy to manage that backlash in the organisation. She also added that, as per their policy, it is forbidden to talk about religion on their social media account. So, one of their guiding principles is not to address any religion-related post. The volunteers and other members are not allowed to raise this topic. I asked about the reason; she mentioned that the founder believes that it will divert them from their main objective, and often, this debate and discussion around religion does not conclude. The principle states not to introduce religion as a topic and not to address religious topics in replies or comments.

The Facebook group has its members and moderators who are its human resources. Apart from their online presence, they also have two websites, which are their physical resource. One is their information, and the other is the enterprise through which they sell products made by transgender community members. It is a volunteer-based organisation, but they have departments, and altogether, the team is their human resource. In addition, the founder and her social network, through various fellowships and awards, add to their social, organisational and cultural resources.

5.10 Comparison between the organisations:

This section is the comparative analysis using specific themes of the earlier formation of these organisations and their current structures, including the different kinds of resources they have. Seven broad categories are identified here for comparison, which include their funding status and their registration to receive funding. Matthew Waites (2015), in their book section ‘The new trans-national politics of LGBT+ human rights in the Commonwealth’, examines the new transnational politics of decriminalisation led by London-based NGOs like Kaleidoscope, Human Dignity Trust, Peter Tatchell Foundation, and Stonewall, focusing on their growing engagement with the Commonwealth. He compares insights from these UK-based NGOs to findings from cross-national analyses of struggles in Commonwealth states, highlighting the need for UK activists to learn from the Global South. Considering his book section, this section provides a critical evaluation of the organisations introduced above.

Shojon, with an annual budget of 1,005,000 pounds sterling, is notably larger than many other organisations in the region. In comparison, Shurjer Alo operates with a more modest budget of 41,000 pounds sterling, reflecting its smaller scale. Turning Point and Bahurupi have even more limited budgets, with Turning Point managing 10,000 pounds sterling and Bahurupi 6,000 pounds sterling, emphasising the financial challenges they face. The History Trust in West Bengal, with a financial inflow of just 1,460 pounds sterling in 2020-21, demonstrates an even more restricted financial capacity. These figures highlight the significant disparities in the financial scale of these organisations, with Shojon being the largest and the others operating on much smaller budgets.

If we consider funding and the categories and fiscal sponsorship discussed in Chapter 1, Shojon is receiving it directly from the government or international donor organisations, which puts them at the top of a pyramid. Organisations like Shurjer Alo and Turning Point receive it through local fiscal sponsors. It makes them a community NGOs, which have the character of an NGO, but they have no direct access to financial resources. Non-funded organisations like Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi do not receive any support from the government or international organisations, but they function in their own way by raising funds through performances and being together as a collective. History Trust (India), in an interview, wanted to classify themselves as a non-funded organisation. However, they receive financial donations, and for their cultural and other social organisational resources, it is questionable to place them on the non-funded organisation list.

The social media groups are kept aside as they function differently and are discussed in a separate chapter later in the thesis. The two social media groups introduced here not only have an online presence, but they also mobilise a big portion of their work through social media. They have online and offline work as well, and a part of their total resources is spent online for promotion. Some of their resources are indirectly used; for instance, they pay the designers who design their content, and thus there is a connection with the resources mobilised by the social media groups. Due to the massive reach of social media, locally and internationally, people are more aware of their work, and thus they get involved with them, which also contributes to their resources. However, if we compare these two social media groups, one is using it for communication and spreading the news of organising the annual Pride Walk once a year, whereas the other one is using it more for smaller campaign design and distribution spread throughout the year.

Similarly, registration-wise, Shojon is an NGO burro registered organisation in Bangladesh, which keeps them separate from the other organisations. Shurjer Alo has three different registrations, but that doesn't give them the eligibility to receive international funding. Similarly, Turning Point has no registration as being run by educated young members; they realised that the other registrations would not give them any further advantage. They will just have a piece of paper and won't be able to receive international funds like Shurjer Alo. History Trust (India) was registered as a trust after many struggles, where the organisation was shaped in various formats. However, due to the FCRA regulation in India, they also cannot receive international funds. They receive donations and, through local and international consultancy, they manage their finances. Thus, they want to claim it as a non-funded organisation. Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi is also a non-registered organisation, and for performances in public spaces, they do not need formal documentation.

Many of these organisations work for the queer community in general but still, there is an organisational focus. If we investigate the organisations and their priority areas, Shojon and Shurjer Alo work for the Hijra population. Turning Point is focused on gay men, and Bahurupi works with Chukri and Kothi community members. History Trust works for all community members irrespective of gender and sexual orientation. Though they talk about inclusivity, certain topics gain more traction, and some community members feel isolated and tend not to become part of the collective actions.

Internal structure-wise, Shojon, History Trust and Shurjer Alo are more hierarchical and have an organigram. Communications and decision-making are managed based on that hierarchy. In all three organisations, when I was interviewing the junior staff members, they were unaware of the funding

sources and often the reply was ‘I don’t know’. In the case of Turning Point and Bahurupi, there is less of a hierarchy, and organisation members are more aware of how their funding is mobilised and managed.

Organisational culture varies significantly based on mission, leadership style, region, and the communities served. As per organisational culture, Shojon is a hierarchical organisation where there are certain positions for decision making, and the rest of the staff working are not consulted or aware of the financial and managerial decisions. Their culture focuses on clear authority lines, defined roles, and formal policies. Their characteristics include rigid protocols, clear decision-making authority, established roles, and a strong focus on accountability and compliance. Shurjer Alo and Turning Point have outcome-oriented cultures. Their culture is focused on achieving specific, measurable results, often with a focus on data-driven strategies and impact evaluation. Their decision-making often revolves around the outcomes of projects and programs. On the other hand, History Trust has a mission-driven culture where its core identity is rooted in a commitment to archiving. Trustees and volunteers are deeply motivated by the organisation’s mission and purpose, which relates to addressing social and humanitarian issues. Finally, Bahurupi has a resource-constrained culture where they adopt a culture of frugality and efficiency, striving to maximise impact with minimal resources. This culture focuses on cost-effectiveness and resourcefulness. Their characteristics include an emphasis on lean operations, stretching resources, prioritising essential expenses, and sometimes relying on volunteer contributions. Staff are accustomed to adapting to limited budgets.

If we investigate the activities, Turning Point, Shojon, Shurjer Alo work in a structured manner, which is project delivery. They design a project, receive funds from the local government or international donor organisation and

deliver the project only as a form of collective action. In their organisational history, many of them were involved in various forms of collective action before, and that is how they emerged as an organisation. However, if we investigate their current stature, they are highly focused on project delivery. History Trust focuses on archiving as its regular activity, and Bahurupi focuses on its production and rehearsal as its collective action.

Apart from these major differences, all the organisations have physical space and various material resources. In addition, all of them mobilise volunteers, social organisational resources and cultural resources in their different forms of collective actions, which is remarkable.

5.11 Conclusion

This chapter offers a perspective on the topic by examining forms of queer collective actions through an organisational lens, an approach not previously explored by other researchers. Academic attention to see it from an organisational perspective has been minimal, and there has been little exploration of seeing it using various methods, both in the case of Bangladesh and West Bengal. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), some research exists on non-normative gender and sexuality, but studies in Bangladesh focusing on this topic from an organisational standpoint remain scarce. This project addresses this research gap by analysing five organisations and two social media groups to originally explore the dynamics of queer collective action.

To understand different organisations and their practices, I conducted in-person visits and engaged with them directly to identify underlying patterns of organisation. Based on their structural complexities, for this thesis, I have

categorised them into funded, non-funded, and partially funded organisations. However, this chapter highlights that these categories are not solely determined by material resources but also by their reliance on mutual solidarity and their strategies for managing various other resources. While some organisations operate independently of external donor funding, others are highly dependent on it. Structurally, some are loosely connected networks, whereas others have a tightly knit hierarchy with formal regulations and organograms.

Considering the funding structures, categories, and fiscal sponsorship discussed in the introduction chapter, organisations receiving direct funding from the government or international donor agencies sit at the top of the hierarchy. Partially funded community NGOs receive funding through local fiscal sponsors, while non-funded organisations operate independently, raising funds through performances and collective efforts without support from the government or international donors. In terms of registration, formally registered organisations distinguish themselves from others by holding more institutional power. While partially funded community NGOs may have multiple forms of registration, they are not eligible to receive direct international funding. Non-funded organisations, on the other hand, rely on local donations, and some engage in international consultancy.

Structurally, funded organisations tend to be more hierarchical, operating with an organisational chart that dictates communication and decision-making processes. In contrast, non-funded organisations have a flatter structure with less rigid hierarchies. Organisational culture varies significantly based on mission, leadership style, region, and the communities served. Funded organisations typically follow a bureaucratic model, with assigned decision-making positions and limited transparency regarding financial and managerial

matters. Their culture is characterised by rigid protocols, clearly defined roles, formal policies, and a strong emphasis on accountability and compliance. Partially funded community NGOs adopt an outcome-oriented culture, prioritising service delivery through data-driven strategies and impact evaluation. Their decision-making revolves around achieving measurable project outcomes. Non-funded organisations, by contrast, are deeply mission-driven, with trustees and volunteers motivated by social and humanitarian causes. Their culture emphasises efficiency, striving to maximise impact with minimal resources. They operate with a lean structure, focusing on cost-effectiveness, resourcefulness, and prioritising essential expenses while often relying on volunteer contributions. Staff in these organisations are accustomed to adapting to financial constraints.

When analysing their activities, funded organisations follow a structured approach, designing projects, securing funds from local governments or international donors, and implementing initiatives that often manifest as artificial forms of collective action. In contrast, non-funded organisations cultivate a more organic and grassroots-driven culture of collective action among their members.

For movement building, all the organisations collaborate, and they work for the same objective in general, yet these organisations also create a division between those who have access to the resources and others who do not. A strong sense of distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is particularly evident in many of the interviews. Technological advancements, especially the rise of online communities, have reduced individuals’ dependence on physical networks. However, my analysis also reveals that many organisational ties still retain a strong local component.

Legal frameworks and obstacles in resource-sharing present significant challenges for queer organisers, yet their continuous innovation in navigating a hostile environment is remarkable. Different organisations employ diverse strategies to resist political exploitation, reflecting varied kinship structures and creative resilience in their organising approaches. The organisations examined in this chapter reveal the hierarchies embedded in these processes and how community members mobilise at different levels.

Through my fieldwork, I have documented the diverse negotiations that queer organisations undertake to adapt and assert their presence. The remainder of this thesis will further explore the factors shaping this diversity in organising and how these factors have influenced the perspectives and operational structures of these organisations.

Chapter 6

Resources, queer labour and friendship in the forms of collective actions: Behind the curtains of queer events

6.1 Introduction

Queer community members seek a sense of belonging and communal connection with like-minded others. These forms of expression allow them to explore and celebrate their identities creatively. While organising the events, queer collectives share stories, experiences and identities as both a form of self-expression and a means of connecting with others. Moving beyond the previous chapter's consideration of the organisations' formation and internal structures, this chapter will contribute to the thesis by developing an analysis of how the organisations' practices of organising relate to external queer communities, including by exploring the implications of a decolonial perspective. It will refer to Po-Han Lee (2019), who discussed decoloniality in Asia by emphasising the need to challenge colonial legacies and rethink the structures that have shaped the region's modernity. He critiques the lingering influence of Western frameworks and advocates for a reimagining of Asian identities and histories that are free from colonial domination. Lee calls for an inclusive approach to decoloniality that acknowledges the diversity within Asia while resisting homogenising narratives imposed by colonial powers.

In the previous chapter (Chapter 5), I described and analysed the organisations from which I collected data. In that chapter, I introduced the organisations and discussed their formation, using data from interviews. In the first half of this chapter, there is a discussion about creative workshops (Method 1) and in the second half, there is a discussion about the queer events I observed (Method

2). Through the events they organise, it can be seen how they form collective actions for celebration and campaign management. The research sub-questions for this project enquire about traditional culture in the context of queer collective actions reflected in the oral history. These sub-questions are going to be addressed in this chapter through the event observation and creative workshops that were done during the fieldwork.

This chapter describes different events organised by queer collectives in India and Bangladesh, and argues that they are important for coming together and forming collective actions by mobilising the community, as well as using cultural symbols. Solidarity in organising, friendship and collaboration in forms of event organising are also themes for this chapter. Hatem M Hassan and Suzanne Staggenborg (2014) mentioned the power of ‘we’ in their journal on movements as communities. They gave a reference to the Iranian women’s movement and stated that this sense of ‘we’, one that emerges from below and through largely impersonal networks of ordinary individuals, is also what makes the actions of women in Iran a (pre)movement community. They added that the consequences of this sense of we’ are anything but imagined, as can be seen by the communities of professional activists, academics and lawyers, artists and musicians, and, finally, ordinary Iranian women who have gradually coalesced to demand concrete change (Hassan and Staggenborg, 2014, p 349). They asked whether movement communities can form under authoritarian governments in the Middle East; however, in this chapter, the focus is also on the power of ‘we’ in authoritarian regimes. While narrating the events, there is a reflection on queer collective labour, friendship and the use of various resources. However, in the end, these events are often not celebrated as mainstream events and are considered obscene. In the context of two Bengals, queer events have been a part of the wider queer place-making discourse for a long time, which is discussed in this chapter.

The creative workshops, as well as the events, give an insight into queer storytelling and different forms of collective action of joy, friendship and care. The main research question is ‘How should critical social analysis interpret the forms of collective action by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal?’. Queer events - no matter whether that is a performance or a campaign- play a significant role for community members to come together as a collective and interact with each other. This interaction later helps them to know more about the community and build strong relations with each other for other collective actions. Many of the groups that are now registered NGOs or partially funded community NGOs, started their collectives by organising performances and celebratory events.

For this chapter, I have incorporated data from event observation and creative workshops, which are two of my methods. The events are classified into a few categories, where there are ritual performances, Pride Walks, advocacy events, and infotainment. Apart from that, the discussion will draw on some data from in-depth interviews as it relates to the events being discussed. A total of five organisations' data will be discussed in this chapter. (The two social media groups are not discussed here; they will be discussed in Chapter 6. The events and their promotions are often through social media groups, but the actual events take place physically, where face-to-face interaction and getting to know each other are a requirement for the queer community. Along with academic references, different news reports are also cited in this chapter.

The first section of this chapter provides a theoretical framework that will be used to develop the arguments in this chapter. Later, the second section provides a brief background of the legal context of assembly, explaining valuable rights for all the country's citizens. When we talk about queer community members, assemblies are prohibited or create difficulties with the

authorities, which is analysed in this section. In the third section, there is a discussion about the creative workshops, which were one of the observation methods. In the fourth section, the discussion is about independent events which these organisations arrange in traditional forms, as per the context of this thesis. The fifth section will give a glimpse of the events from five different organisations that have been observed during fieldwork. Many of these events described in this section are often funded by transnational donors, where guidelines govern how these events should take place. On the other hand, infotainment events are often designed based on community demand and are sometimes partially funded by local and international organisations. The final section of this chapter is the evaluation of the collective ways of organising events.

Apart from Pride events, queer individuals and groups sometimes organise private parties and events to celebrate occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, and even secret Pride gatherings. Celebrating small victories in advocacy and activism, such as successful workshops, awareness campaigns, or legal aid cases, brings a sense of accomplishment and joy. Carefully curated visibility campaigns that highlight positive stories and achievements of queer individuals can foster a sense of friendship, solidarity and joy within the community.

6.2 Context and Analytical Framework

To organise events, some groups have mobilised based on a common identity to agitate for societal change, whilst many queer individuals hide their purpose for fear of persecution. Organising events where several people form an assembly requires permission from the local police. Though there is a specific

provision in the constitution where all the citizens have the right to form an assembly, various obstacles and hurdles can be seen for such queer collective actions.

In the case of India, this right is specifically enshrined under Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b) of the Constitution. Article 19(1)(a) confers a very valuable right. For an assembly to enjoy protection, it must remain peaceful and avoid causing public disorder. 19(1)(b) ensures the right to assemble and hold public meetings or processions without arms peacefully.

About the decriminalisation of same-sex relations in India and Article 19(1)(b) of the Indian Constitution discussed in the introduction (Chapter 1), the right to assembly applies to all citizens. This right extends to all members of the LGBT+ community; however, societal attitudes and local authorities can influence the practical exercise of this right.

Pride marches and other LGBT+ related public gatherings have become more common in several major Indian cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Chennai. Despite this, organising such events can still face challenges. These can include bureaucratic hurdles, the need for police permissions, and potential backlash from conservative groups. For instance, Karthik Pasupulate (2012) wrote about the Pride 2013 experience in Hyderabad, India, in the *Times of India*, where they stated that the city police have not taken too much time to give their nod to a gay Pride Walk, scheduled (Pasupulate, 2012). Similarly, in 2020, the police denied permission for the annual Pride parade, *Queer Azaadi Mumbai Pride 2020*, which was supposed to be held in August *Kranti Maidan, India* (The Wire, 2020).

In the case of Bangladesh, one of the fundamental rights is freedom of assembly, where Article 37 of part III says that every citizen shall have the

right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of public order or public health.

Public expressions of LGBT+ identity and rights advocacy often face severe backlash. For instance, in 2016, a ‘Rainbow Rally’ in Dhaka was cancelled due to threats and subsequent police actions against participants (Rezwan, 2016). Four people were detained on that day. This incident exemplifies the extreme hostility and danger associated with the LGBT+ community in Bangladesh.

In 2017, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)²⁸ detained 28 people from attending what it calls a homosexual party at a community centre in Dhaka's Keraniganj (Amnesty International, 2017). Similarly, one person was detained, and a party was forced to close in 2024 by the police force in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Anecdotal).

In the next section, there are more discussions around it from the context of two Bengals, where events and creating temporary spaces through collective actions are not only a phenomenon of urbanisation or victimhood, but also a way to establish autonomy in many creative ways.

²⁸ Rapid Action Battalion or RAB is an anti-crime and anti-terrorism unit of the Bangladesh Police. This elite force consists of members of the Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Navy, Bangladesh Air Force, Bangladesh Police, Border Guard Bangladesh, and Bangladesh Ansar. According to Human Rights Watch, members of the Rapid Action Battalion have shot and killed women and children during public protests. Rights groups describe it as a "death squad."

6.3 Creative Workshop Outcome

Different creative workshop outcomes gave different perspectives of queer collective actions, which are not homogeneous. While discussing the process of collective identity, Melucci argued that instead of seeing collective actions as stable entities with fixed identities, we should focus on the ongoing, dynamic processes through which groups come together, form identities, and make sense of their collective actions. This approach emphasises the fluidity, negotiation, and meaning-making involved in the construction of collective actors.

By asking the question of how individuals and groups make sense of their actions and how we may understand the process, we are obliged to shift from a monolithic and metaphysical idea of collective actors towards the processes through which a collective becomes a collective (Melucci, 1996, p 70)

Traditionally, collective actors were often conceptualised as static, unified entities. In this view, collective actions were seen as singular and stable. Rather than seeing a social movement, for example, as simply a thing that 'is,' we should ask how and why individuals and groups come together, how they make sense of their shared goals, and how they navigate differences. This perspective highlights the dynamic, fluid, and ongoing processes that constitute a collective, such as negotiation, communication, identity formation, and strategy-building.

As a method of data collection, five different creative workshops were organised where participants could share their skills and interact with each other through dialogues. The method was introduced as an icebreaker, followed by an unstructured discussion for the participants of the five different

organisations. However, the workshops were also events where there were invitations, and they could share their skills and knowledge through different media. The creative workshops and their outcomes are analysed below in this section.

6.3.1 Creative workshop by Shurjer Alo

In the creative workshop by Shurjer Alo (Bangladesh), the participants painted a canvas while discussing events from their memories. Most of the participants were involved in hand painting as they had taken part in several hand painting training sessions under the government's enterprise development program. Whilst painting, they discussed queer celebration events from their memory. In the workshop, many of the community members talked about the affordability and accessibility of queer spaces and how they have mobilised spaces for their needs.



Image 5: Hand-painted canvas by four participants of Shurjer Alo

Among the participants, Nadiya (Top left) talked about a local party with trans women that they organised by renting a restaurant. As a *Kothi*-identified person, the major attraction was buying a dress and stilettos and wearing them in the program. They were very excited describing their experience of choosing the dress, and they drew the golden dress on their part of the canvas.

Tinku talked about a cultural program (Bottom left in the image) by Shurjer Alo in a local community centre, which is a funded event under a project. They talked about the food and drinks that were served at the event, and that

was a memorable part of their queer memory. Their artwork contains drawings of food items, including a glass of water, a plate with a meal, and a cup of tea. It is the typical meal of a Bengali occasion, illustrating rich food items.

Roni recalled a visit to a carnival in 2011. They went there with Jolly, where a guy offered money to Jolly for sex work. They described how masculine that guy was among all the attractions of that carnival and painted the man as well as Jolly from their memory (Bottom right). The drawing shows two figures holding hands. The figure on the left is a woman wearing a blue dress and red earrings, with high heels. The figure on the right is a man with a beard, wearing a red checkered shirt and a lungi²⁹. In the artwork, they named the person as a customer, which shows the business relationship with the person. They show a vivid description of queer joy in the carnival. The illustration and text commemorate the occasion of the carnival and the proposal. The drawing captures the moment in a vibrant and personal style.

Piya (top right) recalled their childhood when they had a doll, and they organised an event for the wedding of their doll. They drew a swing in their work and painted them wearing pieces of jewellery and make-up. Their drawing resembles a playful scene with a tree with a bird perched on it. This captured a childhood memory of playing, highlighting a nostalgic and significant moment.

The workshop with the members of Shurjer Alo highlights many of their forms of collective actions, such as parties, going to a carnival together or sharing food, which are important elements of organising apart from their work as organisational members together. The events they talked about use

²⁹ The lungi is a clothing that originated in the Indian subcontinent. The lungi, which is usually multicoloured, is a men's skirt usually tied around the lower waist below the navel. It can be worn as casual wear and nightwear.

resources that are not only material and human resources but also cultural resources, which were discussed by the participants of the workshop. It reinterprets various collective actions undertaken by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh.

6.3.2 Creative workshop by Bahurupi Natya Goshthi

The *Chukri* dance group in Bangladesh made a wall newspaper (Appendix 2) with some of their photographs, and as they were unable to read and write, I captured their discussion according to their suggestions, while they were recalling their memories of the photographs. Their work highlights sex, commerce and how queerness and forms of collective actions exist in rural Bangladesh. During the discussion, they gave me quotes which I later wrote on a piece of paper according to their order, and later I translated that compilation into an image on my computer. They talked about the different rules and regulations they follow to remain a collective and perform. The discussion also touches on the interaction between performers and their audiences. This includes how the audience perceives them and how they maintain a connection with the audience through their performances.

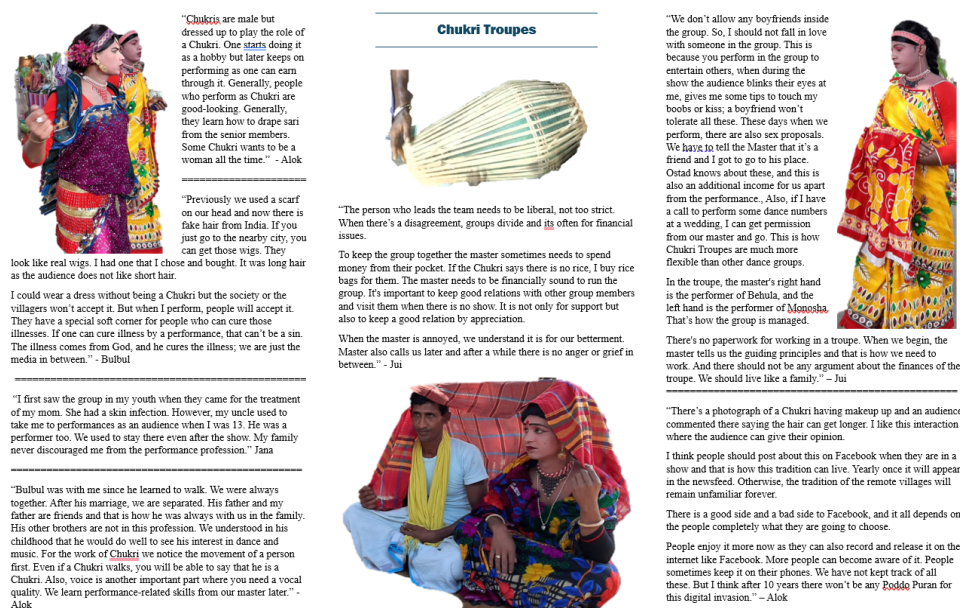


Image 6: The wall newspaper, which includes interviews or quotes from various members of these groups. Personal stories and experiences of performers are shared, including how they started in the group, their challenges, and their dedication to the art form.

In the discussion during the making process, the question of religion and coexistence came up as well. Shaon, one of the group members, analysed a complex interplay between religious knowledge, personal desires, and self-control. The acknowledgement that certain actions are 'haram' (forbidden) yet still being pursued out of passion suggests a struggle between spiritual understanding and emotional or physical impulses.

We have some knowledge, at least, and everyone knows it's haram (Sinful). But out of passion, we do it and go. When it happens, there is a different addictive feeling, and the brain doesn't work (Interview, Shaon /Bangladesh).

The reference of Shaon to an ‘addictive feeling’ highlights how certain behaviours can override rational thought, pointing to a psychological and emotional disconnect between belief and action. Ultimately, this internal conflict reveals a tension between individual desires and religious teachings, which many struggle to reconcile in their everyday lives. During the same discussion, Alok reflected on the growing influence of religious preaching through Waz Mehfiles (sermon) and the societal pressure it exerts on individuals, particularly those involved in performance arts.

The audience is increasing in Waz Mahfil ... The preachers also guide people on how to live their lives as true Muslims. Sometimes they also talk about our performance events. The preachers ask us not to perform wearing dresses and forget what we have done so far. For all this pressure, Bulbul is not going to the weekly Jumma prayer anymore. The Imam there preaches things that are forbidden according to the way they understand Islam (Interview, Alok/Bangladesh).

According to Alok, by dictating how people should live as true Muslims, these preachers wield significant power, shaping public perceptions of morality and acceptable behaviour. Their criticism of performance events highlights a homogeneous interpretation of Islam that excludes alternative cultural expressions, leading to ostracisation or self-censorship among artists. In his narration, Bulbul’s decision to avoid weekly Jumma prayers reflects the alienation caused by these restrictive discourses, revealing the social and psychological toll on individuals who do not conform to the prescribed norms. The Imam’s preaching, grounded in a specific understanding of Islam, underscores the lack of space for diverse interpretations within these religious communities. Critically, this situation exposes the tension between religious authority and cultural pluralism, raising questions about the balance between

tradition, contemporary, and individual autonomy in shaping identities and practices within Islamic societies.

Concerning shaping identities, here it would have been easy to identify this group as a crossdresser group or men in drag; however, that would erase the traditional knowledge these dancers were talking about. For instance, Niloy Basu in his book about Launda³⁰ dancers named it Hijra in their subtitle and were criticised by Kaustav Bakshi (2021) in a web journal. Bakshi reviews social researcher Basu's book 'Launda Dancer: Anyo Hijrer Bhinna Bhuban', an important book in the queer literature in Bengali:

... one may take issue with the sub-title of the book, in which the Laundas are categorised as Hijras, where the term Hijra, as it seems, is used loosely as a gender non-conforming generic category, and not so much in the traditional sense. But it is indubitable that naming has always been a challenge within queer communities, where identity categories are so fluid and overlapping that self-identification appears to be the only acceptable way out if naming or labelling is at all necessary (Bakshi, 2021).

The use of the concept Hijra in the subtitle is critiqued for its loose application as a generic term for gender non-conforming individuals rather than its traditional cultural meaning, highlighting ongoing challenges in naming within fluid queer identities. For *chukri* dancers as well, self-identification is emphasised as a respectful approach, instead of identifying them as trans or cross-dressers. That is how queerness exists in South Asia, where a subtitle

³⁰ The Bhojpuri word launda literally means a young male adolescent. However, in daily life, it is sometimes used as a derogatory term for a man, who is effeminate and from an inferior Caste. In the Mughal Era, Courtesans had significant importance.

like trans or cross-dresser is often not omitted, thinking about the larger audience.

6.3.3 Creative workshop by Turning Point

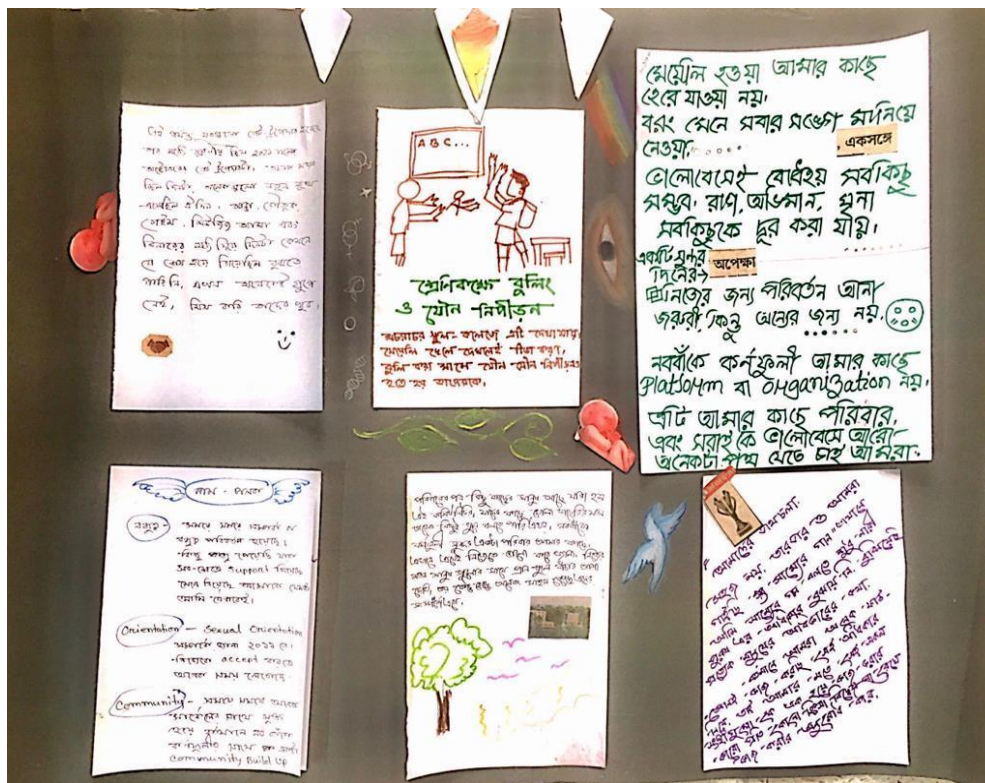


Image 7: Wall newspaper made by the members of Turning Point

The group from Turning Point produced a wall newspaper of various handwritten notes, drawings, and text, primarily in Bengali. The event took place in an art space in the southeast of Bangladesh. The layout is informal and visually engaging, with different colours, drawings, and handwritten text contributing to a lively and creative display. This suggests an emphasis on

individuality and expression, as each section appears to be uniquely styled by its author.

The content reflects the concerns, hopes, and aspirations of the community, particularly the younger generation. Issues such as education, mental health, societal expectations, and personal growth are common themes that aim to prepare queer individuals for their well-being.

Collective action can be addressed as a symbolic challenge, where the cultural practices of drawing, writing and presenting challenge established norms, values, or social structures. Unlike more direct forms of collective action like Pride, symbolic challenges are primarily concerned with changing how people think, feel, and understand the world around them—particularly the dominant ideologies or cultural narratives that legitimise existing power relations.

6.3.4 Creative workshop by Shojon

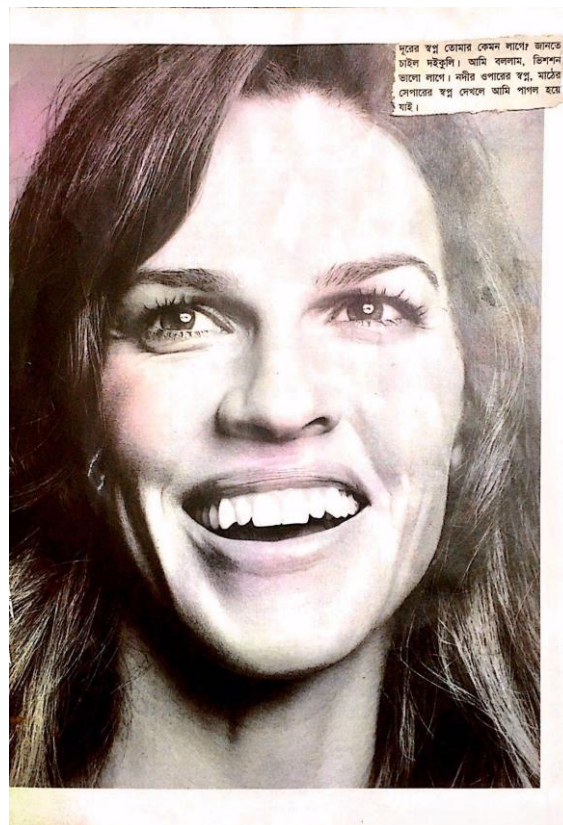


Image 8: Poster designed by a staff member of Shojon as a collage

The workshop took place in an informal setting with old magazines, colours, papers and other materials where the participants chose to prepare posters. Among the sets, this poster was selected to interpret as it has a connection with transnational resource sharing and transnational funding, which came out in the discussion during the workshop.

A close-up of Hilary Swank's face was cropped from a magazine, with text written in Bengali at the top right corner. She acted as a transman in the film *Boys Don't Cry*. The text reads: How do you feel about distant dreams?

*Doikuli*³¹ asked. I said I like the vision. I go crazy when I dream of crossing the river, crossing the field.

The team was given old newspapers and magazines to make collages, where there were local materials as well as international journals. The person who created it chose Hilary Swank as she is his favourite actress. Hilary Swank acted as a trans man in a film, and it shows that many of the community members have been inspired by international media. Figures like Hilary Swank are seen as culturally iconic and universally recognisable. It can help attract attention by incorporating such familiar, mainstream symbols and tapping into the emotional and aspirational appeal these celebrities have.

In the poster, it may not be immediately evident that the text addresses transnational resources, a point that emerged in the discussion, highlighting how working in an NGO can be disappointing—an aspect often overlooked in the context of collective actions by marginalised genders and sexualities. The workshop brought discussion about transnational resources and how they are used in the form of collective actions, which sometimes result in a successful campaign but fail to make any long-term changes in the collectives.

The participant is from Shojon, which is a registered NGO, but the poster indicates symbolic challenges, as it did not directly indicate the dissatisfaction of working for such collective actions. Rather than focusing purely on material or political changes, symbolic challenges aim to shift how people perceive and interpret the world around them.

³¹ The Oriental magpie-robin is also known as *Doikuli* in the villages. They are distinctive black and white birds with long tails that are held upright as they forage on the ground or perch conspicuously.

6.3.5 Creative workshop by History Trust

Participants who came to the workshop decided to make zines, which were later photographed and discussed below.

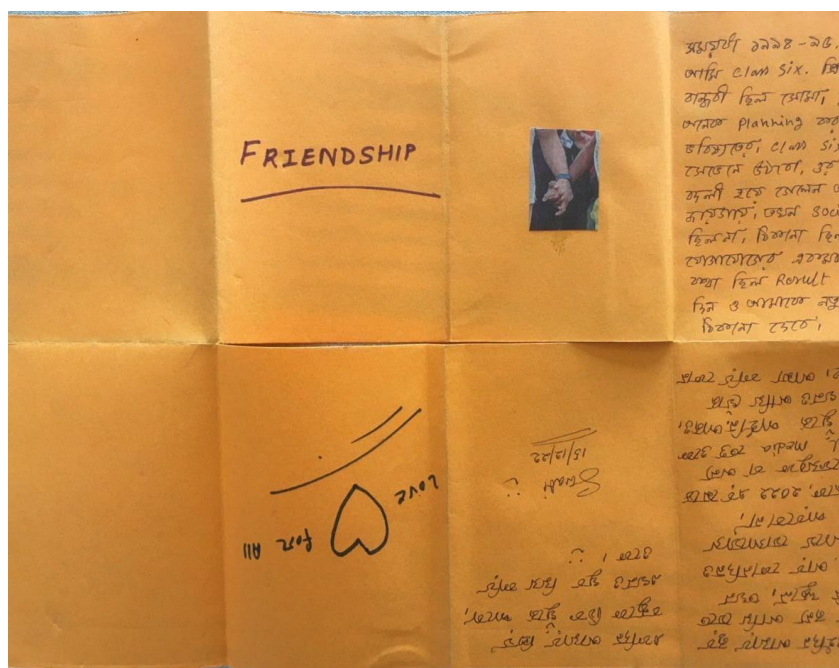


Image 9: Zine made by a participant in the workshop about her long-lost friend

The zine offers a window into the social fabric of the individuals involved, showing how they navigate friendship, affection, and identity within their cultural and temporal context. Here, the participant wrote about her long-lost school friend, and she wrote that she would search for her using social media. In the subcontinent, often same-sex relations are termed as friends and the heart symbol, and the words ‘friendship’ and ‘love’ suggest that the zine is about a special friend. These symbols are universal, but their inclusion in a handwritten note emphasises the personal connection. The text reflects the social process of maintaining friendships, an essential part of identity

formation and social belonging. In many cultures, especially within Indian society, friendship is a key component of one's social identity.

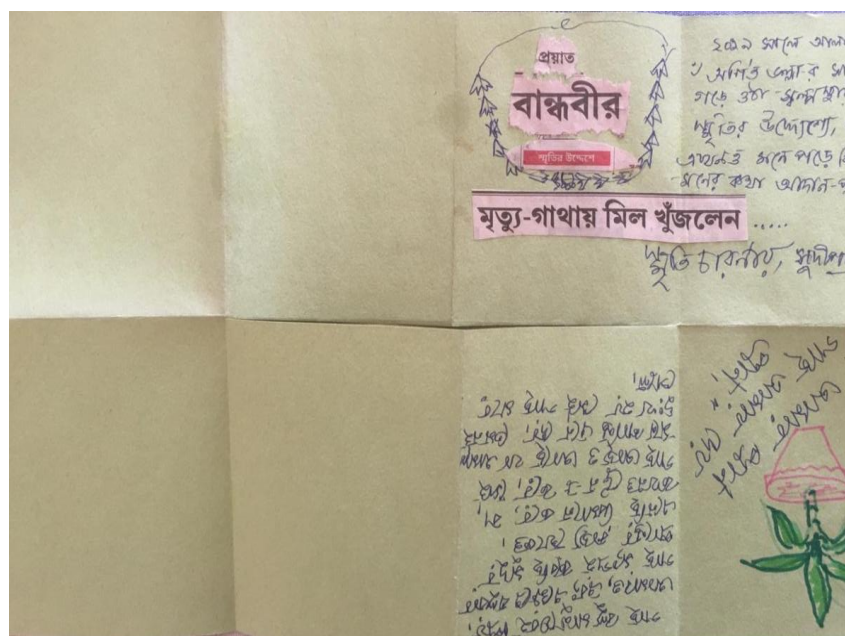


Image 10: Zine made by a participant in the workshop about a fellow activist who died

The participant wrote about an activist friend who died a couple of years ago. In the zine, she recalled how they met in a workshop and the memories she still recalls about that friend. The zine explores themes of struggle and the resilience of a community in the face of challenges.

The zine creatively explores themes related to aspiration, identity, and the tension between individual potential and societal constraints. By paradoxical phrases, symbolic drawings, and fragmented text, it raises questions about how dreams and reality interact within social structures.

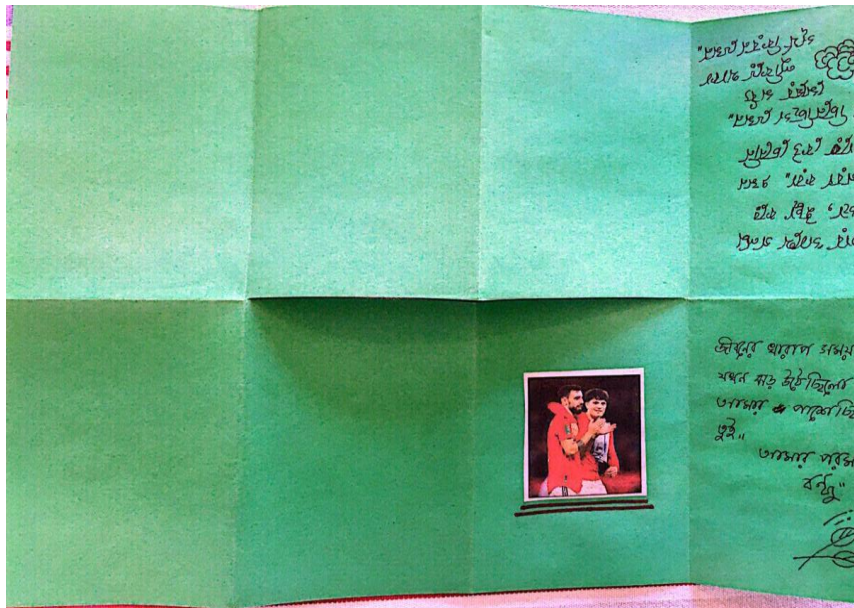


Image 11: Zine made by a participant in the workshop about overcoming difficult times with the help of a friend.

In this zine, the participant wrote about a friend who helped them in their hard times. This zine appears to blend personal expression with broader social symbols. Sociologically, this could be interpreted as a reflection of how personal identity is constructed in dialogue with broader cultural symbols and societal values.

The inclusion of a sports photo highlights the significance of collective achievements and the role of special friends in shaping social identity. The simple drawing symbolises growth, beauty, or even a gesture of goodwill. The choice to write in one's native language, accompanied by local symbols (like the cloud, sun and leaves), reflects a sense of pride in one's heritage and a desire to maintain cultural ties. This connects to broader sociological themes of how language and symbols are used to reinforce identity within a cultural or social group.

If we investigate the zines, the ideas of friendship, love and solidarity come across in all of them. These ideas were commonly shared in the workshop and emerged as key themes of the chapter. The workshop participants also talked about their childhood, about loss, and about how being resilient is a resource for them. Melucci highlighted the importance of communication in these forms of collective action. Shared values and solidarity are often maintained through informal communication networks rather than through formal organisations.

Meeting other activists and receiving support from friends in the group indicate these submerged networks of collective action. Informal, often hidden social connections play a key role in mobilising collective efforts. These networks of friendships from workshops operate beneath the surface of formal, public structures, enabling the sharing of information, resources, and solidarity. They are crucial in building trust and facilitating coordination, especially in collective actions that are not publicly recognised in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal.

6.4 Evaluation of the Creative Workshop Outcomes

Creative workshops, in this project, provided a safe and inclusive space for individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their stories, particularly in contexts where distrust exists. These methods encouraged dialogue and self-expression and promoted critical awareness, enabling queer collectives to engage meaningfully in shaping their narratives and addressing shared concerns. Melucci argued that modern social movements often prioritise creating a shared identity among participants. This collective identity is often as important as, if not more important than, any specific goals. The friendship

or the connection among the queer community members that appeared in different workshops, such as the one in Kolkata (India), where they made zines, indicates that.

Unlike traditional movements focused on immediate economic or political change, Melucci noted that new social movements are often more about challenging cultural norms and values, aiming for long-term transformation. When the Chukri dancers use various symbols and motifs to convey their message in the outcome of the workshop, it clearly shows that their focus lies more in challenging cultural norms rather than enacting a quick economic or political change. Thus, the creative workshop method not only inspired their engagement but also strengthened networks of collaboration and mutual support among them.

6.5 Forms of collective actions regarding events, from memories of organisers

Queer events are always a tool behind many collective actions. This became clear in many of the workshop discussions and interviews. Interview participants talked about their memories of such collective performances, which helped them with team building and aspiration. It inspired them and gave them confidence that they could reach out and organise bigger collective actions. Without that collective effort, it would not have been possible to make these collective assemblies of celebration because of the lack of spaces where the queer community can be themselves and express themselves the way they want to.

Bhandari from Turning Point (Bangladesh) talked about their initial event schedule, where the specific facility of a dressing room was introduced. In the

socio-cultural context of the city, it was a challenge for many and collectively, their organisation has addressed that in their events.

We started with four people. Sequentially, we had a get-together in harbours and other public spaces. Later that year, we celebrated New Year's Eve on a river cruise at a nearby lake after Eid. Apart from that, we had a photoshoot and one dish for my birthday. My motivation was attending some events in Dhaka, like the one-dish gathering and the launching event of a group. I liked it as people are open about cross-dressing. why is there so much fear in my city? So, I felt like not giving up (Interview, Bhandari/Bangladesh).

Here, Bhandari talked about the different kinds of events they initially organised. There were not only get-togethers but also river cruises, photo shoots and birthday celebrations. In their annual events, there is always a separate room for the people who want to cross-dress and perform. Many of them do not have the sociocultural context where they can cross-dress at home and come to the event. This setup of a dressing room is a unique feature which the group must facilitate from their collective action of organising annual events.

Singh from the History Trust (India) talked about coming together in the early 90s and how they thought of collective actions to save their club. The Fun Club, a group that lasted only a year, struggled with internal conflicts and financial issues. Members attempted to organise events, including a 'Pink Evening' at a Cathedral in Kolkata (India), which was intended to be a gay party. However, concerns about police intervention led them to cancel it.

Within a year, the Fun Club was winding up as the money ran out. In its one year of existence, the organisers tried hard to keep it going.

There were fractions in the group as well. Some came out with the idea of organising a Pink Evening at a Cathedral in Kolkata (India), and they paid the advance for the booking. It was supposed to be for a gay party to happen. It was a space that was given out for events at that time. Some members argued that we can't do this. The police will come, and we will be arrested. Then they thought they would plan another event in Sarat Sadan (Auditorium in India), which is next to Triangular Park. That was a stage performance; there was a drag show, and people sang and danced. It was a small auditorium for theatre performances. People did not turn up, only dozens of people. We danced a little bit and said Let's go home. Nothing happened, and nobody sustained membership (Interview, Singh/West Bengal).

Singh's statement reveals that there were several attempts to sustain their club. In that initial phase, in the early 90s, they tried to organise events and, through membership, they wanted to raise some funds to ensure sustainability. This pattern is common in the case of both Bengals, starting with informal parties and ending with performance events, which later turn into other collective actions.

During the in-depth interviews, Proshanto from History Trust India also talked about the 'Friendship Walk' that took place on 2nd July 1999. This was one of the earlier Pride walks in Asia, and Proshanto talked more about the details of the first one and the second one he attended.

A few people organised the Friendship Walk. They wrote posters saying, 'Proud to be a gay'. People were curious back then, thinking about what gays look like. Now this looks like a carnival with celebrity dance music.

After that, I attended the second one and I sang the entire walkway with a microphone in hand. Others were dancing. It was one thousand people. Back then, it was only community members - not everyone came to Pride walks. There was always a small meeting at the end of the walk with some music and dance. We needed to get police permission for different routes. There's a committee to decide all of this. Back then, we used to issue letters, and we had pagers to communicate (Interview, Proshanto/West Bengal).

From the narration of Proshanto, the ambience of the walk can be pictured. The early walks were modest, attended primarily by community members rather than the broader public. It is notable that back then it was not titled as Pride but as a 'Friendship Walk'. This reflection shows the journey from small, community-focused events to large, widely celebrated public festivals, highlighting both the progress and the ongoing challenges in organising Pride events.

Islam, who is the chairperson of Shojon in Bangladesh, talks about events in their newly formed office. The program was called 'Social Gathering', which used to take place every Friday, and it helped them to teach and mobilise vulnerable groups for their research on HIV/AIDS.

In our tin³² shed office, on Friday, there was always a program called 'Social Gathering'. They used to keep their *sari*³³ here and perform at the weekends. Before leaving, they removed the makeup and left

³² Corrugated Iron

³³ A sari (sometimes also saree) is a women's garment from the Indian subcontinent. It consists of an un-stitched stretch of woven fabric arranged over the body as a robe, with one end attached to the waist, while the other end rests over one shoulder as a stole (shawl), sometimes baring a part of the midriff.

everything there. Later, when we had DIC, we had these events at the weekend, even outside Dhaka.

Whenever we were meeting someone new, we used to invite them for Friday, saying Come and see if you like it. People liked it, and they invited others. We also invited people from outside Dhaka when we were going out for a survey.

Even in this building, we hosted weekend events. Hijras used to come after lunch with their costume make-up and took it off when leaving. It was a free space (Interview, Islam).

This statement shows how performance played an integral part in forming their organisation as a collective. He talked about the regular programme called 'Social Gathering' and thus, they attracted many community members to come to know about services like HIV Aids prevention, testing and STI/STD-related issues. This population was vulnerable to HIV/AIDS at that time, and it had remained previously untapped due to social stigma and location.

Examining these dynamics reveals how power, identity, and community boundaries are constructed and maintained, often subtly or implicitly, even within groups that aim to be inclusive. If we want to discuss the inclusion and exclusion of people into these organisations, History Trust started as a gay men's group but now caters for everyone in the queer community. This expansion suggests shifting social pressures and expectations within queer communities to be more representative. Shojon also started that way and still functions by focusing on male sexual health. Bahurupu was formed by Chukri dancers and now also consists of them. Turning Point started as a gay men's group and now caters for them through their projects.

The organisations mentioned, History Trust, Shojon, Shurjer Alo, Bahurupu, and Turning Point, illustrate a complex evolution in identity and purpose. very often, they mention that their initiatives are for all. However, the environment as well as the setup is such that others (such as lesbians) feel discomfort and thus do not identify themselves as a part of the group. Kothi identified people are part of Hijra groups like Shurjer Alo, Bahurupi and Shojon. However, they are never in a leading position as they are looked down upon in the collective identity formation. Despite shared struggles and marginalisations, Kothis are not accorded leadership roles, reinforcing a hierarchy where certain queer identities (in this case, Hijra) hold more power within the community structure. These hierarchical distinctions are constructed within the collective identity of these groups, creating a power dynamic that privileges one identity over another within marginalised communities themselves. In this sense, collective identities are shaped by both inclusion and exclusion.

The exclusion or marginalisation of certain identities (such as Kothis within Hijra groups or lesbians in male-centric organisations) shows how power dynamics operate subtly but persistently, influencing who has authority, visibility, and voice. These intra-community exclusions suggest challenges for collective activism and solidarity. When organisations prioritise specific identities or maintain unspoken hierarchies, they risk alienating potential allies and weakening the overall strength of the queer community.

Despite their intentions, these organisations are often shaped by implicit power structures, identity hierarchies, and symbolic boundaries that limit inclusivity. Cultural studies provide tools for understanding these dynamics, showing that identity categories and inclusion efforts are fluid, contested, and shaped by both external expectations and internal power struggles.

However, in all cases, during the workshops, community members talked

about their ways of organising and forming collective labour with collaboration, friendship, care and joy. They recalled these events from their memory; some of them took place thirty years ago, and some took place only five years ago. There is a significant change in the events they organise now, which is discussed in the next subsection.

6.6 Variations in the forms of collective actions now

As the key research question was about forms of collective actions, I observed five events organised by different organisations for this project. They are analysed in this section. They can be categorised in a few formats. There are traditional folk performances, advocacy campaigns and Pride. I am also adding sociological analysis in this section, which will be evaluated in the next section. When considering the products of folk traditions, especially those embodied in the performances of Charan (folk) poets, it's unwise to seek rigid conclusions. Folk traditions are dynamic and ever-evolving, making it difficult to pin them down to absolutes or fixed interpretations.

6.6.1 Poddō Puran³⁴ in Bangladesh

If one were to look, one would find quite a few versions of the famed verses of *Monsha Mongol*, but a single, definitive version would be much harder to locate.

When I arrived in the village of the *Chukri* group and asked people to show me the house of Bulbul, who is the leader of the group, people could not recognise his name. However, as soon as I talked about the performances, they understood and told me that you are looking for *Chukri* Bulbul. The *Chukri* dancers are involved in other professions when there is no performance, but they are renowned as *Chukri* in that locality.

In Kushtia, the performance takes place on a canopied stage in an open field, which features youths playing the roles of women and accompanying songs. It was directed by the *ostad* of the group Bulbul, who leads a large team of singers, musicians, and players. The leader or ‘*ostad*’ of the group plays a crucial role in both the financial and operational management of the group. This includes making decisions about spending money for group needs and ensuring the performers are taken care of financially and emotionally. The musicians sat on the sides of the stage and provided the music for the songs and dance. They brought amplifiers and played music live, where dancers performed. The *Chukris* went to their room during sunset for makeup, closing

³⁴ The Padma Purana is one of the eighteen Major Puranas, a genre of texts in Hinduism. It is an encyclopaedic text, named after the lotus in which the creator God Brahma appeared, and includes large sections dedicated to Vishnu, as well as significant sections on Shiva and Shakti. The style of composition and textual arrangement suggests that it is likely a compilation of different parts written in different eras by different authors. The text includes sections on cosmology, mythology, genealogy, geography, rivers and seasons, temples and pilgrimage to numerous sites in India. One major recension, traced to the Bengal region, has five Khandas (Parts, Books) and an appendix, but has neither been published nor translated. The composition date of Padma Purana is unknown. Estimates vary between the 4th and 15th century CE. Some parts of the text may be from the 750 to 1000 CE period.

the door so the others could not see their transformation at that time. Instead of the regular makeup sold in the market, they used zinc oxide and other chemicals to make it pink. I came to learn that if the ratio is not right, it turns brown. Instead of lipstick, they used vermilion with oil on the lips so that it lasts longer.

The performance had a high-pitched dialogue, and they were modulating their voice when they were performing as a *Chukri*. A major part of the two-day-long performance was mostly music and dance performance which requires stamina. However, there were not many dialogues apart from the songs. Others stayed in the dressing room and waited for their turn. Young boys dressed as girls took part in this dance. In the dressing room, *Chukris* were helping each other to wear makeup, and one of them was draping a *sari* for the first time.

The performance mostly had a male audience (around ninety per cent), and they were collecting tips from the audience. Agniva Lahiri and Sarika Kar wrote about the dancing boys of India, where they discussed about traditional prostitution of young males. They talked about how harsh and abusive conditions can be when the *Launda*³⁵ dancers in rural areas perform in front of the audience.

It could start late in the evening and continue non-stop until dawn. Even if they feel tired, they cannot stop as they are physically prodded to carry on, with pinpricks on their body. At times, drinking water has been refused. As the night progresses, the songs become risqué, complemented by vulgar and obscene body movements. By this time, drunken men at the wedding party hurl abuse at the dancers. The

³⁵ Launda dance, practised in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (India), dates to when women, barred from dancing in public, were replaced by effeminately dressed men.

dancers now become vulnerable to physical and sexual assaults. Often their back was slashed with blades when they were dancing while wearing backless cholis. Often, they were bitten and stabbed (Lahiri and Kar, 2007).

The *Launda* dancers are forced to perform non-stop from late evening until dawn, despite exhaustion, and are physically coerced to continue. As the night progresses, the situation worsens, with vulgar songs, obscene body movements, and abuse from drunken men. The dancers are vulnerable to physical and sexual assaults, including being slashed with blades and bitten while performing. However, for *Chukri* dancers, the case was different. Most of them gave 20/50/100 cents as per their ability. The audience was touching the dancers' bodies, and some of them danced holding their hands and making the dancers sit on their laps while the dancers were asking for a tip. Whoever can make it enjoyable can earn more for the tip.

Here, it is important to consider that both groups represent non-normative gender and sexuality in the context of the two Bengals, but there are significant differences among them. *Launda* dances migrate from one state to another and sometimes from Bangladesh to India, but *Chukris* perform in the same locality. In addition, *Chukri* dancers have their profession of working as day labourers or running small businesses. They perform from a ritualistic point, which gives them more agency over their body and how they want to present it in front of the audience.

Sometimes they were coming in groups to touch the *Chukris*, bite their boobs, and hug and in return they receive tips. In this hypersexualised public space, *chukris* awaits eye contact, touch, or even a kiss as she takes a currency bill from the hands of the audience. Similarly, giving them a few bucks makes the audience feel valuable. It gives a picture of sex, commerce and forms of

collective actions in rural Bangladesh. It reveals the complex economy of sex commerce involving the *chukris*, masters, pimps, contracts and consumers – a business network that enthralls by its intricacies with only one target to achieve – sexually titillating entertainment, particularly for men.

The audience here is captivated by the *Chukri*. Men are culturally conditioned to derive sexual pleasure through voyeuristically watching *Chukris* perform on stage or engaging with them sexually. This dynamic is normalised in that socio-cultural context rather than seen as deviant. There is an implicit acceptance, as though there is nothing unusual about desiring or exploiting them. In other words, attraction to the *Chukris* is not framed as queer or non-normative but rather as a naturalised aspect of sexual life that transcends rigid metropolitan binaries like the ‘hetero homo’ divide.

The *Monsha Mongol kabba* (epic poem) consists of seven chapters. It tells the tale of Monsha Debi, her birth, her expulsion from the heavens, her struggle to establish her place as a deity, and her eventual triumph. In this issue, the collective presents the *Monsha Bondona*, a chorus that traditionally starts the *pala*³⁶ of Monsha Mongol.

Now Bulbul is fifty years old, and his group has ten members, where the group is known as ‘*Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi*’. Many of the performers in that locality have their own families, and they perform female characters in different performances titled *Poddopuran*, *Nosimon* et cetera. To keep the group together, the *ostad* (team leader) sometimes needs to spend money from their pocket. If the *Chukri* runs out of rice in their home, the *ostad* buys rice bags for them. The *ostad* needs to be financially sound to run the group. At one point, he addresses that it is important to keep good relations with other

³⁶ Pala gan can generally be referred to as a narrative folk ballad or musical narrative about gods and religious hymns.

group members and visit them when there is no show. It is not only for support but also to keep a good relationship through appreciation.

The performance of '*Padma Puran*' was two days and two nights long, and the performers stayed in the house where they were performing by invitation. They stayed in the given room by the person who hired them for the show. Their *Ostad* (Lead) also lives together. When the show was over after two days, they went back to the *ostad's* house, collected money, and returned to their family.

Regarding such performances and payments, different discussions around exploitation have appeared in different literature. Agniva Lahiri and Sarika Kar, in their work on dancing boys of India, discuss the traditional prostitution of young males.

Orchestra companies hire launda dancers on a lump sum contract, in addition to free food and lodging. But they give the dancers only a fraction of the amount they make through them. The other mode of payment is through cash given at the end of each session. A performer could earn 6000/- to 12000/- on a three-month contract depending on the dancer's look, grace and dancing abilities...They have to dance for the girl's family along with the *baraat* (groom's entourage). In rural areas, this journey could stretch across several miles and span numerous villages. After going to the bride's house, they get to rest briefly during dinner, after which the climax of the event starts through the *laggan* (marriage) ceremony (Lahiri and Kar, 2007).

Launda dancers are hired by orchestra companies on lump sum contracts that include free food and lodging, but they only receive a small portion of the money earned through their performances. Their performances include

dancing alongside the groom's entourage to the bride's house, which can involve long journeys through multiple villages in rural areas. After a brief rest during dinner, they perform the final dance at the marriage ceremony.

In the case of *Chukri* dancers, they can take a rest in between the performances while other dancers perform on the stage. Though it is a hard-working job, and some of them mentioned taking painkillers afterwards, they can take breaks in between. The way they described their experience was more about their friendship, joy and care. The juniors can be economically exploited by the leaders, who have enormous authority over the group. However, all the performers I talked with had become a part of the group of their choice.

Culturally, it is perceived as a ritual, and there is certain honour and respect for them as well. In a group of Launda dancers, there are female performers as well with whom the dancers need to compete, whereas in the case of *Chukri* dancers, they are the only ones who can perform a certain form and for a very long duration. As a result, the question of economic exploitation and the work environment in their collective action of performance is not comparable in these two cases.



Image: 12: A group photo of the performers in traditional attire after the performance. The group is posed in a courtyard setting in the village where the performance took place.

If they have no call for performance, the group of *Chukris* work as construction workers or in the fields with the farmers. People in that locality strongly believe that the performance can heal them from snake bites and many other evil eyes surrounding them.

The *Monsha* (Serpent) *Debi* is a Hindu God, who is worshipped mainly for good fortune, prevention and cure of snake bites, and prosperity and fertility. Hindu and Muslim communities in rural areas of Bengal follow the rituals. Traditionally, *Manosha Puja* starts on the last day of monsoon and lasts until the third day of the next month. However, *Monoshar Pala* is performed throughout the year, albeit in different forms and guises in different regions. In some places, this is referred to as *Bhasan Jaatra* and is performed as such: a *jaatra* with fixed characters and dialogue and musical interludes. In Kushtia,

where I went, it is called *Padma's Nachon* and is much more song and dance based. In the southern parts of the region, it is called Royan, in the northern parts: *Paddabati* and *Dishohori*, and *Monsha Mongol*.

In rural Bangladesh, with the downpour of the Monsoons comes the menace of snakes, which spread a pall of fear. Thus, all over the countryside, amongst the marginalised communities, be they Muslim or Hindu, householders organise performative rituals to appease the mighty Goddess of Serpents, Manasa Devi. Popularly known as '*Poddar Nachon*', or 'the Dance of Podda (from Padma, another name of Manasa)', these performances are efficacious 'rituals' performed against a '*manot*' or pledge, by a householder to appease Manasa in the hope of getting a boon from her, in the form of 'good health' for the household, or to overcome other such minor householder's obstacles. The performers, though popular village bards and actors, are all additionally faith healers, or '*ojhas*', revered for their capacity to cure minor diseases with their wealth of knowledge about herbs and natural cures. The actors of this event - the '*ojha*', the householder, the afflicted and the onlookers- are all Muslims, standing testimony to the assimilative and plural practices of rural Bangladesh, especially amongst the marginalised.

Through colonisation, the social patterns are interrupted in many ways, and one of them is the gender relation and its understanding in the society, which Lugones analyses. Expunging the traditional knowledge of gender, colonialism incorporated the binary idea among the colonies to make the world homogeneous. The ideas around gender, sex and sexuality that existed before got lost under this modern gender system. Through transnational, international and political intervention programs, this eradication of the Indigenous knowledge of understanding gender, sex and sexuality is getting erased (Lugones, 2007, p. 188). She suggested that a solution can be found in

the work of decolonial and feminist scholars, who can work hand in hand to keep that knowledge and learn from each other.

Lugones argues that gender itself is a colonial introduction, which is used to destroy peoples and communities as the building ground of the civilised West. This was also reported in many articles where masculinity was redefined in the subcontinent during the colonial era, erasing the existence of eunuchs and many other ambiguous identities. The event highlighted indigenous practices where non-normative gender and sexuality are integrated into society, demonstrating how collective actions foster socio-cultural cohesion. Melucci talked about monolithic identity in his book, where he argues that identity is a system of relations rather than a fixed idea.

One cannot create collective identity as a thing, as a monolithic unity of the subject; it must instead be conceived as a system of relations and representations (Melucci, 1996, p 76).

Rather than seeing identity as something fixed, this perspective argues that identities are produced through social processes, shaped by power dynamics, historical contexts, cultural representations, and social interactions. The performances of Chukri dances can be categorised as cultural and artistic expression, where they take it as a symbolic challenge and perform in a way which might not be well accepted in society. The emphasis is on questioning dominant cultural norms, values, and the meanings assigned to social practices. The act is often less about visible confrontation and more about changing the way people think or view issues. These symbolic challenges create new meanings and inspire shifts in identity, focusing on long-term transformation rather than immediate policy changes.

6.6.2 "ইন্দ্রধনুর মেলা"/ Rainbow Fair in Bangladesh

At the end of September 2022, there was the two-year celebration event of Turning Point. The funding for this celebration was provided by a Dutch donor organisation that formed a consortium (Power of Pride) of twelve other organisations for movement building. Turning Point does not have a registration or any plan for it, so most of their activities were initially based on a cooperative basis, such as a potluck, picnic and river cruise, but they have started receiving some funds and started formalising their work. The speciality of the event was to bring representatives from all the different districts of Bangladesh together, which is not common in many events.

It took place in a big learning centre which is in the centre of the port city. The security guard at the reception of that building asked me to sign in his record book. I noticed that the space was booked under a different name. I realised that to avoid their name being written in the record, they gave the name of another organisation and not their one. There was a code of conduct (Appendix 1) that they sent in with the invitation email for this event regarding entry and dressing room guidelines.

I was asked to wait in a dressing room, which they had hired for the people to change their clothes and for their makeovers. It was something new in my experience. The invitation e-mail also contains a small note about the changing room.

Many of the attendees in the program can't dress or wear makeup from home, as most of them are young and living with their families. So, the changing room is for changing their clothes and putting on makeup. They were making fun of each other a lot. While draping a dhoti, some were making derogatory jokes, and others were laughing at it. Among many of the jokes, bottom

shaming was very common. Instead of being harmless fun, the bullying that seemed enjoyable was creating a sense of unity among certain members. However, this solidarity was achieved by putting others down and mocking them.

I was sitting in one corner, and I knew some of them who came and talked to me. One of them told me that his photograph was trickled from an event, and he is quite upset about it. His friend leaked this out of jealousy, and he stopped using social media after that incident. His family and relatives came to know about his cross-dressing, which was shameful for him.

While talking about forms of resistance, withdrawal and symbolic challenge, Melucci argues about silence and resistance. His argument clarifies what makes the participant not talk about the experience boldly.

It is important to understand that in a culture where communication becomes the means and content of domination, silence and retreat are forms of resistance and express new needs through which alternative models of social life are experimented...The tendency is now generalised on a cultural level, with the values it propagates manifesting one of the dominant codes expressive of our society (Melucci, 1996, p 183).

Melucci argues that in a society where communication serves as a tool of control and domination, silence and withdrawal can be forms of resistance, signalling a desire for alternative ways of social life. This resistance, he suggests, is widespread and culturally significant, as it challenges dominant societal values and opens space for experimenting with new models of existence.

His sad face and his voice slowly disappeared in the hullabaloo of the dressing room. The people present in the room were also helping each other to wear nail varnish, makeup and a *sari*. Many of the members were wearing a Dhoti³⁷ and helping each other to drape, which is not something that I have seen often in other events. The Dhotis are *saris* with vibrant colours like red and purple with golden embroidery all over.

Later, I had a conversation with one of the members where I asked why they had chosen the dhoti among all the clothes, as this is not common in many queer events. Is it mostly non-Muslim participants in this event? He clarified that the people in the city are not as open-minded as in the capital, where a guy can just drape a *sari* and hop around, which can be seen in the capital in many queer events. The community members there (southeast of Bangladesh) wished to drape a *sari*; however, at the same time, they were afraid to be scrutinised and frowned upon by other community members. As a result, they chose the dhoti, which is a *sari*. Thus, they wore a *sari* but in a form which is more acceptable to the mass audience. And they can do this in the queer event where they have the freedom to wear it, but in other events, they don't feel like doing it. This is also because any deviation from the common cultural practice can lead to suspicion and distrust. When individuals feel they are under threat, they begin to more consciously consider how they present themselves (Harris and Karimshah, 2019, p 619). In other words, they must demonstrate their efforts to be well-accepted in the community. Their work is about young Muslims, stigma and their work of normality in Australia, and

³⁷ The dhoti is fastened between the legs in a manner that outwardly resembles trousers, sometimes loose. It is a lower garment forming part of the folk costume for men in the Indian subcontinent. The dhoti is touted as the male counterpart of the sari worn by females to religious and secular ceremonies.

they considered how centring every day, embodied techniques of the social production of normality makes evident the constrained agency of young Muslims in times of amplified fear and regulation.

Altogether, there were around seventy people present there, including a few allies. There was a very brief introduction to the organisation. Later, there was a storytelling session where three participants described their story of workplace harassment and how lonely life was before they got to know each other and shared their feelings. The stories all led to a vivid description of hard times, which is common in other NGO events.

There were games like the musical pillow, and I assume that was a part of icebreaking. After lunch, there was a cultural segment, which was the main attraction of the day, and performers performed belly dancing and much more. In the end, all the participants took part in dancing, which did not last long. While returning, I could see a few people removing makeup in the changing room at the end of their collective effort.

This observation of the event illustrates how cultural practices like wearing a *Dhoti* instead of a *Sari* creatively help to articulate sexual and gender minorities in a conservative society and how forms of collective actions offer them a space to authentically express their identities.

The event was also supported by a Dutch donor through a fiscal sponsor, as mentioned earlier. The organisation could do such an event by itself. However, there is a challenge of material resources, which prevents them from booking a big space or doing it fully in their own way.

6.6.3 Pride events in West Bengal (Kolkata)

There was a series of events in December which ended with the Pride Walk. The announcement for the 2022 Kolkata (India) Pride Month, which took place from November 17 to December 18, lists various events organised for Pride Month, aimed at celebrating and supporting the queer community. Among them were film festivals, fundraising parties, health camps, sports, parent meetings, gender mela, poster-making and slogan-making workshops, Pink Pride ball, and the Pride Walk. The poster in social media features colourful artwork with abstract, tree-like shapes, symbolising diversity and unity. The text is clear and prominently highlights the dates and venues for each event, encouraging community participation and support for Pride Month activities. In addition, there was a large, attention-grabbing banner displayed across the town, featuring vibrant and flashy clothing. The banner stood out due to its bold design, drawing the attention of passersby. The much-awaited Pride Walk had a very nicely designed logo and merchandise.

I went to the Poster Making and Slogan Writing Workshop event at Jadavpur University, which was a fun-filled afternoon with a lot of young people. Some people came from outside Kolkata (India), and I could see the difference in their approach. People were writing slogans in English, Bangla and Hindi.

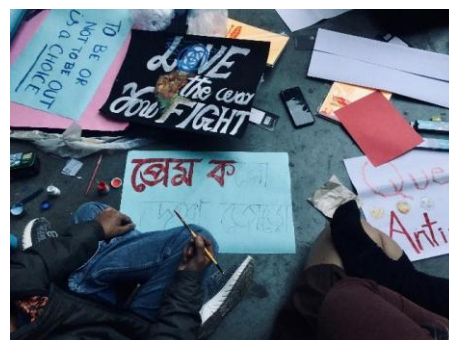


Image 13: A young participant making a poster that says Stay happy. The other image is also from the poster-making event, where the poster says Make love, unite the country.

Many groups participated in the Pride Month events, but extensive preparation went into organising the Pride Walk. Over a series of meetings held over a long period, all the groups collectively agreed that there would be no logos or branding displayed during the event. As a result, the Pride Walk was free of logos, including those from prominent groups like Lalit³⁸. However, this raised questions about funding, specifically, who sponsors the branding-free event and how funds are sourced for essentials like sound systems and staging. Activists were talking about police permission and fundraising, but they never mentioned donations or whether they had the funds for it or not.

People also had many mixed reactions about attending the Pride, and it was an interesting conversation that started for me when I was interviewing or meeting people. Many of the senior activists were unsure if they would attend or not, as they were reluctant about the organisation. Nandita from the History Trust India talked about the form of organising from her time, when the ambience was different, and a tone of resentment came out from her narration. They reflect on their reluctance to attend a Pride Walk due to feeling out of place among a younger crowd that lacks respect for older generations.

There is also a reason not to go to this Pride Walk. The last time I went, I found I didn't know anyone. Everyone is very young. Old people of my age from different organisations are missing, as young people don't respect them. We were much more decent in our time. I

³⁸ The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group is one of the leading privately owned hotel brand in India and UK, engaged in the business of operating and managing hotels, palaces and resorts, with a focus on the luxury segment.

feel sad, and I believe there is a point when you need to leave... I do not go to any party. I was a party queen when there was a 31st December party at our club. It's too loud now, alcohol all over. Our time was different. People enjoyed, but at the same time, they were respectful about boundaries... that was a different team spirit, I don't see that joy anymore (Interview, Nandita/West Bengal).

They reminisce about a time when social gatherings, like parties, were more respectful and joyful, with a strong sense of community and boundaries, which they feel is missing in today's events. Nandita is saddened by the changes and has chosen to distance themselves from such events, believing it's time to step back. In her statement, she showed her disappointment that she cannot recognise the new generation when there is a search for collective action like the Pride Walk. Also, the elements of celebration have changed, and she gave the example of loud music and alcohol in collective gatherings. She spoke highly about the team spirit that they used to have for collective actions back in the day, and according to her, it is missing now, where young community members are not respectful of boundaries.

Many people I met were just not attending for any reason, which indicates queer life apart from the activist circle. While discussing identity and collective emotional experience, Melucci argues about love and conflict, which prevent these community members from attending Pride.

If we hate those whom we love, we feel guilty... Blaming the enemy projects onto him/her that part of aggressive tendencies towards the loved one, which one cannot tolerate. ... the model can be applied to what I call antagonist social conflicts (Melucci, 1996, p 87).

Melucci suggests that in situations of love and conflict, individuals often experience internal tension when their affection for someone is mixed with feelings of aggression or resentment, leading to guilt. This guilt is then projected onto an ‘enemy,’ where the hostile feelings that cannot be fully processed within personal relationships are externalised onto another. Melucci applies this psychological model to ‘antagonist social conflicts,’ suggesting that larger societal conflicts often involve similar dynamics of projection, where groups project their internal contradictions onto external opponents, intensifying the social divide.

There was a debate about the supporting allies list, where there is a café, they included. The cafe was renowned for not letting a person get in when she needed help. Such an affiliation in Pride 2022 was Mocambo Restaurant and Pub Ginger, which came out in detail in a web journal. The article was about Kolkata (India) Pride Walk through the eyes of a first timer, where Das (2022) says that there have been incidents where these very restaurants denied entry to trans persons and working-class people as patrons. There was also the incident of the late Suzette Jordan being denied entry into a pub called Ginger in 2014 because she had been a victim of gang rape! “When I think of these incidents, I wonder how supportive these establishments truly are.” Her online expression critiques the conditional inclusivity of commercial spaces that may publicly align with social justice causes yet privately uphold exclusionary practices, highlighting a disconnect between performative allyship and genuine support. It reflects concepts of cultural resources and social gatekeeping, where establishments adopt progressive branding for reputation enhancement but often maintain discriminatory norms rooted in class and gender biases. This inconsistency suggests that the support extended by such spaces may be superficial, serving commercial interests more than authentic solidarity with marginalised groups. One of the key fundraising events was a

party which took place in a hotel of the Lalit group. It always takes place there, and a lot of people attend the event, purchasing tickets. The group is an international chain as well. One of the key fundraising events was a party which took place in a hotel of the Lalit group³⁹. It always takes place there, and a lot of people attend the event, purchasing tickets. The group is an international chain as well.

The road was blocked when I arrived at the beginning point, and it was a long walk. There was a van where only certain people could be - senior or idol or organiser. A cheerleader with a very toned body was waving a huge flag from that van, which was very prominent. This leads to the question of ideal body type and how necessary it was to place him there in the van.

During the walk, I met activists and representatives who came from outside Kolkata (India). One of the activists said ‘It’s very different where I come from, we do not have the money to have such a show. My community members simply can’t afford such clothes or make-up’. Class differences still play a role no matter how inclusive the events try to be, as most of the participants define how the event should look like.

The group was not very diverse considering caste, class, and cultural capital—some being urban, English-speaking gay activists, while very few were from the suburbs. Participation in the Pride Walk highlights how formalised movements can exclude marginalised gender and sexual identities from mainstream collective action.

³⁹ The Lalit Suri Hospitality Group became one of the leading privately-owned international hotel brands from India, engaged in the business of operating and managing hotels, palaces and resorts, with a focus on the luxury segment.

The entire arrangement can be categorised as public mobilisation where people gathered in a public space and there is a manifesto that they published and distributed on that day. Here the groups intentionally act together to make a statement and push for social change. The focus is on making demands public and pushing institutions, government, or society to respond. It also attracted media attention.

6.6.4 Advocacy workshop in Bangladesh

The advocacy workshop in the Northwest of Bangladesh, organised by Shurjer Alo, took place in a venue called the NGO Forum⁴⁰ and many of the participants attended from remote districts. The way they drape the *sari* made it very visible that they are not like many other Hijra-identified people often seen in different events or on social media. The way participants draped their saris marked them as distinct from the more urban or socially visible Hijra community, often seen in media or public events. This distinction underscores the diversity within the Hijra community and the importance of recognising various forms of identity expression, especially in rural areas. It also suggests that the representation of marginalised groups can vary significantly depending on geographic and socio-economic factors.

The workshop had a slide presentation where the facilitator from the fiscal partner of Shurjer Alo was trying to define gender and transgender. In the slides, the Gingerbread person was used as a visual tool to explain the distinction between sex and gender, as outlined in Appendix 6. However, it was argued that in the Asian context (Chapter 2), sex and gender are often

⁴⁰ The NGO Forum for Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation (DWSS) is a national NGO in Bangladesh that works on water and sanitation issues.

viewed as inseparable, challenging the separation presented in the slides. It was a refresher workshop and was supported by Christian Aid and the European Union. While the funding and frameworks come from global institutions, the implementation and adaptation occur within local contexts. This dynamic can both empower local groups and create tensions regarding the relevance and appropriateness of externally driven agendas in local settings.

The workshop was for CSOs, and the topic was about human rights and empowerment for women. In the content of the training, the main highlight was introducing the services provided by the government, such as at the union level, the youth welfare office, and the social welfare office. This approach not only aims to empower individuals but also to integrate them into existing social and governmental structures, thereby facilitating social inclusion.

In the middle of the workshop, there was a cultural performance by the participants as an energiser. It not only serves as a break from formal training but also reinforces cultural identity and community bonds. This practice can be seen to blend activism with cultural expression, making the advocacy efforts more relatable and accessible to participants.

Many of the participants run different CBOs in the other corners of the division. These organisations often act as intermediaries between the community and larger institutional frameworks, facilitating the flow of information, resources, and support. Some of them were familiar with such workshops for a long time, since there was HIV/AIDs related work at the end of the 90s, which came out in the discussion. The activist efforts in response to the AIDS crisis also gave rise to a new queer political movement. Within this environment, a group of mobilisers in the queer community began promoting a new kind of advocacy, which involves arranging workshops and training for

social awareness in collaboration with international donors. The experience gained from earlier health-related advocacy has seemingly evolved into broader rights-based activism, showing how historical challenges can shape future movements.

Some of the key topics discussed were gender, sexuality, and security. While the event was primarily educational, it also included some entertainment activities, which shows that it is an integral part of queer organising. It highlighted how international identities attempt to integrate into the local context, often overshadowing indigenous knowledge, and how this approach to activism is raising security concerns in such forms of collective action.

The trainer of the workshop later told me that she was not very happy to deliver such content. However, the job is essential for her survival, and thus she is delivering content which is against her will. This workshop was all about building community by refreshing their knowledge. Without a public protest, this workshop is informal and a hidden form of collective action, as the externals who are not associated with queer organising will not be able to be a part of it. The queer individuals taking part in such workshops share common experiences, beliefs, or practices, but do not form a unified or visible protest. The action here is not to organise a confrontation with authorities. Participants may not be highly visible in public protests or demonstrations, but they interact and create a collective consciousness around shared values, which is also a part of the workshop content.

6.6.5 Reincarnate in Bangladesh

At the end of 2022, a three-day-long South Asian art and film festival titled ‘Reincarnate 3’ took place in the capital. The inaugural ceremony of the

festival was chaired by the state minister for Cultural Affairs, who was also the chief guest at the ceremony. Among others, there were the Additional IGP and Head of Tourist Police, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Dhaka, Country Director of UNAIDS and cultural activists and film directors attending the event as special guests.

The involvement of the state minister for Cultural Affairs as the chief guest underscores the importance the government places on cultural events as a means of soft power and cultural diplomacy. This reflects how the state seeks to promote cultural capital by endorsing and participating in such festivals, which in turn legitimises the event and elevates its status in society.

The presence of international figures, such as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy and the Country Director of UNAIDS, points to the global-local intersection in cultural production. This indicates how local cultural events are increasingly positioned within a global framework, highlighting the interconnectedness of cultural, social, and political spheres.

The involvement of cultural activists and film directors suggests that such festivals are not just entertainment but are also platforms for promoting social change. This indicates the role of culture in addressing and challenging societal issues, using art and film as tools for activism and raising awareness. After the inaugural ceremony, there was a dance performance choreographed by a prominent dancer. The programme of the first day came to an end with the screening of two films, one from Bangladesh and one from India.

A cultural programme, along with an art and photography exhibition, continued for the rest of the days. Films from Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India were screened at the daylong event. The festival concluded with a dance drama. Besides, the festival also included panel discussions and a

memorial lecture. The extravaganza of art and films created a platform to address issues like human rights, South Asian cultural heritage, and many more. “This government is working hard to bring gender equality, and advocating human rights,”, the chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) said on the occasion.

Organising queer events is also associated with resources. Some organisations use their cultural capital to access certain spaces, and some organisations use public spaces for arranging their performances. Amin Ghaziani talked about the benefits and drawbacks of such cultural capitals in their journal as well. They discussed the nature and impact of organising pop-up events, which are temporary and often unconventional gatherings.

Because events are performative geographies that are fleeting, organizing them requires arrangements with venues that can provide momentary anchors. Organizers must possess a high degree of social capital within their networks to make this happen. These relational resources can produce positive and negative effects. Positive benefits include access to economic resources, perceptions of expertise, bonding people within communities and bridging them with sympathetic networks, creating a spatial consciousness, and establishing institutional credentials that secure contracts and funds for social gatherings. Social capital can also produce negative outcomes by reproducing exclusive organisational strategies, placing excessive demands on members, breaking down trust, and restricting social opportunities for those who are outside the network (Ghaziani, 2018, p 877).

The short-term events organised by the queer collectives are temporary. They create temporary spaces for interaction and engagement. To organise events,

arrangements must be made with venues that can serve as temporary locations. This requires organisers to have significant ‘cultural resources’ within their collectives; the benefits one gains from their social connections and relationships. Having social capital can enhance the perceived expertise and credibility of organisers. It helps in bonding people within a community and bridging connections with external supportive networks. It can establish credibility that can secure contracts and funding for future events. With all these positive effects, it can also lead to exclusive organisational strategies, making it hard for new or less connected individuals to participate. There’s a risk of breaking down trust within the network if things go wrong. People outside the network may find it difficult to access the opportunities created by these events. So, organising events requires a strong network of social connections. These connections can bring numerous benefits, such as access to resources, community building, and credibility. Some of the organisations in this project have access to the American Centre or foreign ambassadors and government officials through their networking but not all can have such access. This can also lead to exclusivity, high demands on network members, potential trust issues, and restricted opportunities for those not within the network.

The public and symbolic nature of the event, with prominent figures from various sectors, illustrates how cultural festivals function as spaces for interaction between different social groups. These interactions can influence public perception, shaping how culture, authority, and social issues are viewed by the broader society. In sum, the festival reflects the intersection of culture, power, and global influence, demonstrating how cultural events are deeply embedded within broader social structures and dynamics. Overall, the observation gave me a picture of how activists and community organisers mobilise collective action using culture to advance social change.

On one hand, there is a security concern when organising queer events in Bangladesh. On the other hand, there are also public events taking place in the capital. Tayob, who was a staff member of Shojon (Bangladesh), has shared his concern about information leaks from queer events. While networking within the community is on the rise through such events, it is accompanied by significant trust and privacy challenges. The lack of proper oversight by organisers exacerbates these issues, leading to potential harm and discomfort for the individuals involved. This can lead to detention and many other harassments discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

For events, networking is increasing among the community members, but there are security concerns as well. I know of private groups where people take screenshots and share them with others. Organisers do not check properly when they invite people. I had to suffer from a screenshot leak, and I do not want to talk about it (Interview, Tayob/Bangladesh).

Networking within the community is growing, but security concerns are rising due to private groups sharing screenshots without permission. Organisers often fail to properly vet attendees, leading to incidents like a personal experience of a screenshot leak. This statement shows that despite the advantages, there are significant security concerns in such forms of collective action. Specifically, there are incidents where individuals take screenshots of private conversations or sensitive information within social media groups. The organisers of these events or social media groups may not thoroughly check the backgrounds or intentions of the people they invite. This lack of proper vetting increases the risk of breaches in confidentiality.

The emergence of a queer political movement within this context indicates a shift from purely health-focused initiatives to more comprehensive rights-

based advocacy. This transition reflects the growing recognition of the intersectionality of issues faced by marginalised communities, including the need for legal, social, and economic reforms. Overall, the workshop highlighted the complex interplay between identity, local activism, global influence, and historical continuity within the context of social advocacy in Bangladesh. The workshop described serves as a microcosm of broader sociopolitical dynamics, where marginalised communities navigate their identities and rights within the frameworks provided by both local and international actors.

Like the *Chukri* performances, this event can also be categorised as a symbolic challenge. The emphasis is on questioning dominant cultural norms, values, and the meanings assigned to social practices. The public act is less about visible confrontation and more about changing the way people think or view queer issues. These symbolic challenges create new meanings and inspire shifts in identity, focusing on long-term transformation in public opinion.

6.7 Evaluating the social dynamics of collective labour and friendship

Traditional ritualistic performances, infotainment, advocacy workshops and Pride events have been observed. Alok from Bohurupi (Bangladesh), in their interview about the *Chukri* performances, talked about obstacles to performing in public spaces. Though their performances hold traditional forms, they still come under state surveillance, as described in the initial discussion of the chapter. In general, it looks like there is no censorship of their content and performances, but there is monitoring and collection of information by

government authorities to oversee and control the behaviour, activities, and communications of these groups. Alok tells a story about how a male performer used to dress in a *sari* and had long hair, which led to frequent confusion about his gender.

I used to ask Bulbul to wear a *sari* all the time. He had longer hair till his hip. Back then, we were staying outside for 2/3 months for the show, and he was always wearing a *sari*. It even happened that they kidnapped him and later found that he was a guy. It was difficult to make people aware that he was a guy. This had happened several times, and later, I said after the show, you should remove the makeup.

There was a problem with the police during rehearsal once, and they made a query about him. They again appeared when they heard of a program, thinking there might be chaos during the event. They detained Bulbul at the local police station, and I later brought them back from there by paying some bribes to the police. From that point, he has shorter hair (Interview, Alok/Bangladesh).

Due to his appearance, Bulbul was mistaken for a woman multiple times, even getting kidnapped and questioned by the police. These incidents caused difficulties, including interactions with the police during rehearsals.

Eventually, after an incident where Bulbul was taken to the police station and later released after a bribe was paid, he decided to cut his hair shorter to avoid further confusion and trouble. His statement highlights the challenges faced by performers like Bulbul, whose appearance and attire for their roles could lead to serious misunderstandings and safety concerns. It underscores the social and legal difficulties faced by gender non-conforming individuals or performers in certain cultural contexts. In a situation like this, state surveillance can lead to issues related to privacy, civil liberties, and the

potential abuse of power. Bulbul regularly wore a *sari* and had long hair, which was part of his performance attire. This was common during extended periods when they travelled for shows. Because of his attire and appearance, Bulbul was often mistaken for a woman. There were incidents where he was kidnapped, and only later did the kidnappers realise he was a man. This suggests that his appearance was very convincing and caused confusion.

While networking at community events can be positive, there are also risks related to privacy and security due to inadequate vetting of participants and the unauthorised sharing of private information. The individual recounts a personal instance of suffering due to such a breach and expresses a desire not to discuss the specifics of the incident.

If we compare all the events, we will see that there are significant differences and similarities between all these events. The similarity is in all the events; there is some kind of oppression and exploitation of the participants, where they cannot be the way they want to be. Whether it is a big event like Pride or the workshop or a closed-door event like Rainbow Fair, there are regulations like what to wear and which language to use to be well appreciated. Queer organisers constantly try to regulate the overall ambience, which is a double discrimination for the community members.

The traditional performance by the *Chukri* group was organised with the material resources they could organise locally. The local household that invites them pays an amount for the week-long performance. Here, their performance skill is a cultural resource in this case. The infotainment events in Chittagong and Dhaka are funded by international donors. The event organised by Turning Point mobilises its volunteers, who are a human resource. In addition, Turning Point has an email list through which they have invited all the people and social media promotion, which is their social

organisational resource. The event by Shojon used all the resources, including material, human, social, organisational, and cultural resources. Similarly, the advocacy workshop was funded by an international donor and in addition to that, they have used social organisational resources to make a contact list of participants. Finally, the Pride event was backed by a fundraiser and partially supported by the corporation. In addition, it has used volunteers and some professionals who are human resources. They have circulated the invitation via email and social media, which is their social organisational resource. Creating a manifesto for the Pride Walk which was distributed on that day is a cultural resource.

The categories made at the beginning of this chapter have significant differences, and that is reflected in the events organised by the organisations. Organisations with a lot of social organisational resources and human resources can initiate public mobilisation events such as the Pride Walk and Reincarnate. This form of collective action is more visible and structured than submerged networks. On the other hand, organisations like Shurjer Alo, which are located outside the capital, organise submerged networking events to bring invisible queer individuals together and create a collective consciousness around shared values. On the other hand, groups like Turning Point and Bahurupi choose symbolic challenge events due to the sociocultural context of the locations. On one hand, Turning Point is in a city which is predominantly conservative and on the other hand, Bahurupi assures cultural coexistence by presenting symbols and metaphors in their performance, which can bring backlash without such symbolic challenge.

On the one hand, there is discussion around stigma and discrimination and on the other hand, there are public events. The similarity is in both cases of Bangladesh and India; the organisers try to design them by subtly not being

responsible. The Pride in Kolkata (India) has a few concerns that the community members are not addressing and making the organisers responsible. Similarly, in the case of Bangladesh, when there is a security breach, the community members are not vocal about it. In both cases, there is a culture of 'don't ask, don't tell' and the organisers play a superior role where they do not maintain transparency.

6.8 Conclusion

While discussing conflicts of culture, Melucci stated the lack of political legitimacy faced by such marginalised groups as those discussed in this chapter. Queer celebration events show how they try to seek recognition subtly within a hostile socio-cultural context.

The second model of interpretation attributes protest to the deficiencies in political legitimisation suffered by groups which find themselves excluded from institutions and that therefore mobilise to gain access to the system in order to participate in it (Melucci, 1996, p. 97).

Melucci suggests that one explanation for protest is the lack of political legitimacy faced by marginalised groups who are excluded from formal institutions. In response, these groups mobilise to gain access to political systems and participate more fully in decision-making processes, seeking recognition and inclusion.

The research sub-questions for this project included traditional culture and contemporary culture, in the context of queer collective action. It also included questions about NGOised spaces and how they play a role in forming collective actions. While discussing the creativity of South Asian queers in

Britain, Dasgupta has discussed the significant role of artistic expression and creativity in addressing and opposing social inequalities and fostering a sense of radical hope for the future.

Artistic expression and creativity play an important role in challenging, resisting and disrupting structures of inequality and in the production of radical hope. Similarly, our use of the term creative resistance describes visual forms of queer art and performance created by South Asian queer artists in Britain, not just as a way of creating visibility but also asserting identity and resistance (Dasgupta, 2023, p 2)

Looking into the collective actions in five different locations analysed above, art and creativity are powerful tools for questioning and confronting unjust systems and structures in society. They provide a way to highlight and critique these inequalities, bringing them to public attention. The cultural event in a learning centre or a women's association shows that, beyond merely challenging, art actively resists and disrupts these structures, offering alternative perspectives and narratives that oppose the status quo, where often actions which might be seen as performances by some analysts are not considered as a performance by the queer collectives.

Through some queer events, the queer collectives make their identities and experiences visible to a broader audience, which is crucial for recognition and understanding. By organising unique events, queer collectives assert their presence and share their lived realities, challenging mainstream narratives. These kinds of collective actions are essential for fostering social recognition, empathy, and greater understanding of diverse queer identities and experiences. Through their collective effort, they assert a form of resistance against societal norms and structures that marginalise their existence.

Among the observations and interviews, there are discussions around changing rooms and cruising spaces where this privacy is a class privilege. It disproportionately affects those from subordinate caste locations. As in many places around the world, many working-class gay men and transgender women in India work out their desires in public cruising spaces (Bhattacharya, p 152). Shayon Bhattacharya talked about it in their journal on the play by History Trust titled *The Koti's Ghost*. Privacy is often linked to economic status and living conditions. Wealthier individuals can afford private spaces such as personal rooms, apartments, or houses where they can express themselves freely without fear of societal judgment. In the case of two Bengals, those who belong to higher social strata have more control over their living environments and personal spaces. People from lower caste backgrounds often live in crowded, shared, or less secure environments where privacy is scarce. Lack of privacy can exacerbate the challenges faced by these individuals, as they have fewer opportunities to express their identities and desires safely.

If we consider all the events described in the earlier section, we can see that there is a certain complexly woven affective lineage of this collaborative art. In these events, community members find a certain pleasure, which also gives them a certain power. The events organised by the queer collectives give a certain strength to express themselves. Such collective actions are more than just performances; they are sources of joy, self-expression, skill development, and empowerment, which is why queer collectives continue to practice them even in a challenging environment.

Across the events, there were differences in age, caste, and class within the groups, with some members being English-speaking activists from cities, while others lived in the suburbs and lacked the cultural capital of their urban

peers. While discussing forms of resistance, withdrawal and symbolic challenge, Melucci argued for a shared identity that respects and incorporates individual differences.

In recent forms of collective actions, starting with the culture of women's movements, there can be seen an effort to build a collective definition of the movement which strives to retain respect for individual differences (Melucci, 1996, p 184)

Melucci highlights those modern collective actions, particularly in movements like feminism, focus on creating a shared identity that respects and incorporates individual differences within the group. This approach seeks to balance collective unity with the recognition of diversity, allowing for a more inclusive and flexible movement that values personal autonomy while pursuing common goals.

Nevertheless, the most common rhetoric is intolerance and hatred rooted inside, for which they have a cis-passing mindset while organising for a diverse group of people. For many of the queer individuals, it is the only breathing space to talk about their thoughts and ideas of companionship, care and joy among many gossips and rumours. This might not be considered significant in the existing narrative of queer collective actions, but for many small queer communities, this is how knowledge is transferred from one to another by this alternative news network of events. The clothes people wear, the location where it takes place, the music and the ambience and the ticket price define the political participation of queer bodies.

If we investigate the events discussed here as collective actions, there are indoor and outdoor events. For this collective action, they use various resources such as social, organisational, cultural and human resources. Due to

surveillance and legal issues, many queer collectives use events to come together and occupy a shared space. For them, it is an action of opposing inequality and expressing oneself. It shows them the possibility and aspiration of realising their gender as well as sexuality.

My sociological contribution in this chapter centres on the concept of collective denial. Through observing various events and creative workshops, I identified a subtle but persistent pattern. While participants address forms of oppression and engage in collective mobilisation, there remains a collective reluctance and denial to confront the deeper cultural and structural forces sustaining marginalisation. This includes a widespread silence around religion's role in shaping public perceptions of queerness, which is evident in different events and activities narrated in this chapter, such as the one with Turning Point or the conversation during the creative workshop with Bahurupi.

Although queerness has long existed in the sociocultural fabric of the region, as evidenced, for instance, in the practices of the *chukri* groups from the precolonial period, contemporary queer events and collectives often omit religion as a core dimension of majoritarian culture. Despite the recurring influence of religious discourse in the narratives described throughout the chapter, none of the events explicitly engage with it. I interpret this absence as a form of collective denial, wherein the stigma linked to queerness and religion is either minimised, reframed as irrelevant, or rendered invisible.

In many events, there is a tone of sympathy and negotiation, rather than a firm political commitment against its exclusionary logic. Concerning my research question about the culture, the context of queer collective actions, and oral history of the community members, I found that the design and framing of these activities often suggest an implicit belief that the stigma rooted in

religious ideologies either does not exist, is not widely known, or can be safely ignored.

Paradoxically, many queer individuals involved in these collectives, often socialised from an early age within authoritarian political and cultural regimes, exhibit heightened moral and emotional sensitivity to social exclusion. They are deeply aware of the tensions between religion and queerness, and many react instinctively and ethically to these contradictions. For them, engaging religion and sexuality together is not a radical act; it reflects their lived realities and ethical commitments.

Chapter 7

Half-truths in a queer digital life: Understanding the interrelation of Pride and shame to explore queerness online

7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how queer community members mobilise collective action through digital media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, blogs, and podcasts, which serve as key facilitators of engagement, community making and activism. The exploration of queerness using digital media is important as it shows the potential of collective consciousness and envisions possibilities against the social stigma that exists for queer community members in these locations. The chapter will first investigate how digital culture works for collective consciousness building. Later the chapter will examine how sharing stories and phatic communication help them to come together for solidarity and build collective action. Here the discussion will follow how alternative sanctuaries are created in digital queer spaces. The last two sections in this chapter will present two case studies of anti-gender backlash and resisting pinkwashing in Pride, followed by an evaluation.

The main research question for this project is ‘How should critical social analysis interpret the forms of collective action by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal?’. It looks at five different queer organisations in Bangladesh and India. Additionally, it also engages two Facebook group observations which are Equality Network Family from Bangladesh and Azadi Festival from Kolkata. They are not like the other

physical organisations. The focus of the chapter highlights structural leadership, authority and organising roles. The sub-question that is addressed in this chapter is ‘What is the role of digital culture in contemporary forms of collective action?’.

This chapter draws on data from in-depth interviews, creative workshops, and observations of two online social media groups, as detailed in the methodology chapter. A separate research profile was used for social media observations. While one group utilised digital tools to organise Pride events, the other focused on managing hate comments and online harassment. This contrast led to the emergence of the themes of pride and shame. The second half of the chapter presents two case studies based on these observations, exploring how queer collective actions unfold in digital spaces. These case studies frame the discussion around two key categories—shame and pride—offering insight into the digital lives and strategies of queer communities.

To show the potential of digital spaces in movement building, the work of Paulo Gerbado (2012) and Mustafa Oz (2024) is referred to when they talked about Egypt and Morocco and how the movement was mobilised in Muslim communities. Similarly, if we investigate South Asia, in the case of Pakistan, there was a massive Twitter reaction (Images, 2022) after trans activist Mehrub Moiz Awan was removed from the TEDx panel. To demonstrate how community members start interacting, the idea of queer fanfiction and fandom by Llewellyn (2022) and keeping in touch through phatic communication by Jerslev (2016) is discussed. While the older generation, typically around 35 years of age, discussed fan fiction and fandom as means of creating connections through social media, the younger group, in their early 20s, focused on phatic communication and how they interact to form social media groups. During the social media observation, it became evident that a key

highlight was the transformation of social media interfaces, which allowed queer community groups to utilise their creativity and innovate, ultimately mobilising to form online collectives. Shuchi Karim and Imran Mazid (2020) mentioned the possibility and potential of queer individuals in digital spaces, which is argued in this chapter. A certain framework of visibility-based online activism can bring an existential crisis to the community. The online activism ideas need to be reviewed from a decolonial perspective, which is discussed throughout the chapter.

As a part of my fieldwork, I observed two Facebook groups, one from Bangladesh and one from India, based on their activities for queerness online. The groups have very different ways of managing, and content-sharing activities are unique compared to the other groups with physical existence. While discussing the way these groups functioned, I particularly observed the use of social organisational resources such as the list of community members and allies the groups mobilise and cultural resources where the group administrators develop security guidelines or group rules and regulations as a file in the group.

During the observation of two social media groups in two places, it was out that due to the socio-cultural and religious differences in the context, the queer community members of these two countries do not interact with each other online very often. The differences in their cultural identity are discussed through two case studies in the second half of this chapter.

This chapter will explore the unspoken phenomenon of shame and pride, acknowledging that these emotions are fundamental to the human experience and play a crucial role in shaping queer collective identities and actions. The objective is to discuss the adoption of visibility frameworks and how that has brought an existential crisis for some community members when they are

taking actions collectively. Besides the other purpose of discussing the two case studies is to acknowledge their (two case studies) pervasive influence while equipping participants with the different features of social media applications to confront and navigate them effectively.

7.2 Queer Social Media Group Observation:

In this section, an overview of the two groups, Equality Network Family from Bangladesh and Azaadi Festival from India, are discussed to give a clear picture of the groups and how interaction among the members takes place there for collective action. Each Facebook group has a moderator who has ultimate power. They have structural leadership, authority, and an organising role; each also has resources (Discussed in Chapter 2), which they use for organising events and sharing announcements for collective consciousness in Facebook groups.

Both these groups have their offline presence where they generate funds, and thus, they have material resources which they also use for social media groups indirectly. There is no direct use of material resources in social media promotion or such activities, but for taking care of the groups or designing visual content, volunteers receive nominal remuneration. Both Facebook groups engage a team to moderate and manage the groups, which is their human resource. Besides, they share awareness-related posters, job circulars and emergency contact lists, which are their cultural resources and social organisational resources. There are debates and disputes in the groups, which are managed by the moderators separately, and there are guidelines for managing the group.

Equality Network Family has a total of 589 members and two admins. The cover image of the group has a pink background where there is a light bulb, and some graphic characters are bringing different reactions, such as liking and loving it. Besides, there is the logo of Equality Network Family, which is two hands shaking, one is blue, and one is pink, derived from the transgender flag. The first post of the group is a call for crafts where the group collect handicrafts from gender-diverse entrepreneurs and sells them through their commerce website. This shows that the group has cultural resources to develop graphic images and design an e-commerce website for the trans entrepreneurs who are probably deprived of such resources as an e-commerce website to sell their products online. Besides, it also asked to remove cross-dressing photos, change Gmail, Facebook and other social media passwords and not to comment on any public post related to queer issues.

Moreover, there are a few regulations for the group, as another pinned post where a few of them say not to share screenshots with others without permission, and not to share any erotic content that violates Facebook regulations. Often, it is complicated to maintain the guidelines which came out later in the interview with the group admins.

“The group was open to all the community members, but we had moderation guidelines, and everyone was expected to follow them. From the beginning, these terms of engagement included – no personal attacks, diversity of opinions, content that had to be respectful, and no comment on religion.

But in reality, these terms are often difficult for the Equality Network Family. Soon, we were accused of bias, having a progressive leaning and ‘censoring’ opposing views. Some members left or stopped posting, and A few wanted to start their group to express themselves.”

The group has a pinned post (Appendix 7) titled Anti-LGBTIAQ+ Movement Background, Risks and What We Can Do. It has a few points about context, and later it has some guidelines asking to unpublish all the webpages online and locking down the ID to avoid exposure.

Most of the discussion in the group is around trans social enterprise, mental health first aid or different events taking place in town. They have social organisational resources where they can have information from other groups and share it on this social media platform. The group works as an informal news network. Due to security reasons, the invitations for different events cannot be posted publicly. In the events section of the group, there are a few fundraising calls but also events such as film screenings, training on empathetic communication, mental health first aid and entrepreneurship. Also, there are small video clips and dance videos from different events shared by the members. Furthermore, there are some photos where members share their selfies without any titles. The informal video and photo sharing works as an aspiration for becoming a collective and interacting with each other, where they can react and comment, as well as make sure that there is someone on the other side present and providing validation. Such queer labour is important for being together and imagining a collective action using social media. The group members use their resources for taking such photos or recording a video, which cannot be calculated in financial terms. Similarly, for the event promotion in the groups, there is no cost associated with it; nevertheless, one needs to plan and post them in all the secret groups, which involves a certain time and queer labour for sure.

Azadi Festival has one admin and 7521 members. The cover image of the group contains an umbrella from which some birds are emerging and a ribbon. All the elements in the image have the theme rainbow. Among the initial posts

of the group, there is a set of photographs of Pride Walk 2023 with hashtags such as Kolkata (India) diaries, canon photography, and Kolkata (India). There are sixty-two love and like reactions in the photo series, where some of the comments say ‘Nice, absolutely love this pic’, and ‘everyone looks so gorgeous’.

In the files section of the group, there are documents about the Rights of Transgender Persons bill, a report of Gay Bombay parents meeting, a UN Fact sheet, and others however, there are no recent file updates there which means there was more information sharing through updates before however now it is all about only the collective walk only. The members and the organisers of the group were putting labour back at that time to update the group members about different meetings and legal actions so that everyone was on the same page. However, now the group is more about video clips and photographs and for running the campaigns, they receive material resources.

Apart from the online presence, both groups mobilise material resources in their offline presence. Azadi Festival generates funds through parties, merchandise sales and donations and parts of it are used for designing the content. Equality Network Family receives funds locally and internationally for their social media campaigns and website maintenance, through which they generate sales. Both talk about voluntarism, but the volunteers get paid on various occasions for developing design, transport and refreshments.

In this subsection, the Facebook groups that I observed have been detailed to give a vivid overview of the content. There are images and many other casual interactions between group members in the group; nevertheless, there are serious discussions as well, which we see in the comments of the Pride or in the security guidelines made by the community members using their cultural resources. How the community members build a sanctuary of collective

emotions in such social media groups are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

7.3 Building a sanctuary of collective emotion with an alternative profile

In this section, the key theme to frame the discussions is community making, which works in the background of queer collective action in the digital spaces. This section will introduce data derived from the observation of the social media groups and creative workshops. It will explain how alternative identities online have helped queer community members to create a hybrid sanctuary, which is also a part of their lived experiences and plays a role in taking collective actions.

Geoffrey Macdonald, in his research report from the International Republican Institute (IRI) on understanding the lives of the Bangladeshi LGBT+ community, mentioned the isolation and coming together.

The internet plays an important role in affirming LGBT+ identities, which are often understood early in life.... The internet provided an affirming community that they lacked in their daily lives as young people (Macdonald, 2021).

While interviewing different age groups, there were individuals (aged 30-40) who talked about queer fiction online, which was very popular among them, and that is how they came to know each other. At the same time, the young generation (aged 20 – 29) talked about sharing stories and phatic communication. There were no material resources associated with the group members to post such stories or post daily stories, though there is energy,

labour and time invested in it, which is also a human resource of such social media group collectives. Mobilising such resources is not only for creating a connection with each other but a silent protest collectively as well, where the mainstream media does not provide the space to express their thoughts and ideas due to the stigma existing about queerness.

The smartphone has made information easily accessible, and as a result, from remote hill tracks, someone can search and find information about their identity and a network of acquaintances. In his narration, it can also be seen that community members can easily come together and make secret groups on social media to share their imagination and knowledge through storytelling and interaction with the author. While talking about the online world and fanfiction as heterotopias, Llewellyn mentioned it as fandom, where she said that by creating stories outside discursive norms, fanfictions are heightened heterotopias that actively disorder discourse, power and knowledge and enact women-loving-women (WLW) centric spaces. ... Hence, fanfictions operate alongside, but significantly outside, the “Regime of truth”, which is cisgender and heteronormative and the absence of representation in both society and media texts (Llewellyn, 2022, p 2350). Their work shows that connecting these spaces is fandom (and fanfiction), which can operate as places of collective resistance for marginalised groups, which is very relevant in this context.

In India as well, a similar idea of writing queer fiction came out in the interview with I Bohemian Bong. She is forty now and works in a queer archive. She comes from a small town near Kolkata (India), and she also mentioned that she came out late, as in her town, people were not very familiar with the internet and Facebook, like the way young people are in Kolkata (India).

It all started with Facebook groups. I used to write at that time; some of them were status updates from my thoughts, and some were short stories or journals. Through that, I became popular and visited the book fair with a few friends I knew from Facebook. Slowly, I saw my friend circle was growing. I started going to various events. Now I have many people from the whole community among my friends. A Queer Film Festival took place here in Kolkata (India) a few days ago. I went there and found that there were more people like me. For so long, it seemed that I was in a cage; now I have come out of there. Now my world is big (Interview, Bong/West Bengal).

Her narration depicts how she has moved through writing queer experiences in social media and how that has helped her to build a circle of friends and made her associated with queer collective actions like film festivals or archives.

Queer fiction online, both in the context of Bangladesh and India, played an important role, which later came offline as well. In both cases, groups emerged as online underground networks to share queer fiction and later started to organise get-togethers and parties as offline activities. Shabnam Azim and Humaira Bilkis, in their journal, talked about such groups as well and mentioned the features of such an online platform.

Onno Purusher Golpo (Other Men's Stories), a Facebook page, serves as a common platform for the Bengali-speaking LGBT+ community, where they express their thoughts mainly by sharing literary pieces like stories, poems, opinions, and essays. It's a space for LGBTIAQ+ groups where they reflect on their lifestyle, sufferings, hopes, and dreams ... All the members who shared their works of fiction took refuge in pseudonyms. An overview shows that the stories mainly reflect gay experiences. The stories tell us about strong awareness

about denials of rights, but the act of posting stories remains a silent protest at its core (Azim and Bilkis, 2023, p 304)

Their observation shows that these digital media platforms enable community members to share their thoughts and ideas in their language through fiction stories, poems, and essays. Nonetheless, they did not talk about how these queer fictions also help community members to create connections for collective actions. The fictions are shaped by their experiences, and they keep themselves secure from the social stigma by using pseudonyms. The idea of managing security in the online platform by creating an alternative identity is discussed later in this chapter. They identified such a collective act of sharing stories as a silent protest collectively which I completely agree with.

In addition to that, digital media tools have become an essential part of queer relationships, facilitating the exchange of information, gossip, news, intergenerational knowledge sharing, and collective action. Different features in digital tools such as stories, selfies, comments, filters and emojis have created a new form of digital dialogue which has specially constructed the communities in India and Bangladesh as part of a new discourse on visibility and representational politics. The camera phone and the ubiquitous Internet have enabled the massive and unforeseen production and sharing of photographic images. A wide array of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, encourage people in general, and quite vaguely, to share their lives with friends or with broader audiences and to share their lives also more concretely in the form of digital content such as camera phone images. Pranto, who is a part of Turning Point, is twenty-two years old. We talked in a harbour about his interaction in social media groups and how he came to know about them, where he talked about sharing stories every day, where people used to comment, and that is how he came to know about others.

I share photographs such as selfies in the story... Someone likes it...
 He writes something as a comment. From there, the conversation
 starts. I often receive comments like - you are hot, your lips are
 beautiful, your face is magical, cutie pie (Interview,
 Pranto/Bangladesh).

The communication or the image discussed here is brief and often assures that the other person is present there to validate, which is one of the key factors of social media sharing. In online media cultures, such phatic communication serves the purpose of letting others know that 'one is still there'. Phatic communication, for instance, greetings and pleasantries, provides a social function but rarely relays new information. It has become increasingly important, because simply keeping in touch may be more important than what is said when one gets in touch (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016, p 253). Thus, the content of a photograph may feel insignificant compared to the photograph itself being a sign of connectivity and the presence of the sender. This photographic medium says, 'Hi! I'm here, right now!' This constant connection is also encouraged by different social media platforms, which reward users for chains of consecutive multi-day communication. The apparent triviality of content brings current photo sharing close to the notion of phatic communication, where the propositional informative content of an utterance is seen to give way to the pure social bonding function of the utterance itself.

Pranto gave an example of such communication when he mentioned that it is convenient to send a sad emoji rather than saying I'm feeling sad today. The brief communication indicating 'I am here' means a lot to the isolated community members on social media platforms, where they are constantly in search of validation. Due to the denial of marginal identities in the mainstream

public sphere, queer community members rely on such short validations, which are an alternative use of the digital public sphere. In her book chapter, Sirisena reflects on the role of mobile phones in relationships, highlighting how they have radically transformed the way Sri Lankans engage in different types of relationships.

Research participants showed me that being there virtually becomes a new expectation of relationships...It is, nevertheless, different in that being 'virtually yours' is always emotionally charged. In other words, it is not the mobile contact itself that is significant, but rather, it is its affective mediation of old and new expectations of what it means to be together (Sirisena, 2018, p 191).

Media such as mobile phones and small communications have not only changed the practical aspects of being alone but also examined their deeper, emotional connections. It involves implications of phatic communication, such as increased connectivity and issues like dependency and validation.

In all the interviews, the community members tried to justify why these social media interactions are important for them to come together as a collective and do something together. They talked about the interaction between the alternative profiles and how they validate each other. The older generation's focus on fan fiction and fandom as a means of connection reflects a more traditional use of digital platforms to engage in shared interests and create a sense of community. In contrast, the younger group's emphasis on phatic communication highlights a shift towards more subtle, non-verbal forms of interaction that prioritise emotional resonance over content. The concept of queer fiction and phatic communication as 'unrecognised labour' suggests a deeper, often overlooked form of emotional and social work that is essential to building solidarity within these communities. This unrecognised labour fosters

trust and rapport, enabling queer individuals to form cohesive collectives in digital spaces, despite the challenges of visibility in mainstream society. The intersection of creative expression and subtle communication reveals a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms are not just spaces for identity expression, but also for collective mobilisation and the invisible work that sustains such communities.

After knowing each other, it also came out that they thought of forming groups online and offline and initiating get-togethers and other advocacy for internal and external mobilisation. Equality Network is a group established online with resources such as social connections and educational background. In contrast, now they are partially funded by different transnational organisations directly as well as through fiscal sponsors. Other organisations also give them contracts now to design and record social media video campaigns, which they consider a milestone in their achievements.

In this section, the idea of queer fan fiction and phatic communication has been described, which are the key to building queerness online for different age groups to come together and initiate collective actions. In social media groups, they can enlarge their network of friends and acquaintances and validate the information and knowledge they share through gossip, dispute, intimacy, and friendship. It can be argued that creating this fabricated profile of glossy images with smartphone filter or creating fan fiction is an escape from harsh reality, yet through the process of creating aspirational and often neoliberal content, a form of representation is created to help move away from the hostility and rejection faced otherwise (Alim, 2022, p 253). Thus, the group members can discuss their needs collectively and create their solutions, which are discussed in the next sections of this chapter.

7.4.1 Pinkwashing and Pride: A case study from India

This section explores the role of digital media in organising Pride through collective labour. Over time, the nature of resources used for organising has shifted, initially relying on social, organisational, and cultural resources, and now increasingly on material resources. The section concludes by highlighting the disappointment felt by community members towards the dominance of Western frameworks of activism, which they express openly on social media. While members can directly reach out to key organisers, social media provides a space for spontaneous and fearless articulation, allowing for expressions that might not be possible in physical meetings.

Pride walks have been marked as forerunners of social change, paving the way for the rights and social acceptance of people marginalised for their gender and sexual identities in the West for a long time. In this section, a case of Pride organising before and how it is organised now is analysed, where there is a certain compromise with the corporate identities; yet, digital media is not the only means here to organise a queer collective action like Pride. It is also a medium through which many individuals can share their opinions. In other ways, it is almost impossible to reach the organisers and voice their opinions. As a framework, Jasbir Puar (2007) comments on how corporatisation is used to interpret the case study of Pride Walk organising in Kolkata (India). The key agenda that is highlighted here is how adopting Western frameworks of queer activism, like Pride rallies, brings extreme existential challenges. Here, the challenge of disappointment is analysed through the case study, and later, the collective action in digital platforms is also elaborated to explain how queer community members mobilise such social media spaces not only to organise but also to express and verbalise the repression.

For organising the Pride Walk, different tools such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and email have been used since the beginning for information dissemination, such as where it will take place, who to contact, and important decisions that are taken in the meeting. During my fieldwork in Kolkata (India), I noticed how social media tools managed to organise the volunteers for the Pride Walk. Such social media platforms are highly prevalent in South Asia due to their simplicity, low data consumption, and widespread accessibility, making them an ideal platform for communication. It enables rapid mobilisation, as users can instantly share information, organise events, and coordinate actions in real-time through group chats. Access to affordable phones and data plans, including in queer communities, further boosts its use, allowing for widespread participation in social and political movements. Such platforms are also used to disseminate responsibilities. Beyond erotic desire, common platforms like this help to know each other for isolated queer community members and create shared spaces in digital platforms, which are later used for collective actions like organising Pride.

In their social media groups, there were teams for flags, banners, posters, crowd management and floats, which were assigned to the group. The collective discussion about who could be in the float and who could not also took place digitally, as such details were not possible to discuss in physical meetings, even with fifty volunteers. There was a big discussion around being there on the float, where different people mentioned their opinions differently. There was a group of people saying it should be allowed for people who are working for a long time for the community, whereas the volunteers also expected that they would be allowed there for a while, as they are volunteering. The collective decision from admins also came in the digital platform that those who are involved in the float management can be there,

and it is pre-decided who can be there and who cannot. The float should not be a part of politics and should be a space to celebrate only.

I wanted to be there for 5-10 minutes on the float. The outsiders were alerted, but I was abused. The seniors were screaming at me.
Volunteers should get a chance to get on the float within 5 hours of the Pride Walk. Volunteering gets people excited, so they can get on the float, right? Collective decisions have already been made before, in the meetings. Only those who volunteer for float-related work will be able to get a chance to be there. Where does the question of permission come from?
During our 4th meeting of the organising committee, we had a 45-minute-long conversation about the float. about whether we want it at all or not, about why we want it and how we manage it.
I understand your sentiments. But is it so important that one person unable to be in the float can dislodge our entire collective spirit here online? In that case, you need to rethink the idea of Pride.
According to you, the float is for 'people'. But you demanded to be on it because you are a volunteer.
You are calling it a collective space, but you are the one who thinks we are going to tolerate your Authoritarian behaviour and absurd screaming. KEEP YOUR HYPOCRISY TO YOURSELF.

Table 4: The online conversation regarding a conflict about who can be in a float and who cannot. The text is translated and rephrased as discussed in the ethics section (Chapter 3).

The online conversation reveals a tension within a collective organising space, particularly around issues of hierarchy, access, and individual expectations within Pride. The volunteer's desire to participate in the float represents a personal expectation tied to their contributions, which conflicts with the group's established norms and decisions on float participation. The collective is pushing back against perceived entitlement, highlighting underlying values of egalitarianism and mutual respect, while also challenging the individual to align their perspective with the shared ethos of inclusivity and community accountability intrinsic to the Pride event.

Mondol, in his interview, talked about how they used to organise the Pride ten years ago when they formed the Facebook group. The funds they raised from parties and art exhibitions were donated to the Pride Walk. Azaadi Festival was the facilitator for the Pride Walk, not the organiser. They were giving the call online to arrange the Pride walks; all members were involved in arranging the Pride.



Image 14: The expensive float decoration of Kolkata (India) Pride in 2023 that was referred to in the interview above. Performances take place on the float at the end of the Pride Walk now.

Tech companies that provide IT solutions, like Accenture Group and ‘We Pro’, were organisations that walked in the Pride without branding to show their support. How the Pride will look and how that will be organised were discussed in the meetings after the online call. One of the major decisions that was made in those meetings was that no banner or branding should be used

during the walk. Mondol explained the reasons and how that has led to a recent shift:

Last year, the accounts were not shared with anyone as we used to do in emails. I have no information about this year (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

Mondol talked about the shift in organising where digital media platforms also have a role. Through social media, young people can see how Pride is celebrated in the US or in Europe, which has shifted the aspiration of the organising process.

The aspiration has changed; the ideology is no more there. Pride now needs to be flashy, as seen in the filtered photographs on Facebook; the float needs to be very big for the disc jockeys and performance. Where is the politics among all these? (Interview, Mondol/West Bengal).

After saying this, Mondol took a long pause in his interview, which resembled his disappointment in the shift that had taken place over the years. When there is this aspirational change, then there are also changes in smaller initiatives. The Lalit Great Eastern is the venue now for fundraising parties that are a wing of a transnational foundation.

The organisers announce the events, such as the party, through Facebook, and community members come to know about the details of the party from the event details. Similarly, some disappointments were also articulated using social media. Some of the comments about the Pride Walk reveal a complex layer of identity negotiation in activism, where solidarity for a cause clashes with collective values, underscoring the challenge of aligning global support with local realities.

What struck me the most was that the demand for Palestinian liberation was well represented. Not only the slogan of love for Palestine, but the flag of Palestine danced in the hands! Will Palestine do anything about LGBT+ rights? Only when the situation in Palestine is normal will Palestine show its brutal, homophobic form. Palestine is a country whose government believes in the principle that homosexuality is declared abhorrent and dehumanising; It also provides for the public execution of homosexuals.

I am not saying that Palestine should not be discussed. Be sure to raise your voice. More should be said for people in the LGBT+ community out there. But how can they forget what is happening in their own country? Even though nothing has been said about Kashmir this time. Also, many other internal matters are not spoken or chanted (Monon, social media, 2023/West Bengal). [The text is translated and rephrased as discussed in the ethics section (Chapter 4)]

This reflection highlights the tension between solidarity in international liberation movements and the acknowledgement of differing cultural stances on queer rights within those movements. Within many queer collectives, religion is often deliberately excluded from political engagement. This omission reflects both a strategic silence and a deeper discomfort. Here, the speaker grapples with the dissonance between shared support for Palestinian liberation and the homophobic policies in Palestine that conflict with queer rights. Similarly, another post indicates Hindu nationalism, where the selective focus of social movements is shaped by cultural and political priorities.

In one group, a person anonymously posted that Pride was protesting against Brahminism, but why not against Sharia or any Islamic law? You must know well who has more influence in the country where we

celebrate Pride. So maybe people feel it is more important to protest in that regard. But yes, in the future, I also hope that there will be protests about other toxic and brutal issues of all religions. (Arpita, Social Media, 2023/West Bengal). [The text is translated and rephrased as discussed in the ethics section (Chapter 3)]

By questioning why Pride protests address certain ideologies (Brahminism) over others (Sharia), the comment reflects concerns about perceived partiality in activism, often influenced by dominant cultural narratives and power dynamics within a given society. The comment also calls for a more inclusive critique across all religious and social structures, aligning with principles in pluralist theory, which advocates for a broader representation of diverse grievances within social justice movements.

No matter how difficult the circumstances are, queer community members use social media to express their opinion and resentment about collective action. It is not that there is no resistance to the changes in social media. There is a new digital queer public sphere forming in social media where queer community representatives, there are post and comment regarding Pride and how it is organised, which is an interaction between each other and an attempt to address the organisers. Here are some of the opinions that came as a comment after the Pride addressed to the organisers of the Kolkata (India) Pride.

What is notable here is how the queer community members are using digital tools to express their disappointments and reach the organisers collectively, which might not be possible to convey physically. It also depicts the sub-question, which asks about the role of digital culture in contemporary community organising.

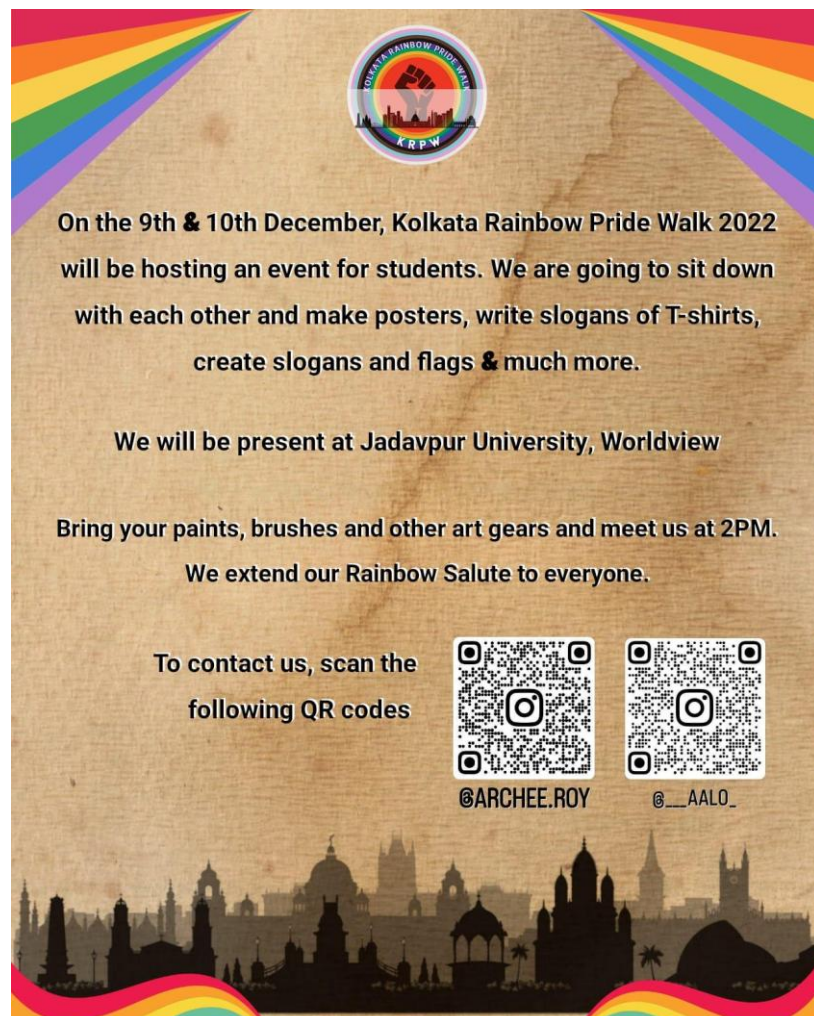


Image 15: The online call for participation in poster-making for Kolkata (India) Pride in 2022. The open call engages a cordial language with venue details and other information, showing their attempt to make it more participatory for the collective action. The post is in English and contains the Quick Response (QR) code of the organisers. How many marginalised queer community members have QR code reader applications in their phones is a crucial area for further inquiry.

Similarly, a prominent trans activist and social worker who is the second trans woman to become the judge of a Lok Adalat (People's Court) in the state of West Bengal (India) talked about the inclusiveness of the Pride Walk in a podcast. She mentioned that previously, it was very class-oriented, where they would only hear about meetings taking place at the American Centre or in Big Hotels by prominent activists, and it was never open to all. Now the discussions for the planning meeting are open to all, and she can go there now, which she could only imagine before.

The online calls for Pride-related meetings, invitations to the series of events in December, and the volunteer call have made it accessible to many young queer community members, who can now be part of the organising. One of the interviewees from the History Trust during the fieldwork mentioned that the Pride organisers in Kolkata (India) now want to commercialise the space of Pride subtly. There are no tickets for attending the Pride Walk, but the ambience, as well as the changes over the years, make them feel that the space is getting saleable slowly.

Overall, this section has drawn an impression of how digital media tools such as WhatsApp, blogs, Facebook and others are mobilised to organise a collective action like Pride. There are disappointments in the process, which are also articulated through social media, and that shows how these digital tools are convenient for collective opinion building and coming together for collective action. The way there is enthusiasm in social media for a collective action like pride, there is also shame associated with collective action in social media, which is discussed in the next section about anti-transgender backlash.

7.4.2 Anti-transgender politics and shame: A case study from Bangladesh

In this section, an incident of backlash is analysed that was broadly discussed in the social media group I observed. This section will light upon how the idea of digitalisation of sermons has caused a backlash on various occasions of queer collective actions. The key incident mentioned in this section is about including the case studies about transgender individuals in the textbook, which is a long-term lobby for incorporating sexuality education in government curricula.

Apart from different academic literature about hate comments and queer collective actions against them, the idea of hate comments and backlash in social media is not uncommon for queer community members who came out in the many interviews. In 2022 Bangladesh textbook board incorporated three life stories of Hijra and Trans-identified people as a part of sexuality education, which they had to remove due to pressure from protests. A self-claimed philosopher ripped (Sakib, 2024) the pages of the book and asked others to do the same. The video went viral on social media, creating fear of shame among the community members. The entire stunt in the viral video created anti-gender politics in the country.

One of the key factors noticeable here is the rise of sermon videos available on social media such as Facebook and YouTube, which is often not discussed by academics. In ‘was mehfil’, a religious preacher, often from a heightened place, addresses the congregated believers on religious duties and divine commands or exhorts them for individual and social behaviour and action (Stille, 2021, p 307).

The backlash's massive impact came out in an interviewee's helplessness. In her interview, Ahona, the trans rights activist from Shurjer Alo (Bangladesh) referred to that by comparing the power and acceptance of such sermon videos on social media.

There are Sermon videos online where they talk about the textbook labelling transgender people as homosexual. When an Islamic scholar says anything, a lot of people believe it. Now I identify myself as Trans, but I was a guy as well. Who will explain all this confusion to them? I doubt if we can do anything collectively for such backlashes (Interview, Ahona/Bangladesh).

From her interview, it was clear that there is a misconception regarding trans identity, and it is a mammoth task to explain it to Islamic scholars and the general population. In the country context general population confuse trans people with homosexuals, where they have no tolerance. They have a certain sympathy for the Hijra population, assuming they are intersex, but the politics were against transgender people and how homosexuality is prohibited in Islam. It was also clear that when an Islamic scholar preaches on a certain issue, it impacts the public sentiment, which makes the community members feel ashamed and helpless. In this regard, other scholars like Stille also stated how these speeches work as commands.

For many years, HIV/AIDS prevention work has been taking place in the context of Bangladesh, where the organisations and their collective actions tried to incorporate discussions around sexuality, considering that Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country. While creating such discourse, they sought to reconcile religion and sexuality and design such initiatives. They took a health-focused approach as a strategy instead of rights-focused work, but it shows that the online advocacy strategies taken as a queer collective action

with a health focus are not functioning due to cultural and societal taboos around open discussions of sexuality. Framing sex education solely around health may inadvertently reinforce perceptions that discussions about sex are only relevant to medical contexts, ignoring the broader need for open dialogue around consent, relationships, and gender roles. Social media politics mentioned above reflect deep-seated conservative religious values, viewing sex education as Western, morally threatening and culturally inappropriate, which can overshadow and stymie health-focused initiatives. Consequently, without addressing underlying cultural stigmas and integrating discussions of respect and relational aspects, health-centred sex education struggles to resonate in such a sensitive socio-cultural landscape.

The critique of the internationalisation of queer organisations as a ‘Western imposition’ often overlooks the rich histories of local and pre-colonial traditions of gender and sexual diversity in many cultures. This framing is frequently mobilised by conservative or religious movements to reject LGBT+ rights, portraying them as alien and incompatible with local values. However, such rhetoric conveniently erases Indigenous practices such as Chukri collectives discussed in Chapter 5 and understandings of gender and sexuality that predate colonial rule, which often imposed binary and heteronormative structures. By ignoring these traditions, these critiques perpetuate a colonial legacy while undermining efforts to reclaim and validate diverse identities within their authentic cultural contexts.

In the social media group, I observed, there was a series of hate sermon videos about the topic shared by the community members in shame. They wanted to update each other about where the discussion was taking a turn. They were discussing their friends, allies and others who were sharing and sending love reactions to those videos, and their posts and statements were articulating the

shame they were going through for not being able to come out in front of society and speak about their gender and sexuality. There was a discussion about how they can develop a security guideline (Appendix 4).

Some of the titles of those contents are listed below. Queer community members were sharing them in the group to show the public perception of queerness and how helpless they feel about it. There is shame associated with it when they can see the hate sermon videos but cannot do anything against them on social media. The group members have also questioned the reason for the enthusiasm for visibility among other members. Someone also posted that maybe the government will change the books, but the fear of death has come to everyone's mind. This country does not give him the right to express his identity, and thus, the entire incident on social media viral videos denies his existence. The kind of hatred that is propagated gives an impression of the shame discussed here as a part of the discourse.

Title of some posts creating the discourse
1. New transgender law and new syllabus to brainwash children into being transgender by inserting transgender stories in the textbooks of class 7.
2. Detailed discussion on LGBT+ in Bangladesh.
3. Transgender, Sharif-Sharifa's tale against the Qur'an: Hefazat Islam
4. Who is behind the LGBT+ agenda in Bangladesh?
5. The psychology of perversion
6. How to recognise homosexuals? What is the way to know them?

7. What is the way to get rid of homosexuality?
8. In the eyes of Islam, is homosexuality a disease or a sin? What is the punishment for this sin?
9. Homosexuality is a terrible disease. LGBT+ is haram in Islam
10. How to avoid feelings of Homosexuality and how to repent from it?
11. How to recognise homosexuals? What is the way to know them?
12. ISIS throws gay men off buildings

Table 5: Title of social media posts (captions) that spread hate and homophobia

This list reflects a pervasive hostility toward queer identities, where misinformation, religious condemnation, and a fear-based narrative frame queer topics as morally corrupt. Portraying transgender and queer topics as brainwashing tactics implies that queer identities are unnatural and imposed, rather than innate identities deserving respect. Many contents also rely on religious interpretations, suggesting that queer identities are sinful, diseased, or perverse, thus positioning them as a moral threat that needs correction. The repeated focus on recognising and curing homosexuality and transgender identities indicates a view of these identities as something to be feared, identified, and eradicated, fostering a hostile environment. This public culture not only dehumanises queer individuals but also promotes harmful

stereotypes, increasing social stigma and potentially inciting discrimination and violence against these communities.

In research in health and human rights journals on the digital transformation and the right to health of young adults in Bangladesh and Colombia, the findings talked about the depth of this social stigma, stereotypes, anxiety and shame. Participants highlighted significant anxieties surrounding online engagement due to persistent stigmas and taboos, particularly related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH). This reflects a broader issue of digital surveillance and social judgment in conservative contexts, impeding meaningful engagement with sensitive topics.

Given the persistent stigmas and taboos described, participants expressed anxieties about their online engagement. Some felt that community-led social media groups were hostile to them...In Bangladesh, a researcher conducting digital ethnography on Facebook identified Bangla-language accounts that actively promote the targeted harassment and slut-shaming of young women online. Some Bangladeshi participants worried that even clicking ‘like’ on an informative post about SRH might inadvertently expose the user as sexually active to others in the community (Health and Human Rights, 2024).

Community-led social media groups were often perceived as hostile, while Bangla-language accounts promoting harassment and slut-shaming further exacerbated fears. Even simple actions like liking an SRH-related post could unintentionally expose users to judgment or scrutiny from friends and family, as illustrated by young men concerned about misunderstandings or assumptions about their intentions. These examples underscore how digital

platforms, instead of fostering open dialogue, often reinforce societal stigma, limiting access to critical information.

While talking about public culture, Warner argued that queer and counter public identities must navigate the pressures of public discourse, balancing the desire for embodied, playful, and affective connections against a society that often prioritises structured, rational dialogue. Warner emphasises the role of visibility in forming counter publics.

As it happens, an understanding of queerness has been developing in recent decades that is suited to just this necessity; a culture is developing in which intimate relations, and the sexual body can be understood as projects for transformation among strangers.... Public discourse imposes a field of tensions within which any world-making project must articulate itself. To the extent that I want that world to be one in which embodied sociability, affect, and play have a more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical dialogue, those tensions will be acutely felt (Warner, 2002, p 88).

Queerness has evolved as a concept that allows for transformative, intimate connections between people who are "strangers," moving beyond traditional, stable categories of relationships. This shift creates a culture where queer identities and relationships are seen as flexible projects of self and social transformation, distinct from mainstream norms. However, as communities become more visible in mainstream society, there is a risk that they may lose the oppositional nature that once defined their spaces as radically alternative.

In the context of the USA, Warner argues that by creating spaces where LGBT identities are visible, queer people can challenge dominant cultural norms and

create new ways of being recognised socially and politically. Similarly, Imran Mazid and many others argued that it is apparent that if small and medium-sized advocacy organisations employ an indirect strategy on Facebook and invest in crafting strategic viral content, then they will be able to secure public attention and promote social change. Therefore, virality on Facebook could mitigate the resource gap between big and small-sized advocacy organisations in terms of garnering visibility in the public policy arena, strengthening outreach, and securing public attention (Mazid, 2020, p 114)

Here, Warner and Mazid are indicating that this visibility can remove the oppositional voice, which I completely disagree with. It is also important to consider local culture as well as cultural identity to consider visibility as a counter-narrative. In the case of queerness in certain cultures, this can be counterproductive and threatening for queer lives, as we see in the above-mentioned case. Oreo from Turning Point Bangladesh talked about it and stated that while enhanced security measures and frequent updates by social media companies offer hope, they remain reactive rather than proactive, leaving users vulnerable to ever-evolving hacking tactics.

Extremists are also coming through social media; we can't stop but take precautions so that they can't hack us. Maybe they are also organising them, and maybe they are more privileged than us. But the hope is that social media is bringing a lot of updates every week, and thus, they (social media) are enhancing their security. Nonetheless, hackers are not sitting idle; they are also updating them, and this will go on (Interview, Oreo/Bangladesh).

According to Oreo, the presence of extremists on social media highlights the dual-edged nature of these platforms as spaces for both democratic engagement and malicious activity. The acknowledgement that extremists may

be more organised and privileged underscores the socio-political asymmetries that complicate efforts to counteract such threats effectively. Moreover, the perpetual ‘arms race’ between platform security advancements and hacker innovations reflects a broader challenge of maintaining digital safety in an inherently open and dynamic space. This ongoing cycle calls for more robust, inclusive strategies that combine technological innovation with user education and systemic oversight to mitigate risks sustainably.

Against the risk, many different groups from different strata of society are taking collective actions differently. The group I observed arranged a series of online meetings to make people aware of the security protocol and tried to form a coalition. In the interview with Anha from Equality Network Family Bangladesh, she mentioned the collective consciousness they are trying to raise among the community members to resist such backlash and harassment.

We asked to remove the home address from the social media profile.

We also asked to hide the identity-related posts from the profile and to scrutinise the friends list. We requested not to give the addresses of others. We also discussed what can be done in case of arrest

(Interview, Anha/Bangladesh).

With the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), a public health organisation has offered a video and filmmaking grant to generate the narrative against the backlash through creative media. The campaign used phrases like ‘Countering Backlash’ and ‘Reclaiming Gender Justice’ and asked for digital content on this topic. It is important to note that the campaign did not use the word LGBT+, but they have designed the content inspired by the rainbow flag. Instead of the word, they have used phrases such as the patriarchy and its diverse manifestations, men and masculinities, male allyship and solidarity with feminist movements,

reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms and anti-feminist backlash in various societal environments.

Playing around with the language is not a strategic move, as is indicated in the video-making call or the Pride Walk. What I want to argue here is the tendency to avoid the main idea and address sympathy and humanity sideways by toning down the language. Previously, such strategies were taken several times, where organisations removed the word LGBT+ from their website and started using sexual minority population or gender diverse population, but such initiatives of playing around with the language could not save the community from such a crisis. It took time to build the momentum for the community by using all their resources afterwards.

While talking about such forms of resistance, withdrawal and symbolic challenge, Melucci warns that such yearning carries a potential danger: it may evolve into forms where the rejection of mainstream information and norms solidifies into rigid, exclusionary beliefs. Thus, while these movements initially seek refuge from information excess, they risk fostering narrow, dogmatic viewpoints that mirror the very power dynamics they aim to resist.

In the face of hidden power, which is channelled through information, elementary forms of resistance express the need to escape the excess of information that quickly turns into more noise and experience of emptiness (Melucci, 1996, p 182).

Melucci theorises that in a world dominated by hidden power structures, information overload can transform communication into overwhelming noise, which leads to feelings of disconnection and emptiness rather than genuine understanding. This situation creates a desire for resistance where individuals and groups attempt to escape the information barrage to find meaning and a

sense of self. Young social movements, in this context, often express a dimension—an attempt to withdraw from the social noise and cultivate community, or personal growth.

The two collective action examples against the backlash show that the actions also mobilise the community using social organisational resources and cultural resources. It is targeted at the trans community; however, the other community members are also concerned about it, raising the question of relative deprivation.

7.5 Share collective emotions in queer digital life

The key questions of the project include ‘What is the role of digital culture in contemporary forms of collective action?’ From the above discussion, it can be said that social media and new technologies are important platforms for queer collectives in terms of their efforts to seek their rights and raise awareness. However, a country’s cultural and political situation can affect these activism efforts, which was also illustrated in the context of Bangladesh and India.

Queer digital lives play a pivotal role in shaping collective identity, with digital engagement becoming an integral part of community-building. The second section of this chapter examined how members connect through shared fan fiction, bridging generational divides between older participants and younger individuals engaged in phatic communication. By curating alternative digital spaces through filtered images and narratives, they create a new safe space. However, this digital curation also functions as a subtle act of resistance, allowing community members to express collective emotions, share

personal experiences, discuss socio-cultural obstacles, and collaboratively seek solutions.

There is a disconnect between movement building online and offline, reflecting broader structural and organisational divides within activism. While both online and offline spaces contribute to queer collective action, their strategies, priorities, and modes of engagement often remain separate. Online groups, despite having a physical presence, prioritise digital visibility and discourse, but their influence does not always translate into grassroots activism. In contrast, offline organisations, while active in digital spaces, often fail to integrate online mobilisation strategies into their movement-building efforts. This disconnect can be understood through the lens of resource dependency, where offline organisations shape their activities according to available funding, institutional constraints, and dominant activist paradigms. Online groups may possess digital resources but lack material ones, while offline organisations often have material resources but lack digital fluency. While some movements transition from digital to physical spaces globally and in South Asia, queer activism in Bangladesh and West Bengal remains fragmented due to institutional barriers, unequal access to resources, and a lack of strategies for mutual engagement, hindering the potential for a cohesive and intersectional movement.

In both cases (Bangladesh and West Bengal), the collective actions also engage transnational resources, which is the second sub-question of this project. The Pride organising is associated with a hospitality group where fundraising events take place every year. A non-profit foundation is in partnership with the group, which is the official affiliate for the 'It Gets Better Project' in India. The action against anti-transgender backlash in Bangladesh

engages SIDA-funded projects to mobilise the community and build collective action against the backlash.

In these two case studies, there are disappointments associated with Pride and shame; nevertheless, queer individuals are not very vocal about it on social media if we closely observe their social media interactions. They keep silent without addressing how they feel. Similarly, the groups are often hesitant to address their material resources and how they are mobilised to form collective actions online.

In both cases, there is an anxiety correlated with the cultural identity; as a result, the community members tend to create and showcase the sanctuary instead of directly addressing the politics. The groups often contain posts and calls of workshops, and advocacy programs that they organise in the international donor premises (Alim, 2022). There are photos taken at the ambassador's residence that many general people do not have access to. Photos with foreign delegates, US flags and international donors construct a position of authority for them but also reestablished white supremacy.

There is almost little content which deals with the everyday domesticity of living lives. The complex and often negotiated living arrangements see very little representation. In a situation like this, the digital groups provide a breathing space for the community members, and this construction of collective actions in a group photo of a fundraising party, hypermasculine bodies in a colourful float or national consultation can be called a form of sanctuary. It can be argued that the community groups create a form of utopian representation, carving a space of community in an otherwise hostile environment.

In her 2016 journal article, Dina M. Siddiqi discussed the murder of two Bangladeshi activists (Siddiqi, 2019, p 3). In her journal article, she explored the critical role social media played in organising, highlighting how fear and protective measures became evident as individuals and groups began shutting down their social media accounts. Mustafa Oz described the queer activists in Turkey and their coping strategies, deactivating accounts was removing the trace at that point through which they could be identified and located, and the community members felt that their presence on social media was under surveillance which was threatful to their lives as well (Oz, Yanik, & Batu 2023, p 11). Social media serves as a double-edged sword for the queer collectives, fostering connection and activism, while simultaneously exposing individuals to backlash and surveillance in less accepting environments. This duality highlights the tension between empowerment and vulnerability in the digital age.

Queer visibility online can be threatening, but the role of digital media and innovation shows the resilience of the community organising under oppression, utilising their various social, organisational and cultural resources.

As a collective action, the initiatives are timely and supportive to the community members, but they also require a review of the idea to help the community members to come out and speak can instigate the propaganda and can fuel the backlash against their collective action.

This chapter discusses the aspiration of forming alternative spaces for queer collectives and provides two case studies from Bangladesh and India as examples. One example showed how digital media plays a role in organising a Pride march in the light of pinkwashing and how the disappointments are also articulated and communicated to the organisers by such media. The other case study from Bangladesh shows the rise of Islamic sermon discourse and how

queer community members continue to mend the rupture through their resilience.

If we do a comparison, the Pride Walk in Kolkata (India) has garnered increasing public support over the years, with participation from not only queer individuals but also allies, including students, activists, and even some politicians. This support signifies a shift towards more inclusive attitudes, at least in metropolitan areas, though challenges remain, particularly in rural regions. On the contrary, the anti-trans backlash in Bangladesh reflects deep-rooted prejudices and the influence of conservative ideologies. Public support for queer rights is minimal, and those advocating for these rights often face harassment, violence, or legal repercussions. The backlash is driven by a fear of cultural erosion and a desire to maintain traditional gender norms.

India has seen significant legal progress in queer rights, notably the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018. This legal shift has empowered the queer community to organise events like the Pride Walk with greater confidence, although challenges like social stigma and discrimination persist. In Bangladesh, while there is legal recognition of the Hijra gender, the overall legal framework is not supportive of broader queer rights. Same-sex relations remain criminalised, and queer activism is often met with harsh resistance, both from the state and society. The political environment is not conducive to queer visibility or advocacy, leading to heightened vulnerability for the community. The participants in the Pride Walk gave me the impression that queer collective actions in India involve Hindus and Muslims working together in collaboration, despite the absence of Muslim representation within the pride slogans. There was no mention of the Muslim queers in Kashmir in the manifesto or the slogans. From the discussion with Mondol, it became

clear that Muslim communities are increasingly being criminalised, vilified, and marginalised as the 'other' in the context of Hindu nationalist politics.

The Pride Walk in Kolkata (India) provides a platform for the queer community to express their identity and advocate for their rights. It fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity among participants, contributing to a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards greater acceptance. The anti-trans backlash in Bangladesh has a chilling effect on the queer community, reinforcing fear and marginalisation. It limits the community's ability to advocate for their rights and live openly, perpetuating a cycle of invisibility and discrimination.

In both cases, the queer community members collectively deal with challenges which can be associated with a question of their collective action. Aniruddha Dutta (2021) indicated alternative spaces in their online blog (Dutta, 2020) about exploring queer spaces in non-metropolitan Bengal. In their work, they talked about Pride walks getting organised outside Kolkata (India) now, which can be observed and see if they can accommodate all from the marginalised working-class queer community members or not. Observing Pride organising and how that mobilises the digital public sphere outside the bigger cities is a crucial area for further inquiry.

Social media can play a vital role in amplifying advocacy messages, but in many cases, the authorities do not want to host the criticism. Many groups have a regulation that the members should not post or comment on anything related to religion. Similarly, Meta also blocks users when there is hatred in the conversation as per their community standards. So is the state with its digital security policies (Appendix 1, 2, 3) that uphold the religious values of the state. Kuntsman talked about this paradox of digital media as a complex cultural and political phenomenon. They said that online and offline violence reverberates between spaces, bodies, and psyches, producing unexpected

effects that can intensify the ‘real’ violence of online warfare, as well as offer opportunities for resistance. The digital life of conflict, then, is a complex cultural and political phenomenon, which escapes the simplistic logic of democratisation, empowerment, or media representation (Kuntsman, 2010, p 300). Their statement shows that though there are multiple possibilities of resistance collectively, however, such conflict in an online space is complex, as it is also an intersection of democratic practice, empowerment and media representation.

Often, it is a lazy argument to place religion and queer issues in a dichotomy; however, it is also important to address the religious norms and values being propagated using digital media tools and how queer collectives react against these socio-religious factors on social media. In both cases, the voices of the minority groups are eliminated, which is remarkable. The Pride Walk does not accommodate the community groups that are coming from smaller cities and non-English speakers. Similarly, the queer community is not being recognised by the mainstream audience, and there is anti-transgender backlash taking place in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, young queer community members choose to use social media and prefer to create a sanctuary of half-truths where they don’t want to identify and be vocal about the double standard of the right-wing neo-liberal agenda of the state.

The ILGA World report on accessing connection talked about blocking websites and mentioned that there have been incidents of TikTok being blocked in Bangladesh and India, over ‘pornographic’ content, in which women openly expressed their sexual desires (Johnson & Deutch, 2024, p 36). YouTube has also had incidents of banning non-explicit content with queer themes using the restricted mode, a feature used largely in educational contexts and for parental controls. In India and Bangladesh, social stigma and

government restrictions on free speech have created a hostile online environment for both queer individuals and advocacy-focused organisations. As a result, queer collectives choose to self-censor themselves rather than risk the online harms that can occur from expressing themselves freely. Whilst there are many examples of popular social media platforms being blocked by the government for charges of dissent, digital spaces can also create a virtual safe space or sanctuary for queer collective actions. That is why queer community members choose to build a sanctuary online and express their disappointment among others, or make each other aware of the security protocol, or their resentment about the way Pride is being organised.

The subsections of this chapter illuminate the idea of queer collective actions where physical and digital spaces get infused with each other. They talked about the undemocratic practices and human rights abuses in the two Bengals, along with the hateful and violent rhetoric generated. Nevertheless, they also tell the stories of collective actions where community member gain strength from their phatic communication and fandom. From the small idea of ‘one is still there’ online, there are also organisations that work on local and international advocacy. The queer collective labour behind is still unrecognised and unacknowledged, but the pressure of visibility is also not a desirable one, which is clear in the two cases presented in this chapter.

The central sociological contribution of this chapter lies in its analysis of how fear and shame operate as mechanisms of silencing within queer collectives in their social media groups. Denial is not always a straightforward matter of truth-telling or deliberate deception. Such forms of denial are deeply embedded in everyday cultural practices, banal language, religion and state-sanctioned legitimations that normalise looking away. In this context, denial functions not merely as an individual psychological mechanism but as a social

practice, reinforced through discourse, ritual, and institutional silence. In this chapter, we observe a kind of *do-it-yourself* (DIY) approach in social media, where individuals and communities respond in fragmented, improvised ways, shaped as much by fear, uncertainty, and cultural codes as by overt political repression. This volatility reveals how denial is not passive but actively maintained, negotiated, and reproduced within complex social terrains. The complex interplay between religion and identity has resulted in heightened social tensions, often manifesting in the marginalisation of minority groups, whether religious or sexual. The politicisation of religion and the rise of religious nationalism have created a deep polarisation between the general population and queer collectives.

Through various case studies, a recurring theme emerges: the pervasive fear among queer collectives. This fear is not merely reactive but is actively produced and sustained through a majoritarian imaginary that reshapes identities. Within this framework, the dominant majoritarian culture deploys shame and stigma as tools to discipline and suppress minoritarian voices. The chapter foregrounds the complex interplay between public shaming, affective governance, and identity formation, illustrating how these dynamics contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of non-normative groups. Rather than being incidental, shame and fear are structurally embedded within the national project, producing a climate of precarity that renders minority expressions vulnerable to silencing. This analysis underscores how affect, particularly negative affect, functions as a form of social control, reinforcing hegemonic norms while delegitimising minoritarian modes of existence.

Chapter 8

Resource distribution and organisational cultures: mobilising creative agencies collectively

8.1 Introduction

It is often perceived that there is a strong culture of knowledge sharing facilitated through workshops, conferences, online platforms, and publications. This chapter brings a clear conception that there is tension between the queer community organisations, and that is one of the big obstacles which them from coming together for collective action like movement building. In this chapter, the discussion is about resource distribution and the organisational culture of resource sharing for queer collective actions in the two Bengals.

The first section of the chapter describes different kinds of resources organisations mobilise for their collective campaigns. The second section describes the organisational narratives of resource sharing. The last section shows how these different organisations creatively make agency when they have challenges mobilising the resources for collective action. The conclusion of the chapter discusses the organisational culture of delivering campaigns collectively but not building a coalition for the movement in the street.

The previous chapter (chapter 6) about social media discussed creating a sanctuary with alternative profiles in social media where queer community members struggle in real-life physical space. This chapter will link back to those case studies and analyse physical spaces where queer organisations come together to deliver campaigns but are still hesitant about their collaboration. The previous chapter talked about aspirations and collective

emotions, which also resonated in the interviews presented in this chapter on NGOisation. The originality of this chapter is to look into collective action through events and organising, which was not seen from this perspective in the academic research.

The relationship between registration and funding is discussed in Chapter 4, where it was explained that in the case of Bangladesh and India, government registration for an NGO is a legal process that allows organisations to operate for social, charitable, or developmental purposes. The process involves submitting necessary documents such as the memorandum of association and proof of address, and NGOs can register as trusts, societies, or non-profit companies. Once registered, NGOs must comply with ongoing legal requirements, including audits, annual reports, and additional regulations for foreign donations, such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) in India. Following such procedures, certain organisations can bring funding from abroad, and this type of funding plays a crucial role in global economic power, humanitarian aid, environmental sustainability, and addressing various global challenges. The entire project is looking at queer collective actions through different organisations, where there are non-government organisations (NGOs) that have international resource sharing for their programme, and there are community-based organisations that are unregistered or registered from a small office without direct international resource sharing.

Sarah C White (1999) mentioned in her paper ‘NGOs, Civil Society and the State in Bangladesh’ that NGOs are seen as intermediaries, ‘honest brokers’ between state and society, which will foster broader-based social and political participation (White, 1999, p 320). I agree with her definition of NGO; however, the broker also creates a hierarchy, which questions the authenticity and is a key highlight of the discussion in this chapter. For categorising the

organisations, the reading from David Lewis, (2004) is referred (Chapter 2) where he argues that the categorization of organizations, especially NGOs, can be complex and fluid, as these groups often span various sectors and functions. He highlights that NGOs are not homogenous entities but encompass a range of actors with differing goals, practices, and structures. Lewis suggests that understanding these categories requires recognizing the diversity of organizations and the evolving nature of their roles in development and society. The difficulty of studying 'civil society' in the context of Bangladesh and documented his reflections on NGOs, the state and democracy. For the framework analysis, Naisargi Dave (2012) is quoted as examining the formation of lesbian communities in India. Through her study of different networks and institutions, Dave documents how activism swings between the potential for new social arrangements and the questions that arise once the activists' goals have been accomplished. Their work is cited along with Srila Roy (2015) who reveals the specificity of activist and NGO work around issues of gender and sexuality through a decade-long ethnography of two West Bengal (India) organisations. The consequences of India's liberalisation were paradoxical: the influx of global funds for social development and NGOs gestured the co-optation and depoliticization of struggles for women's rights, even as they amplified the visibility and vitalization of queer activism. Tracing changes in feminist governmentality that were entangled in transnational neoliberalism, Roy shows how historical and highly local feminist currents shaped contemporary queer and non-queer neoliberal feminisms.

To reflect on service delivery in NGOised spaces, the work of Aeshna Badruzzaman (2023) from Bangladesh is consulted. She is a researcher on development and the role of civil society in Bangladesh. She explained that the need for non-state providers (NSPs) to adapt their activities to restrictive governance mechanisms reflects the changing space for NSPs in the context of

semi-democratic regimes. However non-state providers also maintain a hierarchy when they interact with grassroots organisations which indirectly resonated in the interviews and was also discussed by Naomi Hossain (2017) in her book 'The Aid Lab'. Bangladesh plays an ideological role in the contemporary world order, proving that the neo-liberal development model works under the most testing conditions. Hossain's work analyses the nature of the mutual interests and interactions between these distinct yet connected actors in the development story. 'The Aid Lab' subjects this so-called 'Bangladesh paradox' to scrutiny, evaluating public policies and their outcomes for poverty and development. The chapter also relates to Aram Ziai (2017) and his work on post-development, where he argues that post-development can be used for criticising discourses and practices infused with Eurocentrism and relations of power and thinking about global inequality beyond the discourse of 'development'. He suggested theorising contemporary struggles and envisioning different futures based on non-capitalist values and communal ownership. In this connection, Waites argued about a critical analysis of the new London-based transnational politics of LGBT human rights. With examples, he specifically identifies that UK activists have much to learn from the Global South.

Given that the UK-based organisations formed in 2011 show no sign of having conducted or published any reviews of what could be learned from existing LGBT organizing globally before they commenced work, this is hardly surprising – instead, these organisations have been learning on the job. The leadership of UK-based LGBT NGOs has tended to come from the circles of political elites, disproportionately from white middle class sections of the population; and while the desire to act internationally for human rights has usually been well-intentioned and achieved much that is beneficial, the willingness to act

with limited contextual understanding – particularly to invoke the Commonwealth from the North without Southern leadership – does somewhat reflect experiences of privilege (Wites, 2016, p 14).

His argument reflects a common pattern in transnational activism where well-intentioned interventions are shaped by structural privilege. The absence of prior engagement with global LGBT organising indicates a reliance on experiential learning rather than context-driven knowledge, which can reproduce paternalistic dynamics. The concentration of leadership among white, middle-class political elites in the UK suggests that organisational culture is embedded in specific class and racialised networks, influencing both priorities and approaches. Invoking the Commonwealth without Southern leadership not only sidelines local agency but also reinscribes colonial hierarchies under the guise of human rights advocacy.

The data used in this chapter are from in-depth interviews (Method 3) of different organisational members, and the details of how they are gathered with ethical permission and clustered with NVivo have been described in the research design chapter (Chapter 3). Considering the role of collective action based on transnational resources, a typology of different organisations was discussed in Chapter 2, where there were mainly three categories

- a) Non-funded organisation CBO
- b) Partially funded community NGO
- c) Funded NGO

Lewis and many others who worked on transnational resource sharing and NGOs did not cover the organisations working with queer populations such as Hijra groups and their organising. Such organisations and their activities

cannot be explained through the narratives existing about NGOs, as many of these community-based organisations (CBOs) are not mobilising the community with international resources. In most cases, their resources are limited and often voluntary, whereas NGOs are always donor-funded and engage in long-term programme implementations. Small CBOs in the grassroots sometimes receive financial resources from big NGOs, though they are seldom involved in the program design. Rather, they are assigned to service delivery where they have a limited opportunity to talk about the long-term change.

Queer organising and community building in the subcontinent are associated with international sexual health funding that helped queer male communities converge and form under NGOs and charities, which many scholars have cited. Pushpesh Kumar, in their work on radicalising community development, mentioned that the queer movement in India emerged through the influence of diasporic connections and global initiatives to fund HIV/AIDS eradication (Kumar, 2017, P 485). Kumud Rana in her work on transnational AIDS network and configuring Meti identity in Nepal mentioned that since the 1990s, the global fight against HIV has played a critical role in the formation and consolidation of non-normative sexual identities and has contributed to the formation of social movements around the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people in resource-poor contexts in the global South (Rana K, 2022, p 1452). When big donor organisations such as the Global Fund reached South Asia with their HIV/AIDS-related works, Shojon came into existence in 1996 with the help of the Naz Foundation⁴¹ and the late

⁴¹ NAZ was formed in the early 1990s by the late HIV and gay rights activist Shivananda Khan in memory of Nazir. Nazir was a Pakistani Muslim, married with two children. He was also a closeted gay man who had AIDS. When his status became public, he was rejected by his mosque, ostracised by his community, and found no social support that understood that he

Sivananda Khan from India. Similarly, History Trust, formerly known by a different name, has influence and motivation from similar activists named Ashok Rao Kavi and the late Sivananda Khan. Many of the transnational donors that fund the organisations observed are based in Europe and the USA, and thus the global north and euro-centric approach is a part of the discussion in this chapter.

There is a list of donors in Appendix 8. The funding discussed in this chapter can be categorised as long-term funding partners and short-term funders.

Discussing with the research participants, four categories of funding were mainly spoken about, where different funding serves different purposes for the organisation i) core funding, ii) project funding, iii) capacity building and iv) emergency funding. Core funding is usually flexible and can be used for the NGO's general operations and organisational development. This category is often referred to as unrestricted funding. Project funding is project-specific funding earmarked for a particular initiative, program, or project. It's often more restricted and tied to specific goals. Capacity-building grants support an NGO in improving its internal capacity, infrastructure, and skills and Emergency funding is meant for addressing immediate and unforeseen crises or emergencies. Later, the chapter will introduce organisational narratives where there is discussion around how hierarchy and gaps between each party create obstacles for campaign management. The last section is about negotiating all these margins and how queer community organisations establish their agency with creativity. The sections reveal discussion around durational funding and visible outcomes, and such ideas can be helpful for collective action.

had more than one identity. Unfortunately, the issues that Nazir experienced remain alive today.

8.2 Mapping the terrain: The resource context

One of the sub-questions of this project ‘How is transnational resource sharing in an NGOised space creating an impact on movement building?’. The organisations in Bangladesh and India actively work with policymakers and run campaigns in the NGOised spaces, and for organising, they are dependent on different resources. Resources are critical for sustaining and strengthening LGBT collective action in South Asia, enabling organisations and activists to effectively advocate for the rights and well-being of LGBT individuals in the region.

While discussing the material resources, the research participants were hesitant and often unaware of the total yearly budget of the organisations. From various accounts, a rough idea of the yearly budget came out, where Shojon has a yearly budget of 1,005,000 pounds sterling, as per one of their staff members. Their annual report was available online, and in 2009, their annual income was 1,116,599 pounds sterling in the income statement. Shurjer Alo has a yearly budget of 41,000 pounds sterling. On the other hand, Turning Point has a yearly budget of 10,000 pounds sterling, and Bahurupi has a budget of 6000 pounds sterling. History Trust in West Bengal mentioned that they are a non-funded organisation; however, their annual report is available online, and in 2020-21, their financial inflow was 1460 pounds sterling (excluding cash and bank balances carried over from 2019-20) as per the Audit Report.

Shojon, with a yearly budget of 1,005,000 pounds sterling, is significantly larger than many other organisations in the region. In contrast, Shurjer Alo operates with a much smaller budget of 41,000 pounds sterling, reflecting its more modest scale. Turning Point and Bahurupi have even smaller budgets, with Turning Point managing 10,000 pounds sterling and Bahurupi 6,000

pounds sterling, highlighting the financial constraints these organisations face. The History Trust in West Bengal reported a financial inflow of just 1,460 pounds sterling in 2020-21, indicating an even more limited financial capacity. Overall, these figures show the stark contrast in the size and financial capacity of organisations, with Shojon standing out as the largest, while the others operate on a much smaller scale.

Apart from material resources, queer collective actions depend on various resources, which include social-organisational resources, cultural resources, and human resources. In the subsections below, different resources and how the organisations are mobilising them are discussed, where representatives from the organisation talked about their relationship with the donors.

8.2.1 Funded NGO

A funded NGO is an organisation that receives financial support from external sources, such as governments, private foundations, corporations, or individual donors, to carry out its social, charitable, or developmental work. These funds are typically allocated for specific projects, operational costs, or programmatic activities that align with the NGO's mission. The funding allows the NGO to implement initiatives and achieve its goals, while also requiring accountability and transparency in how the resources are utilised. Material resources are common for funded organisations where Shojon has a list of donors, and they have projects with the government as well. Now they have two offices in the capital and district information centres (DIC) in other cities, which is discussed in Chapter 4. Ahmed, the executive director of Shojon (Bangladesh) talked about the human resources of their early phase, which is still run in the organisation as a legacy since 1996.

After Sivananda Khan set up the drop-in centre, he planned a study to create evidence. It was all done from that centre. Shiva formed an outreach team of four people who looked for community members and brought us a lot of contacts. This team consisted of community members from the cruising space. Shivananda closely developed the process, and we were all new at that time without any clue about how this kind of intervention and social work is done. We were collecting CVs, and he was the selection body (Interview, Ahmed/Bangladesh).

Shivananda Khan is a prominent name, and his guidance helped them to set up their organisation and get registered in 1996, which was an important turning point at that time. He was a huge force on HIV and LGBTQI human rights issues in the Asia Pacific region for decades. Shivanada had a vast knowledge of cruising spaces, drop-in centres, and outreach activity management in the region, which helped Shojon set up the organisation with potential human resources. In their annual events and dance events, there are celebrity endorsements and ministers as well as ambassadors present, which reflects that apart from material and human resources, they could mobilise cultural resources.

Their chairman, Islam, also highlighted their human resources while discussing their relationship and reporting with different donors. Being one of the two registered organisations working with the community, they have gathered vast experience managing international donors since the very beginning of their registration.

Different donors have different evaluation manuals and criteria, and we have to follow them. We can't just criticise them. I admire that we can learn from these critical donors who have a lot of queries. ... We now

have procurement, internal audit, and many other departments
(Interview, Islam/Bangladesh).

Here, Islam reflects their expertise in procurement, audit, and other policies that they have developed by working with the donor organisations for a long time. His statement also shows that there is a limited agency to question when they are working with the donors in their funds. He also highlights their learning from all the different requirements of different donors, and it is not common in other organisations. Jessica Noske Turner, in their book, talked about bureaucracy-driven evaluation, where they reflected a tension between the need for standardised evaluation and the desire for local agency and adaptability.

For over a decade, well-meaning development planners have developed sets of procedures, policies, templates, and checklists intended to standardise best practices across the organisation. While bringing greater awareness to the value and seriousness of evaluation for media assistance, this has simultaneously reduced the flexibility, engagement, specificity, and level of agency that stakeholders have. The evaluation procedures reduce the moments of deliberate decision-making (Turner, 2017, p 47).

Her statement highlights how the attempt to standardise best practices within development organisations, through procedures, policies, and checklists, has led to unintended consequences. While these measures aim to ensure consistency and emphasise the importance of evaluation, they have also diminished the flexibility, engagement, and autonomy of stakeholders. This rigid standardisation process reduces the opportunities for stakeholders to make deliberate, context-specific decisions, leading to a more bureaucratic and less participatory approach to development practices.

8.2.2 Partially funded community NGO

In this thesis, a partially funded community NGO is an organisation that receives some financial support from external sources but also relies on other forms of income, such as local fundraising, volunteer work, or in-kind donations, to sustain its activities. This type of NGO operates with a combination of external grants and community contributions, which helps maintain its operations at a local level. The partial funding model often means the NGO has to balance its reliance on external funding with grassroots support and self-sustainability strategies. Turning Point (Bangladesh) started from a social media group and now receives funds from two local fiscal sponsors. So apart from their material resource, like a small office space in a metropolitan city outside the capital, Bhandari talked about social organisational resources. He talked about his friends and acquaintances through whom he could start the group and keep it running.

I also met Bony through another social media group and learned we belong to the same city. We were very close, and we used to talk every day. I shared the idea of the group with Bony and introduced another friend. Later, I created a group with everyone. We arranged a get-together by the seaside. Two of my straight friends also came, who are allies... The cultural programme I organised during my university years helped me a lot in organising. In addition, I have the capabilities and skills of my family. I belong to the Maizbhandari⁴² A community where I was responsible for running a publication.

⁴² The Maizbhandari order of Sufism within Sunni Islam was founded in the late 19th century by the Bengali Sufi saint Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari from Chittagong. It is the only Sufi order to have originated from within the Bengal region, and, as an indigenous movement, it has continued to enjoy significant popularity through to the 21st century.

I always had the idea of decentralisation in mind, and that is how I gave so much responsibility to the young team members. It is not a paid position in many cases, as we are a new organisation (Interview, Bhandari/Bangladesh).

Here, it shows his skill and trust in people helped him to invest their time and come out to form a physical group. In his interview, he mentioned the time he used to spend on social media, which helped him to make a long list of people in the city and learn who was interested and specialised in what, which helped him to organise his group. Apart from the social organisational resource of knowing a good number of people, he chose the right people for building his collective growth from an online group to a physical organisation. His skill in managing groups and publications, which he learned from his uncle and other family members during his adolescence, played an important role. This is a human resource of their organisation as well. His narration also brings the point of friendship and solidarity in the forms of collective actions that Richa Nagar talked about in their work on gender, caste and movement. They mentioned that these situated solidarities – formed by a desire to dissolve individual egos in search of collectively embraced radical vulnerability – birth critical analyses that galvanise the movement (Nagar, 2021, p 170). When individuals like Bhandari come together and intentionally set aside their identities to embrace shared vulnerability, they form strong, context-specific bonds. These deep connections enable them to critically analyse social issues more effectively, which in turn energises and propels their collective movement forward.

Another member from Turning Point (Bangladesh), Oreo, also talked about the role of social organisational resources in their collective work while discussing their work pattern as a newly formed group of young people.

We do not have a network with international donors; we are trying to get some leads from other local organisations. We are working together as a coalition member of another organisation, but we want to find our way because working with someone means doing it their way. We want to do our stuff. It's a lengthy process, but it will work, I believe (Interview, Oreo/Bangladesh).

When the interview was taken, they did not have an office space, but later they secured another funding through a fiscal partner and now own an office space in the city. Their statement shows the importance of building their material resources but also shows their work pattern by building partnerships with others where they might not have the full agency while implementing a project, but as a ladder, they are mobilising it to design their collective campaigns. They also emphasised their faith in this current strategy of utilising their social organisational resource.

Ohona from Shurjer Alo mentioned that the role of human resources and their organisation is also a partially funded community NGO. It has been active for a longer time compared to Turning Point.

After mingling with all these people in my workplace at ODPUP⁴³, I slowly started to understand many ideas...I got various trainings from them about HIV/AIDS, STIs/STD as a field worker.

Right before the death of our Guru, we started to work on a small, funded project. There, I heard of a call for proposals online. I took it to a friend who runs an NGO with youth. He helped me access that link

⁴³ Organisation of Development Program for the Underprivileged

and read it for me. I prepared the proposal with a payment (Interview, Ohona/Bangladesh).

Her statement shows the difficulty of accessing the call for proposals, which was online. It also reflects the lack of ground reality from the donor's stance; however, her problem-solving skills helped her to overcome the challenges. She was a Hijra-identified person who could barely read and write. This is also a question of digital literacy and access to digital resources, and that is taken for granted that she will have them all. She managed to apply for the online proposal through her creative way of solving the problem and making an agency which was inaccessible to her.

Molly from Shurjer Alo, talked about how their Hijra group has become a partially funded NGO with the help of a fiscal sponsor and the changes she felt that had happened in her all through the process. Her narration shows how cultural resources like knowing the right person and managing the job have helped them to come forward from a Hijra group to a structured community-based NGO.

We formed a new committee for Shurjer Alo in 2014. The fiscal sponsor gave us training on business plans. I worked there on a project by the fiscal sponsor till 2012. This was my first learning about project management, there in that job. I was shy before; I could not talk in front of men at that time (Interview, Molly/Bangladesh).

Her interview showed how the formation has helped her to raise her voice and become self-dependent. Often narratives like hers are titled as impact stories of empowerment; however, how much freedom does she have in deciding a case of a donor-funded project is yet to be investigated. No matter whether she is empowered or not, such projects with resources support community

members like Molly to speak and articulate their opinions, which would not be possible without these trainings and other programs.

8.2.3 Non-Funded Organisations

Under this category, the discussion is about Bohurupi from Bangladesh and the History Trust from India. I categorise them as non-funded, as the founder of History Trust would like to identify them as non-funded, and Bohurupi, being a dance group, does not receive funds from any local or international organisations. Local people who can hire them for their ritualistic performance book them, and thus they manage to sustain their group as a lineage.

Singh, being the founder of the organisation and experiencing the shifts, prefers to identify their organisation as non-funded. I have categorised it; accordingly, however, there is a certain tension among the queer community groups regarding the fund and thus no one is comfortable talking about their donors. The unhealthy competition with limited resources also influences individuals not to talk about donor funding. Even if the History Trust do not have any funding from international donor organisations, their social organisational resource, as well as cultural resources, give them the capacity to have access to international spaces and resources, which does not entitle them to be a non-funded organisation.

Initially, they were an informal group and later worked with some donor funds under the name Friendship Club. Afterwards, they registered the organisation as a History Trust. From the experience of this long journey, Singh talked about their cultural resources and how they could form their organisation in Kolkata (India) and keep going till now.

By then, I had met enough people, and a guy referred me to Bombay Dost⁴⁴. He said I have seen your magazine, Instigator⁴⁵ and you are talking about supporting people in their hard times by letters and calls, so why don't we call it Friendship Club, as we will be doing friendly counselling, giving a friendly shoulder to each other. We can have Instigator as a house journal... today in History Trust, we do everything based on individual donations and personal consultancies, which also engage our staff, members, and volunteers (Interview, Singh/West Bengal).

Having a journal of their own and running an archive now is their cultural resource based on how they function. While they were forming the Friendship Club and supporting people in their isolation, finding contact and spending time in their pastime, the skill of listening, validating and being there is the cultural resource that they could utilise. In Bangladesh and India, such forms of collective action for the queer community members were based on friendship and solidarity, which is also a form of resource not discussed very often when resource sharing is discussed. Today History Trust also hosts an online locator that locates mental health professionals, sexual health specialists, COVID-19 services, human rights lawyers, queer support groups and other social support forums near one's city/town/village. They have developed this with the support of Grindr for Equality (G4E) and Saathi and their material resources; however, with only material resources, it could not have been possible. The team of History Trust and their trustee board members use mostly their cultural resources for all their initiatives, such as

⁴⁴ Bombay Dost, India's first registered magazine for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community. It was founded by Ashok Row Kavi in the year 1990.

⁴⁵ Instigator was an early LGBT magazine published in Kolkata (India), India, published from 1991 to 2000, in English and Bengali.

their 25-year celebration for the friendship walk, and that is how they are a non-funded organisation.

Proshanto, a trustee of the History Trust, Kolkata (India), talked about their learning from transnational organisations.

We learnt a lot from Tricone, Humsafar Trust, and Bombay Dost and used to follow their activities through journals. We were also following the health page of the newspapers. We had small funds from the government at that time for similar activities. The expenses were covered by members voluntarily or well-wishers who covered the space rent for three months (Interview, Proshanto/Bangladesh).

In the middle of the interview, Proshanto paused, and I could hear a sigh reflecting that talking about all these from his memory lane is a little disappointing for him, considering the changes in their collective action that have happened over the years. Their friends' collective was going smoothly when they divided the collective into two streams; one was for their meetups and publication: they used to donate a little from their pockets and some donations from their well-wishers to cover the rent for their space. The other one was a photo for sexual health awareness. There were funds available for HIV/AIDS prevention, as it isn't the thought of mobilising some resources along with their regular meetups. They were also receiving small grants from the government for awareness programmes and research. Though there were two streams, the people working for the organisation were at the same end; they could volunteer in one stream and earn money from the other. Today, History Trust is identified as a non-funded organisation. It depends on private donations and consultation fees earned by different trustee board members.

Here, the funds available for HIV/AIDS prevention supported organisations like Shojon, History Trust and Shurjer Alo to sustain their activities however,

the limitation of such funding is that they only cater for populations who are at risk of infection. As Paul Boice and Akshay Khanna in their journal on querying the male-to-male sexual subject in India, mentioned that this is especially vital in HIV prevention work because addressing sexual acts is especially important regardless of whether these acts are scripted as explicitly sexual by participants (Boyce & Khanna, 2011, p 93). It leaves out women and other vulnerable populations from sexual health advocacy which could make it a combined approach for awareness and mobilisation. It prevented other kinds of work, like lesbian organising and non-health-related political advocacy which made it harder for other community groups to sustain and work together under one umbrella.

From his account in the interview, it came out that initially, it was an informal friends' group like many others who were interested in mingling with each other and spending time together; however, they needed a space where they could have regular hangouts safely. To overcome the challenge of space they introduced membership, where they contributed a small amount of donation from each member. Due to the availability of transnational resources for HIV/AIDS research and intervention from both government and international organisations, they created a wing of their organisation to conduct research and awareness programmes to support the needs of the Turner organisations. It helped them to sustain themselves as some of the members could volunteer and at the same time earn some money by working for the funded project however, the pattern is unlike many other organisations that started it at that time. There was dependency as well as innovation to figure out the challenge of forming a collective safe space.

Nandita, another trustee of History Trust, also mentioned their cultural resource of presentation and management skills which is also a politics of

respectability. Being a trustee of the non-funded group, she highlighted the importance of donors in their work.

When I go outside in my locality, I often see young trans community members who don't know what to speak about. They have no idea how to present a problem or obstacle in front of others. They are not empowered. It is important to explain your problem in front of them. That is how you can take a leading position. If you are not vocal, you have to remain dependent on others... Also, when someone is talking about funds, it's important that I can picture the details of what may be my role and how I can use it. Otherwise, there is no hope of progress (Interview, Nandita/West Bengal).

Nandita talked about the importance of presentation and the skill of mobilising funds. According to her, having the cultural skills to imagine how funds can be utilised and how one can benefit from them is important. This also leads to the idea of respectability that the groups in Bangladesh and India care about. Being respected in a forum of people or policy discussions at the government or in front of foreign delegations is very important for these community members. They often ignore that there is a lack of priority and sincerity reflected by these people in their work as a result there are dysfunctional systems like transgender identity cards in West Bengal (India) and transgender protection law in Bangladesh.

Alok from the non-funded organisation Bohurupi, Bangladesh, talked about support and solidarity and how they maintain their team apart from the shows. His statement underscores the importance of mutual support, reciprocity, and appreciation in maintaining social cohesion and strong relationships within a community or group.

If the *chukri* says there is no rice, the *ostad* should buy rice bags for them. It's important to keep good relations with other group members and visit them when there is no show. It is not only for support but also to keep a good relationship by appreciation (Interview, Alok/Bangladesh).

Here, Alok reflected a perspective on social relationships, obligations, and reciprocity within a community. The phrase 'If the *chukri* says there is no rice, the *ostad* should buy rice bags for them' implies an expectation of mutual aid and support within a group. When one member expresses a need or a lack of resources (symbolised by the *chukri* saying there is no rice), another member (the leader) is expected to step in and provide help. This fosters a sense of reciprocity and solidarity within the group. Maintaining social ties and relationships is important even when there is no immediate or obvious reason to do so. Regular interactions and showing appreciation help to strengthen bonds and ensure ongoing support within the group. This appreciation is crucial for sustaining good relations and ensuring that the social fabric of the group remains strong. Friendship is not considered a resource; however, it has helped queer collectives in different forms of their collective actions, and it is not uncommon in the context of South Asia either.

Similarly, Shaon also reflects on how power is transferred from the leader to the other members and how they are paid, considering the role of *chukris* in the troops. Leadership is determined by the individual's ability to perform effectively. This suggests that the group values competence and skill in leadership roles.

When there is the question of selecting a new leader, it is from the *chukris* who can perform the best. If there are two, the person who has

the highest pitch⁴⁶ gets selected. We need voice modulation⁴⁷ when we perform as girls. It is not complicated to hand over the leadership as often *ostad* hands over the responsibility, and we all agree on that.

We all get equal payments, including *ostad*, but *chukris* gets some additional tips based on their performance (Interview, Shaon/Bangladesh).

Shaon's statement reflects the dynamics of leadership selection within a specific group or community. The process is described as straightforward and not complicated, suggesting that leadership transitions are relatively smooth, possibly due to strong social cohesion or a clear understanding of roles within the group. The ease of leadership transition, with the *ostad* often handing over responsibility, indicates a hierarchical structure where the authority is respected, and decisions are generally accepted by the group without conflict.

From the above-mentioned discussion of different resources, it can be derived that all the organisations talked about human resources where they have skilled or experienced leadership, and some of them have finance officers or volunteers who can manage websites or archives. On the contrary, the non-funded organisation highlighted the need for material resources and showed how they use their cultural resources by producing regular online and offline publications. The two partially funded community organisations in this project mentioned cultural resources and social organisational resources, where they have the skill to get the job done by engaging the right people. Their network and allies help them when needed; however, they also have the skill of

⁴⁶ Pitch is the quality that makes it possible to judge sounds as higher and lower in the sense associated with musical melodies.

⁴⁷ Voice modulation is the process of adjusting voice to convey meaning, emotions, and expressiveness. It is a key part of singing.

managing events, running social media campaigns and networking with influential people in the locality that helps them move forward along with their small material resources. The non-funded organisations highlighted friendship, solidarity and collective mobilisation, which is also true if we investigate the funded and partially funded organisations and social media groups. It is the most common factor that came as a resource in many of the narratives during the fieldwork.

8.3 Organisational narratives of resource sharing

Like the previous section, this section is also divided into funded, non-funded and partially funded organisations and their narratives. Where the key research question was collective action, the organisations talked about their challenges for collective action when they mobilised different funding opportunities. The queer organisational culture is shaped by a complex interaction between dominant governing logic and the normative ideals circulating within the organisations themselves. Funded organisations talked about their dependency on this fund and how they are going to fail to exist as a collective if there is no funding. Partially funded organisations talked about how funding creates a hierarchy among their team instead of strengthening the collective. In addition, they also talked about segregation, where the organisations that are beneficiaries are two separate parties created by the fund, and one had less understanding and insight about the other. Finally, the non-funded organisation talked about their struggle to exist; however, being free from many donors gives them the freedom to focus on the process rather than outcome.

Matthew Waites (2024) has argued about the hegemony of international donors in his journal on the international politics of development for LGBT+

inclusion. The UK case study reveals the precarious position of LGBT+ development within hegemonic state projects, as exemplified by its funding under Theresa May's Conservative government and subsequent abandonment by Boris Johnson's populist regime. This discontinuity underscores how LGBT+ rights and development are often secondary, marginal, and expendable in broader state agendas, reflecting their tenuous attachment to nationalist projects.

The UK case study shows that LGBT development was funded by one Conservative government under May, then dropped by the populist government of Johnson, which saw a disjuncture between discourse and practice. This requires an understanding of LGBT rights and development as usually secondary, marginal and detachable elements concerning such hegemonic projects and state practices, easily taken up or dropped...Moreover, the fluid and febrile character of such populist politics makes rapid changes possible and disrupts structural discursive continuities (Waites, 2024).

According to Waites, right-wing populism prioritises nationalism, is frequently tied to racism, and exhibits scepticism toward international aid. The intersection of LGBT+ rights with such political formations highlights the conditional and instrumental deployment of these rights rather than their inherent value. Additionally, the fluid nature of populist politics allows for rapid shifts, disrupting any sense of consistency. This volatility reveals the vulnerability of minority rights within populist frameworks and the broader challenges of sustaining rights-based initiatives under such regimes.

The relationship between the donor and the grassroots organisation has a certain hierarchy and Naomi Hossain in her book about understanding Bangladesh's unexpected success has addressed certain coloniality in this

relation. She addressed it as a master and slave relationship where her work sketches the relations between the Bangladeshi elites, the masses, and their aid donors.

It is commonplace that the aid relationship is an ill-concealed extension of colonial rule; aid flows are seen as either rightful restitution for historical imperialism or as evidence that the extractive relationship never ended, aiming to make Bangladesh safe for global capitalism. ... A telling analogy was that of the 'master-servant' relationship, a phrase that speaks of the acute personal discomforts of the aid relationship in which members of an elite are forced into the role of international beggar. Struggles against colonialism are grand and noble, but the master-servant dynamic is only ever about petty humiliation. The language speaks of reversals in the status hierarchies to which elites are accustomed, a sense of powerlessness within the larger web of international relations (Hossain, 2017, p 70).

While discussing the organisational narratives of resource sharing, it is important to address the status hierarchy Naomi has addressed as a 'master and slave' relation. I partially disagree with her argument because there is a degree of agency from Southern partners who choose to get involved, and the emergence of 'co-creation' practices for design projects. There are hierarchies that elites are accustomed to; however, there are creative ways of mobilising the challenges that queer organisations implement, which should not be ignored. She did not consider queer community members while talking about women about patriarchy, and public policy. Many of the researchers, like here, considered women from a biological perspective and thus leave the hierarchy that exists in queer collectives. Different organisations for this project, who talked about their collective actions and the relation with donors, reflected

certain challenges that also indicate the hierarchy between. Some of the points that came up during the interview are discussed below. Here, it is not only the donors but also the fiscal sponsors that give the organisation a sense of powerlessness.

8.3.1 Partially Funded Community NGO

Funding from donors is generally channelled through a coordinator of the organisation who is more aware of the rules and regulations of that certain donor by attending their workshops and training. This can create hierarchy inside the team and be a factor in their team building. In his interview, Bhandari from Turning Point talked about how a coordinator of a project gets more attention for attending different training and creates a certain position among the group. This has created a hierarchy among the group and can be a reason to demolish their understanding of each other, which is the core of such community-based organisations. These organisations are based on a common understanding and trust with each other, where such power dynamics can damage their queer labour, and such disputes are not uncommon if we investigate all these organisations of the two Bengals and their journey. Spivak suggests that while this opposition decides the future in a problematic manner, it is nonetheless more important to attend to the historical construction of representation through 'interest' than try to rethink the individual through concepts such as power and desire (Spivak, 1988, p 279). Here she suggests that rather than solely focusing on such problematic oppositions, it is crucial to pay attention to how representation has been historically constructed through the notion of 'interest'. This refers to how power dynamics, social structures, and cultural influences shape how different groups are represented and how their interests are perceived and pursued.

Bhandari who studied public administration and working for the government now apart from running the organisation Turning Point, mentioned a key argument which is the tendency of the donor organisations to provide a set guideline and policy under the funded project and thus try to frame into the rules and regulations under the name of good governance and different other policies such as procurement policy, sexual harassment policy or human resource policy.

Recently, we became part of a Dutch coalition which tries to tie up our thought process in various ways. It tries to dictate to us about how to do things. Often, they emphasise only deadlines. To maintain that deadline, we must follow up a lot, and thus, it ruins friendly understanding with the other community members.

The project coordinator is doing things alone to meet the deadline, and due to the time pressure, he feels that he can decide on our behalf.

Thus, there is a gap between him and the other team members. After attending the coalition, he tries to make everything very formal, which is sometimes not necessary for a small organisation like ours

(Interview, Bhandari/Bangladesh).

If we investigate the way organisations like Turning Point (and others) were formed based on queer labour, there was an aspiration of caring for each other and understanding with empathy. The case of Bhandari where he talked about his difficulty in managing the collective together, also shows the resentment for the pressure they receive from donors. On the other hand, he also discussed the careers that young community members can pursue through these donor-funded projects.

Srila Roy (2009) offered a rationale for the anxiety that has plunged feminists in the last two decades in India and how the institutionalisation of feminism has taken place in the context of India. Her paper narrates the rhetoric of institutionalisation of feminism in governmental, non-governmental and academic sites and how that has caused a sense of loss in India. She also talked about the concept of “limited intersectionality”, where subjects are openly queer yet “are still in the closet – hiding parts of the self-while performing the labour of being middle, upper-caste global, aspirational Indians”. This concept is also true in the organisations observed for their collective action in NGOised spaces and is elaborated in the interviews quoted in this section.

Compulsions to obtain and retain funding have not only limited the autonomy of women’s groups but also obstructed any fresh thinking on what constitutes feminism itself: ‘It is as if we know what ‘feminism’ is and only need to apply it unproblematically to specific instances’. The original political thrust of the women’s movement has been ‘blunted’ by this corporatisation and careerism; from the militant feminists of the 1980s, we have now become ‘nine-to-five feminists’ (Roy, 2009, p 343).

Her statement defines feminism as a constant process of unwrapping a box with different layers of feminist practices, and we still need to define that. Pressure from a donor end can ruin the friendship, understanding and sharing of information with each other for an initiative as described by Bhandari however, there are also creative ways that these organisations find to establish their agency in these donor-funded projects. Such pressure to manage resource sharing and extreme focus on completing the task often make community members ignore the care and empathy they start with. According to Roy, the

drive for collective action gets blunt when the priority is getting the job done. If the focus had been more on the process, that could have helped the collective to deliver a collective campaign. In the end, she directed that passion-driven activism becomes a nine-to-five job where there is no belongingness after the working hour. The ethnographic work of Srila on two organisations of West Bengal (India) is remarkable but it highlights the loss of feminist struggles in an age of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism, it did not capture the creative agency these organisations think of to cope with the restrictive environment.

While discussing the projects Ohona from Shurjer Alo, talked about her disappointment about the changes she has noticed in the last fifteen years. In her view, there has not been much change in the project content in the last fifteen years.

It was similar service delivery works just like today, with not much change. The call for proposal often indirectly insists on planning for essential welfare services, such as health care, awareness and sensitisation, and access to legal and other government support. I've seen this same kind of work for the last fifteen years (Interview, Ohona/Bangladesh).

Her statement refers that it is the same activity around awareness-building workshops and training programs that she has observed in the last fifteen years without any significant change in the content. Her statement has weight where the donor projects are mostly focused on service delivery in a time frame with a set of rules. Aeshna Badruzzaman who worked on non-state providers' use of spatialised networks in Bangladesh based on urban biased theory also mentioned that as NGOs play an expanding role in development assistance in Bangladesh and throughout the global South, they increasingly provide

services that were previously associated with government provision, such as healthcare and education (Badruzzaman, 2023, p 50). Employing a grounded theory strategy to explore urban-rural dynamics in service provision and to build on urban bias theory, her work highlights interactions between state and non-state actors, which is NGO here.

Apart from formation, the control of different donor-driven projects and their top-down approach to managing a project echoed in many of the interviews, and this section is going to discuss that. Ahona from Shurjer Alo talked about budgeting and how it engages a top-down approach while designing the project. As a partially funded organisation, their helplessness was very vigilant when she was narrating her stance.

The limitation of NGO projects is that they plan first, including a budget, without engaging the grassroots community members. They reach out to the community for implementation; however, it would look better if they were first taking input from us for developing the proposal. We are sufferers here, and the fiscal partners are just observant in this process (Interview, Ahona/Bangladesh).

During the interview, her distress came out as often there is a call for proposal circulated with some criteria and objectives of the project and organisations like Shurjer Alo, who are dependent on donor resources, need to apply for those funding proposals where they must design a project based on those already set priority areas. The entire process looks very democratic from the outer, but the proposal is prepared so that they cannot engage grassroots community members or their voice in it, though they want to. The process has time pressure as well as a set priority area, which indirectly excludes the needs of the grassroots organisations, and it resonated in many of the other interviews.

8.3.2 Funded NGOs

Having insight from the grassroots is often missing in the planning phase of the projects, and they only reach these for implementation, which resonates in the case of funded organisations. Tayob from Shojon, who works as a senior coordinator of a project, also mentioned that even if the organisations take the input through consultation, often they are not very serious about it.

We think we understand a lot as we have been working in the same field for a long time, but challenges are changing over time. We don't take the opinion of the community with honesty in the consultation meeting; it's more like a show. There is more formality in those meetings than action-oriented discussions. As a result, the outcome is there, but no quality (Interview, Tayob/Bangladesh).

It came out from her (Tayob) interview that there are meetings to take input from the grassroots, but there are too many formalities and discussions rather than action points. Thus, the international donor organisations are often detached from the ground reality of how programs and related finances are managed with queer labour, which is echoed in other interviews as well. Often, these meetings lack genuine engagement from all parties involved. In her interview, she mentioned that such meetings manifest tokenistic participation, where participants are invited merely for appearance rather than for their substantive input. In such cases, the meeting becomes more about fulfilling a procedural requirement rather than fostering meaningful dialogue and collaboration. Besides, often there are dominant presenters, which makes it difficult for the participants to provide their input, which is important for a collective campaign design.

Sangeeta Budhiraja, Susana T. Fried and Alexandra Teixeira (2010) talked

about effective remedies and responses in their work titled 'From Alphabet Soup to sexual rights and gender justice'. There they described the Nepali *meti* identity and said that as an international movement, there will always be issues of translating realities and contextualizing the conditions that give rise to violations; the sexual rights framework does not solve this problem, but it does help to name and identify common ground in ways that stand ready to animate effective remedies and responses. I do not agree with them as such works have helped different community groups; however, it also prioritises vulnerability from a sexual rights lens and excludes others.

Ahmed from the same organisation mentioned a similar point, which is limited knowledge from the donor perspective. He talked about donor flexibility, which has become a shrinking space in his view.

Donors are sort of giving less flexibility these days. They support, but they have limited knowledge of what they are supporting and for whom. I find them dominating now... If the funding stops from international donors, we have to close down. We have no source to continue as a non-profit (Interview, Ahmed/Bangladesh).

Donors frequently allocate funds for specific projects or purposes, which can limit NGOs' flexibility in allocating resources according to changing needs on the ground. These restrictions may be imposed due to donor mandates, project agreements, or donor preferences, constraining NGOs' ability to adapt their programs or respond to emerging crises flexibly. Besides often they require detailed reporting on how funds are utilized, including financial expenditure reports, progress updates, and impact assessments. Meeting these reporting requirements can be time-consuming and resource-intensive for NGOs, diverting their attention and resources away from program implementation. This can impede flexibility by creating bureaucratic hurdles and reducing

NGOs' capacity to pivot quickly in response to changing circumstances.

Sometimes, needful projects can get stopped as the donor organisation feel it is not important from their perspective. The project to sensitise religious leaders represents a critical attempt to bridge the gap between religious traditions and the rights of queer communities, highlighting the significance of engaging influential societal figures in transformative dialogue. However, the inability to move forward due to a lack of resources reflects the systemic barriers faced by marginalised groups in pursuing advocacy initiatives, particularly those that challenge deeply entrenched cultural and religious norms.

We started a project to sensitise religious leaders, but we could not take it forward. We wanted to analyse the trans and Hijra issues based on four religious holy books. But we could not continue because of the lack of resources (Interview, Ahmed/Bangladesh).

According to Ahmed, analysing queer issues through the lens of religious texts could have provided a nuanced understanding of inclusivity within faith traditions, potentially fostering greater acceptance within communities. The project's cessation underscores the broader issue of inadequate support and funding for intersectional initiatives that address both social justice and cultural sensitivity. This highlights the need for sustained investment and collaboration between stakeholders, including NGOs, academic institutions, and faith-based organisations, to ensure such initiatives can achieve their transformative potential.

Donors may impose specific requirements or conditions on program design, such as targeting certain beneficiary groups, implementing prescribed methodologies, or adhering to donor-driven agendas. While donor guidance

and expertise can be valuable, overly prescriptive funding requirements can restrict NGOs' autonomy and creativity in designing interventions tailored to local contexts or community needs. Ahmed talked about shutting down because while donor support is crucial for sustaining NGO operations and advancing their missions, the conditions attached to donor funding can sometimes impede organisational flexibility and autonomy.

8.3.3 Non-Funded organisation

In India, resource sharing played a role in the women's rights movement building, which was analysed in the book by Dave Naisargi (Dave, 2012). She wrote about queer activism in India, where she indicated that the women's movement was itself thoroughly influenced by the emergence of lesbian politics and the imperative to respond to it. India's structural adjustment program of the early 1990s, and the transnationalisation of social service provision that was part and parcel of it, brought the women's movement to a critical juncture. The increase in foreign funds for NGO building led to the production of an increasingly elite class of Indian feminists (described derisively as 'full-time activists' by more staunchly autonomous groups) who flew overseas for conferences, travelled domestically by plane rather than train, held mass meetings during office hours rather than in evenings (leading to the marginalization of people with non-activist day jobs), and earned solidly middle-class salaries. Interestingly, this more evident elitism among NGOs came at the same time as—and through the same process by which—women's poverty was becoming a more visible and urgent concern for the women's movement. Indian women were becoming poorer and left with fewer safety nets, while women's activists were becoming more resource-rich. This was a tension, they argue, that has since been negotiated on the terrain of lesbian

politics, and of sexuality more generally (Dave, 2012, p 123). This idea of resource-rich and poor was also reflected in the case of the non-funded organisation observed for this project. At one point in the discussion, Singh mentioned that it is almost impossible to run the organisation being non-funded. Singh is the founder of History Trust. He illustrated how he felt when a donor is more absorbed in number-oriented outcomes rather than the process. He talked about his early experience, which has compelled him to make History Trust non-funded.

My vision was to look at the process, not only the outcome. Our donor was very happy to see that in the proposal, but already there was pressure not to focus so much on the process. My point was that if the process survives, there will be a fantastic output. You will lose out in the process and work as a government otherwise dealing with only numbers. That is the tragedy that happened. The fiscal sponsor became a bit fidgety about our process; they wanted to see numerical outputs, and thus there was a lot of pressure to show numbers. That was also a reason why I started to lose interest when they were unable to see the value of the process. The donor outsourced the monitoring work to another agency, which was like a corporation. By that time, the project ended, and I lost all my energy (Interview, Singh/West Bengal).

Our conversation in a café in Kolkata (India) began with a popular expression in the two Bengals, which says, ‘Donors love numbers’⁴⁸. His chronicle illustrated the picture explaining how the organic form of collective action dies in this uproar of funding, which comes along with reporting. In between,

⁴⁸ Jessica Noske-Turner (2017) in their book on rethinking media development through evaluation used the phrase which is commonly used by the activists in Bangladesh and West Bengal and came out in various conversations.

he also mentioned how the government projects are like the donor-funded NGO projects, which are about the service delivery with numbers, but not for a sustainable change in society. The regulations and numerical reporting can sometimes be the reason for team conflict and dispute, which is often not recognised by the donor organisations.

Singh (History Trust, India) recalled the dispute that had happened in their organisation due to workload and formalising the small organisation. His experience is not uncommon in many cases of queer collective actions if we look at it.

Instigator⁴⁹ has stopped publishing, we have so much else to do. When I recused myself in 1998 from all these workloads, there was a debate in the group about membership rules, fees, frequency, and money.

The same set of people were doing everything, letter writing, workshops, and counselling. training, meetings, and through donor support, we had some funds. But for publishing, you need dedicated people. Things were getting very inorganic (Interview, Singh/West Bengal).

Singh's narration gives a clear picture of how, as a friend circle, they used to function slowly and how it was difficult for them to continue the publication for other workloads when they started to receive the funds. The institutionalisation of their queer labour made him decide between leaving the collective that he had formed. It was clear when he mentioned that they had a

⁴⁹ Instigator (later renamed Naya Instigator) was an early LGBT magazine published in Kolkata (India), India, published from 1991 to 2000, in English and Bengali.

lot of activity to deliver on time, and on that go, they could not manage to work on their publication, which required their collective labour.

Overall, this section talked about the focus on number-oriented outcomes and hegemonic viewpoints that often-queer collectives face when they collaborate with donors. Partially funded community NGOs talked about their struggle with team building, where donor-funded projects tried to tie them with workload and create hierarchy within the team. It also addresses that the layers in a project, such as donors, fiscal sponsors, organisation and grassroots beneficiaries, lack knowledge about each other. Similarly, the project activities have been the same for many years, which came out in another opinion and questions the credibility of such funded projects. Funded organisations mentioned the same communication gap between the project beneficiaries and project planners and pointed to the consultation meetings where bureaucracy is prioritised more than taking input. In addition, it also questions flexibilities and how that is a shrinking space for the organisations to function. Finally, non-funded organisations highlight the importance of process over numerical outcome and how collective action also demands time and energy apart from the planned activities.

8.4 Negotiating margins and telling stories differently: The path of creative agency

This section of the chapter is going to discuss how queer collectives creatively mobilise resources by creating agency. There are cases when, for better sustainability and understanding of reality, queer leaders tolerate certain manipulation. The organisations might have a very different viewpoint while they are sharing resources. This difference in the transaction of resources

might look problematic from the discussion above, but as Melucci says, “it is also a fact that the problem is never mere difference but rather the parallel necessity to overcome it, to make the constant effort of listening and understanding each other” (Melucci, 1996, p 162). He wrote about this while talking about contemporary collective actions where the language or the identities are very different, and this is also true in the case of two Bengalis, if we investigate the discussion above.

Ahmed, an executive director of a funded registered NGO, Shojon (Bangladesh), highlighted the importance of self-sustainability. After 25 years of operation, they now realise that if the funding stops, they need to stop as well.

In the last 25 years, we could not have our own office space, still it is still rented. We spent a lot of money on project implementation, but we did not materialise the idea of our own space. I now tell the young groups to see if they can do something independently (Interview, Ahmed/Bangladesh).

NGOs in South Asia often rely heavily on foreign aid and grants. However, external funding can be unpredictable and influenced by political and economic changes in donor countries. The statement of Ahmed shows that to create an agency for long-term commitment and collective action, it is important to have one's own space from which one can operate. It also resonates that funded projects focus on implementation rather than making the organisation stand on its own feet. By developing self-sustaining financial models, NGOs can reduce their dependence on external sources, thereby maintaining their autonomy and ability to set their agendas without external interference.

In addition, self-sustaining NGOs are more likely to engage in local resource mobilisation, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability within the community. When communities are involved in generating resources, it enhances their commitment to the NGO's mission and increases their participation in decision-making processes. Finally, self-sustaining models often involve building the capacities of local staff and communities to generate income and manage resources. This contributes to overall community development. By promoting self-sustainability, NGOs can contribute to the broader economic development of the region by creating jobs, supporting local enterprises, and fostering economic independence.

However, self-sustainability in various forms of collective action is also constrained by foreign currency regulations that exist in India and Bangladesh. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) restrictions in India have constrained the financial resources and operational freedom of NGOs in India, particularly those working in advocacy, human rights, and social justice. This can lead to financial instability and limit their operational capacity. NGOs involved in advocacy, human rights, and other sensitive areas face additional scrutiny, making it harder to work on sensitive issues. Several NGOs have been forced to shut down due to their inability to meet FCRA requirements or due to the government's refusal to renew their licenses. Similarly, in the case of Bangladesh, NGO registration is mandatory for receiving foreign currency, which is almost impossible for queer organisations to obtain for socio-cultural and religious reasons.

When Ahmed (Shojon, Bangladesh) addresses doing something independently without depending on the donor, it also indicates a non-Western alternative of redefining development and social change. Ziai has talked about the non-Western alternative as per his work, the current practice is ultimately about the

achievement of Western modernity by developing and transitional countries. In his work titled 'Post-Development 25 Years After The Development Dictionary', he discussed re-examining the future of development studies, based on its past and present trajectories. The argument here is that development may be useful if its norms and practices become context-specific and are made to benefit its purported beneficiaries. According to Escobar, post-developmental thinking believes that the economy must be based around solidarity and reciprocity; policy must focus on direct democracy; and knowledge systems should be traditional, or at least a hybrid of modern and traditional knowledge. Ziai particularly addressed the hegemony of the model and talked about how a single path is only considered for social change.

This means that alternative development merely looks for different roads to arrive at the same goal. However, if this goal is unambiguous and defined by modern, industrial capitalist societies, then even alternative development remains firmly grounded in the Western, or more precisely hegemonic, models of politics (nation-state and liberal democracy), the economy (neoliberal, globalised capitalism) and knowledge (Western science). Thus, we are still assuming a single path forward to a good society, and the potential of non-Western alternatives to these models to improve human well-being remains untapped. If we take the imperative of 'development pluralism' seriously, we need to consider these non-Western alternatives as well in order to redefine development, taking into account not only different paths to modernity but different ideas of a good life altogether (Ziai, 2017, p 2552).

According to his work, the post-development approach questions hegemonic models and promotes non-Western alternatives which can play a central role in a reinvention of development theory beyond the gridlock. His statement

indicates that the donor-funded development projects discussed in this chapter for collective action are often led by modern, industrial capitalist societies. His work talks about non-Western alternatives to improve human well-being and redefine development.

Tayob from the same organisation (Shojon, Bangladesh) has mentioned their opinion about how resource sharing can strengthen the foundation of an organisation for collective action, instead of a conventional list of activities that the international donors always want to see in the proposal.

The organised work of an NGO and the unorganised work of independent activists are both very focused on visible outcomes. A reading circle will not be considered as an activity of the NGO, as per their norms, only workshops, training and consultation meetings are considered as activities. We are not strengthening the foundation of our value system, but beating around the bush. We need to read more to get rid of this manipulative system (Interview, Tayob/Bangladesh).

Tayob talked about the donor requirements as well as expectations. There is a certain kind of program that the donors want to see in their activity list, which sometimes does not correspond with the needs of a community. Donors might have limitations of resources where they are often prioritising a certain kind of activity; however, as per Tayob it is important to push the boundary and incorporate activities with agencies that reach the community members for collective actions.

Financial independence allows NGOs to be more flexible and innovative in their approaches. They can allocate resources based on actual needs and experiment with new solutions without being tied to donor stipulations. Self-sustaining NGOs can better adapt their strategies to the local context, ensuring

that interventions are culturally appropriate and more effective.

Ahona from Shurjer Alo, Bangladesh, talked about tokenisation and mentioned that if the funds were directly transferred to the grassroots organisation, that would have been beneficial in many ways for delivering collective campaigns.

I think it will be good if international donors give us funds directly instead of fiscal sponsors. There is often a communication gap when the media is in between. When I say something, I feel it and articulate it, but the media will not feel that when they write a report. I have seen such people who worked with me on projects and later never talked to me when the project ended (Interview, Ahona/Bangladesh).

Her narration reinforces the idea of direct resource sharing instead of fiscal sponsorships, which is complicated due to government regulations; however, transnational donors can also find an innovative way to support such grassroots organisations that might not have a bank account or registration. Her idea of having the agency of the small organisations is utterly important, as fiscal sponsors can be manipulative, which can hinder the process of initiating collective action.

It is also notable here that from a donor perspective, there is no struggle between the small non-funded grassroots organisation to gain some resources. The small organisations are not deprived of fiscal sponsors, as, in their understanding of development, it does not exist. Aram Ziai in their work on ‘Justice, Not Development: Sen and the Hegemonic Framework for Ameliorating Global Inequality’ mentioned that in the discourse of ‘development’, there is usually no place for social conflicts or political struggles, because ‘development’ is seen as a process which benefits the whole

society and which consists of technical solutions, e.g., projects resulting in improvements in irrigation, productivity, technology or governance. Thus, the question of inequality is removed from relations of power and depoliticised (Ziai, 2014, p 35). There is a certain power struggle among the small organisations as resources are scarce; however, donors often ignore it from their development perspective, as they believe that through fiscal partners, everyone is getting benefits and there is no inequality. Naomi Hossain also addressed a similar power hierarchy, and she also gave a background about the fiscal sponsors.

Many Dhaka elites have recent peasant origins and associated ties. The nationalist political leadership and other elites are chiefly from recent peasant stock, families that entered the professions or had formal education in the past generation or so ...

Until recently, that group was close-knit and multiply connected by ties of kinship and location. That connectedness comes with intertwined personal histories: 'batchmate' university friendships created some enduring ties that cut across sectors and ideologies within the present generation (Hossain, 2017, p 54).

Indicating the connection between these elites and the nationalist political leadership, she talked about the elite clan which supports each other in this development story and also mentions that such stories are surprisingly common in many cases. She talked about how many of the fiscal donors, or their families, were affiliated with nationalist political leadership

Molly from Shurjer Alo, Bangladesh, recommended that if the projects are for a long duration, it could help them with the mission they are working on. All the projects that these four organisations were working on were short-duration, and none of them was more than three years. The socio-political and economic

landscape in South Asia can be volatile. Longer-term programs provide the flexibility needed to adapt to changing conditions, whether they be political shifts, economic crises, or natural disasters. This adaptability is crucial for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of NGO initiatives.

Projects are generally for three years; the first year goes for understanding and designing, the second year includes some activities, and the third year is generally all about reporting. If it's longer, the development can become sustainable. Now it's very difficult (Interview, Molly).

Self-sustaining NGOs can ensure the longevity of their programs and initiatives. This is particularly important in South Asia, where developmental challenges such as poverty, education, and healthcare require long-term commitments. Reliance on short-term grants can lead to disruptions when funding cycles end. A self-sustaining approach ensures the continuity and stability of operations. For developing strong collective actions, the resources from the donor must be there for a long duration. The social change expected from the donor-funded projects should have a long duration; otherwise, it stretches the community organisations to focus more on the day-to-day activity, which is also discussed in a section above.

South Asia faces chronic problems such as poverty, malnutrition, gender inequality, and inadequate healthcare. These issues are deeply entrenched and require sustained, multifaceted approaches to create meaningful and lasting change. Longer programs allow NGOs to implement comprehensive strategies, engage in continuous monitoring, and adjust their approaches based on feedback and changing circumstances. Secondly, effective development work hinges on local communities' trust and active participation. Trust is built over time through consistent presence, engagement, and demonstration of

commitment to the community's well-being. Longer programs enable NGOs to develop strong relationships with local stakeholders, facilitating better cooperation and successful outcomes. Finally, development challenges in South Asia are interconnected. For instance, improving health outcomes is often linked to enhancing education, sanitation, and economic opportunities. Longer programs allow NGOs to adopt holistic and integrated approaches, addressing multiple facets of development simultaneously, which is essential for creating synergistic and sustainable impacts.

From a nonfunded organisation, Monidipa (History Trust, India) highlighted the importance of human resources, particularly care work. A culture of care emphasises holistic human development by addressing the emotional, psychological, and social needs of individuals. This approach aligns with the principles of human development, which consider well-being in a multi-dimensional manner. By fostering care, NGOs can contribute to enhancing mental health, social inclusion, and community resilience.

Initially, I asked him to apply for Garima Greh⁵⁰ which is a huge fund. Singh was not very confident that we could pull it. We are low in manpower. However, we are together because of the leadership; the responsibility Singh took is working behind. He understands people's qualities very well. He has been working in the community for a long time. It attracts people (Interview, Monidipa/West Bengal).

Her narration depicts that if they had human resources, they could apply for bigger government projects, but they did not, as they were unsure about pulling the project. However, they remain together as the founder keeps

⁵⁰ Under the Ministry of Social Justice and Employment, the main aim of Garima Greh is to provide shelter to Destitute & abandoned Transgender persons with basic amenities like shelter, food, medical care and recreational facilities. Besides that, it will provide support for the capacity-building/skill development of Transgender persons.

supporting them with his care and concern. That brings them together as a non-funded organisation to survive and organise campaigns and other collective actions every year.

The culture of care enhances social capital by building trust, mutual aid, and community solidarity. In South Asia, where familial and community networks play a crucial role in social support systems, reinforcing these networks through a care-centred approach can strengthen the social fabric. NGOs that invest in care initiatives, such as community-based health services, educational programs that promote empathy and cooperation, and support groups, can foster stronger, more resilient communities capable of collectively self-organising and addressing local challenges. Secondly, South Asia is marked by significant social stratification, including caste, class, religion and gender disparities. A culture of care can help mitigate these inequities by promoting inclusive and compassionate practices. For instance, NGOs can facilitate dialogues and workshops that challenge discriminatory practices and encourage inclusive behaviours. Care-focused programs that prioritise the marginalised can contribute to more equitable social structures. Finally, while financial aid and infrastructural projects are important, their impacts can be limited without a supportive cultural context. A culture of care ensures that development initiatives are sustainable by fostering local ownership and participation. When communities feel cared for and are involved in the decision-making process, they are more likely to maintain and sustain development projects. For instance, health interventions are more effective when they incorporate culturally sensitive care practices that resonate with the local population.

The title of the chapter is about the organisational culture of resource sharing, and this subsection shows how organisations creatively create their agency

when they have limitations such as a short duration of the project or no funding at all. The organisations and their members collectively negotiate the margin, which is evident when they talk about sustainability, knowledge production and receiving funds directly instead of an intermediary fiscal sponsor. By creating a collective agency in their way, the community members come together and run campaigns that they find important for social change.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter shows the precarious role of resource sharing in queer collective organising by going beyond the merits and demerits. NGOs play the role of a broker between the international donors and local community organisations, which is discussed in the first section of this chapter. Due to the restriction from the government on transnational resource sharing, queer organisations use various innovative ways to mobilise their resource, and one of them is fiscal sponsorship. Through different resources that these organisations can access, queer collective actions, such as campaigns, are designed. The first section of this chapter highlights the different resources that these organisations mobilise. While all the funded, non-funded and partially funded organisations talked about material and human resources, the partially funded community NGOs talked about their social organisational resource and cultural resources and how that helped them to form their collective action. The second section discussed the organisational narratives where all the different organisations indicated hierarchy and communication gaps between donors and the grassroots beneficiaries. Both funded and non-funded organisations talked about existential crises where it is not easy for them to sustain and continue collective action without resources from the donors. The

final section shows creative ways of building agency, where there was discussion around a few points. Funded registered organisations talked about knowledge production and self-sustenance, whereas partially funded community NGOs talked about direct funding without fiscal sponsors and long-term projects.

Through the process of transnational resource sharing, a lot of identities are formed during the interchange of the intervention process, and that is also discussed in the second subsection of the chapter. Many of the organisations that are observed started from the concept of DIC,⁵¹ where the queer community members used to mingle and share their ideas through gossip, celebration, dispute and labour. The individuals started to make a collective from there, and now they can imagine collective actions together for policy change.

Similarly, the chapter also spoke about the approach of the NGOs and their hegemonic idea of partnership, where the grassroots organisations are inferior, and the donor organisations play the role of superior. Transnational donor organisations focus a lot on institutionalisation with policy and other frameworks, which many queer organisers found suffocating in the socio-cultural context. Too many policies and regulations in the sociocultural context restrain the queer collective from being autonomous, as the resources are packed with set guidelines and expected outcomes as a result. It also talked about how the organisations resolved the problem by creating an agency. There is sharing and interaction between the grassroots organisations through trainings and workshops; however, there is no coalition or platform where all of them could voice their collective action when needed. The anti-transgender

⁵¹ Drop-in Centres (DICs) are crucial service facilities for the People Living with Human Immune Deficiency Virus (PLHIV) under the National AIDS Control Program (NACP).

backlash discussed in Chapter 7 is an example of how they fail to unify as a collective to act or build a movement in the street in front of the mob; nevertheless, they can deliver campaigns collectively. For partnerships, these queer organisations prefer to partner with fiscal partners or donors.

While talking about forms of resistance, withdrawal and symbolic challenge, Alberto Melucci mentioned not participating in the progressive rhetoric as a form of resistance in his book *Challenging Codes*. In a society where power is maintained through specific communications and structures, subtle forms of resistance like silence and retreat can be powerful. These acts can express dissatisfaction with the status quo and open up possibilities for alternative ways of collective action.

Beyond the outward appearance that may be assumed, it is important to understand that in a culture where communication becomes the means and content of domination, silence and retreat are forms of resistance and express new needs through which alternative models of social life are experimented (Melucci, 1996, p 183).

His statement discusses how, in a culture dominated by certain power structures and forms of communication, silence and retreat can serve as forms of resistance. According to Melucci, the alternative ways of creating agency for collective actions discussed in the last section of the chapter are a response to the domination faced by the collectives. In such a dominant culture, not all resistance is loud or confrontational. Sometimes, choosing to be silent or withdrawing can be a powerful form of resistance. By not engaging with the dominant structures, individuals can undermine them.

The resource sharing in the socio-economic reality has made many of the initiatives land at a critical juncture where there are activities when there is a

resource, and when there is no resource, the activities stop. One clear example is the rise of the HIV/AIDS-infected population (Appendix 4) in Bangladesh in recent years, where the funding has decreased due to the shift from the MDGs to the SDGs.

There are criticisms of transnational resource sharing, where some social research literature named it ‘full-time activism’ and some others named it a ‘nine-to-five feminist job’ (Menon, 2004). From the data presented in the chapter, interviewees criticised the donor's attitude as number-oriented and outcome-focused only, instead of social change and sustainability. Instead of aiming at the process, they are often more concerned about the outcome in numbers, which ruins the ideology behind the intervention. Funding can make some organisations ‘resource-rich’, whereas other grassroots organisations outside the metropolitan cities are unable to exchange resources at an eye level with the international donors.

Community members interviewed highlighted the learning that they gained as a resource, and some of them have also formed other organisations through it. These community members suggested that if resource sharing could focus more on knowledge production or long-term objectives, there would be a more mutual benefit in the case of both sides of the equation.

The influence of NGOs can be visible in many socio-political initiatives in the contemporary queer organising scene, such as human rights, public health, gender justice, digital security and many more. NGOs have played a vigorous role in lobbying, policy change, awareness and network building. There is a linear and simplistic narrative that obscures the complex and critical organising of local queer communities in Bangladesh and India.

My sociological contribution in this chapter argues that queer collective actions in both Bangladesh and West Bengal are heavily dependent on material resources from international donors. This reliance underscores existing economic inequalities and often creates tension among various queer collectives. Such funding dynamics contribute to a form of political and cultural isolation, a phenomenon illustrated throughout various examples in the chapter.

In sociopolitical discourse, this region is frequently portrayed as conservative due to their religious affiliations, Hindutva and Islam, while structural issues such as international sanctions, shifting immigration policies, and ongoing conflicts with the state are often overlooked. The absence of celebrated values such as queer visibility and liberal gender norms like the SOGIESC framework is routinely framed as a deficiency, reinforcing a narrow, Eurocentric conception of progress. This framing is further complicated by contradictions in state and institutional practices: while queer migrants are subjected to deportation and marginalisation, international development aid simultaneously funds queer collective actions. However, such development interventions rarely engage with religion as a significant cultural force, despite donor organisations being acutely aware of its central role in shaping local social relations and, at times, its friction with queer and feminist mobilisations.

Similarly, within many queer and feminist collectives, religion is often deliberately excluded from political engagement from the above-mentioned influence. This omission reflects both a strategic silence and a deeper discomfort: a fear of alienating secular-progressive elites and the assumption that progressive politics must inherently align with secularism and public visibility of non-normative genders and sexualities. As a result, critical

opportunities to engage with religion as a site of both constraint and potential transformation are often left unexplored.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

The main research question for this thesis was ‘How should sociological analysis interpret the forms of collective action by sexual and gender minorities in Bangladesh and West Bengal?’. I chose five organisations and two social media groups from Bangladesh and India to analyse and watch several of their activities through various methods. The key contribution of this thesis lies in its exploration of collective action through social media, events, and resource distribution, highlighting new forms of digital organising and community-building.

Talking about original contribution, the relationship between dominant, well-funded NGOs and partially funded community NGOs reflects a power dynamic rooted in resource control, institutional legitimacy, and the politics of recognition. Large, well-funded NGOs often co-opt grassroots movements, either to assert control over the narrative or to address the fundamental concerns of marginalised communities. By integrating partially funded NGOs into their structures, these organisations reinforce existing hierarchies, ensuring that grassroots actors remain dependent on them for legitimacy and funding.

Moreover, the bureaucratisation of activism within funded NGOs often leads to repetitive cycles of mobilisation without substantial structural change, as their survival depends on maintaining donor relationships rather than achieving radical transformation. In contrast, partially funded community NGOs, though operating with minimal resources, demonstrate resilience and efficiency, optimising their limited funding to create more impactful,

community-centered interventions. However, their contributions remain underrepresented in academic discourse, which often privileges institutionalised activism over decentralised, grassroots efforts. The exclusion of these community-driven organisations from scholarly analysis further marginalises their role, reinforcing a top-down model of movement-building that overlooks the agency and adaptive strategies of locally embedded actors.

From a methodological viewpoint, this thesis critically examines the structural and discursive frameworks that shape queer collective actions in Bangladesh and West Bengal from a sociological perspective, moving beyond the biomedical lens that has historically dominated research on MSM within HIV/AIDS discourse. By focusing on social media, event organising, and NGO-ised spaces, it highlights the interaction of digital activism, grassroots mobilisation, and institutional constraints, revealing how queer communities navigate visibility, resistance, and systemic exclusion. The comparative approach between Bangladesh and West Bengal challenges nation-state boundaries as rigid markers of identity, instead emphasising transnational solidarities and shared struggles shaped by colonial legacies and contemporary socio-political conditions. Additionally, the use of creative methods and event-based ethnography disrupts traditional research paradigms, positioning queer activism as an evolving and performative process rather than a fixed category. By analysing collective actions through multiple organisations and digital platforms, the study underscores the fluid and networked nature of queer resistance, illustrating how marginalised communities construct alternative spaces for belonging and agency despite legal and societal constraints. In doing so, the thesis not only contributes to the sociology of gender and sexuality in South Asia but also broadens the understanding of activism beyond institutionalised frameworks, highlighting the significance of informal and ephemeral forms of organising.

How do the narratives of queer labour in celebratory events intersect with digital cultures and transnational funding in the last three empirical chapters, and what are their implications for gender and sexuality? To explore this, I would like to refer to the idea of sexuality and gender beyond heterosexuality, which is discussed in Chapter 1.

In their article on ‘MSMing as a networking concept,’ Paul Boyce and Fabian Cataldo examine how community workers in various locales engaged with the term *MSM* (men who have sex with men) in ways that superficially aligned with local sexual subjectivities. However, they argue that *MSM* operates as an *external actant*, a classificatory tool embedded within global health discourse and documentation practices. What remains underexamined is how the acronym *MSM* functions as a site of multiple encodings, partial recognitions, and silences around same-sex sexual lifeworld.

‘MSM’ has also been seen to have been taken up as a term for recognition in many settings, whereby a statement such as ‘I am MSM’ has become a discursive form, suggestive of shared modalities of self-identification, albeit in far from straightforward terms... ‘MSM’ may be a ‘necessary’ term sometimes, not only to secure funds for NGOs conforming to dominant paradigms (at least in public) but also as an attribute of how knowledge communities operate, within standardized terms of reference (Boyce, Cataldo, 2019, p 222).

In programmatic settings, its usage has tended to reify behavioural categories that obscure lived experience, flattening complex subjectivities into epidemiologically legible groups. As a result, the intimate, affective, and relational dimensions of queer life are frequently rendered invisible. The disjuncture between such technocratic labels and embodied realities reveals

the epistemic violence embedded in well-intentioned public health and development frameworks.

In 2023, a PDF book titled *Shomotar arale shomokamita (Homosexuality behind the curtain of equality)* gained widespread circulation via WhatsApp and various websites. Authored by Bangladeshi religious extremist Mohammad Sarowar Hossain, the text is steeped in pseudoscientific claims and moral panic. On page 231, the author alleges that the American Ford Foundation financially supported a project titled *Strategic Response to the Reproductive and Sexual Health Needs of MSM in Dhaka* as part of an effort to generate public sympathy. Citing the Shojon Welfare Society, he contends that the term MSM (men who have sex with men) was strategically embedded into national health policy, thereby allowing such initiatives to operate without legal restrictions. The author further suggests that government officials were unaware that such health-based interventions could serve as a gateway, transitioning from HIV/AIDS prevention work to broader LGBT rights activism.

The deployment of terms like MSM within public health and development programming, while intended to address specific health risks, often reinforces rigid behavioural categories that obscure the nuanced realities of queer lives. This technocratic language flattens complex subjectivities and erases the emotional, relational, and embodied aspects of queer existence, thereby enacting a form of epistemic violence. Concerning that, the book circulation also addresses the term MSM. By weaponising public health terminology and framing it as a covert conduit for activism, such narratives fuel moral panic and justify intensified surveillance and repression. This backlash not only jeopardises essential health services but also further marginalises queer collectives by portraying them as threats to national and religious integrity.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I introduced the various resources that are discussed throughout the thesis. Introducing my positionality briefly, I highlighted the legal framework that shapes the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh and India. The reasoning behind why I chose the two Bengals is also explained in that chapter. A brief narrative about the history of the two Bengals, as well as the role of religion in the present context, is also introduced in this chapter. This provides the background to the forms of collective actions described in this thesis. Previous academic research on the two Bengals has not explored the collective actions of queer collectives, making this thesis an original contribution to the field.

The second chapter situates the project within key theoretical frameworks that critically inform our understanding of collective actions. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial theory, it highlights how global power asymmetries continue to shape knowledge production, identity politics, and activist strategies. However, the chapter also addresses the limitations of these frameworks, when they overlook localised cultural nuances and become overly abstract in addressing grassroots mobilisations. Concepts such as homocolonialism and homonationalism are explored to interrogate how queer identities are mobilised concerning state agendas, transnational funding, and global human rights discourses, often reinforcing exclusionary norms under the guise of inclusion. The chapter then examines scholarship on collective action and social movements, particularly how movements are formed, sustained, and challenged in neoliberal and authoritarian contexts. The role of culture, civil society, and the NGO-isation of activism is critically analysed, noting how institutional logics can both enable and constrain political mobilisation. Taken together, these bodies of literature provide a nuanced conceptual lens through which to examine the specific dynamics of queer collective action in this project's context, where visibility, resistance, and

negotiation are shaped not only by local cultural politics but also by global developmental and digital frameworks.

In Chapter Three, I showed that the existing social research on queer communities in Bangladesh and West Bengal primarily focuses on NGO involvement and Hijra communities, yet it often overlooks the resources mobilised for collective actions within these organisations. The gap in research literature reveals a requirement to investigate groups outside the capitals, particularly those working with isolated identities like Chukri collectives. While West Bengal shows promise with a growing body of social research, Bangladesh remains under-researched, particularly in terms of how queer collectives function under oppressive conditions and creatively exercise their agency. This chapter begins with postcolonial and decolonial theories to explore the socio-political contexts of Bangladesh and West Bengal, and applies resource mobilisation theory to analyse the collective actions and resources of various queer collectives in these regions. The chapter also shows that the history of sexuality, gender, and queer studies in Asia, often overlooked, plays a crucial role in understanding the social and legal dynamics that shape queerness in both countries, influenced by complex cultural, religious, and colonial legacies. In West Bengal, the queer movement has shifted from underground activism to more visible, legally recognised efforts, while Bangladesh's LGBT+ movement remains largely clandestine, facing considerable legal and social barriers. International NGOs in Bangladesh tend to focus on short-term, standardised projects, neglecting the diverse needs of queer collectives, which have not received adequate academic attention. In West Bengal, both community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs have supported collective action, though the process has been complex, often excluding collectives outside metropolitan cities. The discussion about different forms of collective actions came later in the chapter, where the

argument was about the history of NGOs in Bangladesh and India. In that connection, there is a specific focus on sexual health funding where forms of collective action are often not discussed in the existing social research literature. Both regions, particularly organisations located outside the metropolitan cities, face challenges in securing funding, with competition for resources leading to fragmented efforts, while digital platforms, though providing new avenues for collective action, also perpetuate inequalities and expose activists to harassment.

The fourth chapter is about research design, where the discussion focuses on designing the thesis considering positionality, reflexivity and ethics. The data collection methods, as well as how they were later examined, are analysed in this chapter. Previous research has explored Hijra communities and the role of NGOs in driving social change, with some focus on women's rights movements. However, there has been little to no work examining collective actions by queer community organisations, particularly through a complex and multi-faceted research design. This study stands out for its originality by employing four innovative methods, tailored to capture unique insights into these organisations. First, it utilises non-conventional approaches, specifically designed to uncover the perspectives of queer community organisations, methods that have not been applied in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal. Second, it shifts the focus to collective actions outside the capitals, addressing the often-overlooked contributions of grassroots movements in regional areas. Third, it bridges the social research literature gap by studying Bangladesh and West Bengal together, offering a comparative yet interconnected perspective that is rare in existing literature. These distinctive elements of the research design not only ensure a fresh and nuanced contribution to knowledge but also highlight the originality of the thesis by

addressing overlooked areas, using novel methodologies, and challenging metropolitan-centred narratives in queer studies.

Chapter five introduces the five organisations and two social media groups I worked with, concluding with a comparative analysis. These organisations are diverse, representing a range of experiences and approaches not previously explored in academic research on West Bengal and Bangladesh. The chapter also introduces the concept of transboundary encounters, which is later analysed through the narratives of community members gathered during the fieldwork. While the organisations could be categorised in various ways, I have classified them into three categories: funded, non-funded, and partially funded community NGOs. Through the narratives of organisational members, the chapter examines the resources utilised to facilitate collective actions. The chapter concludes by comparing the organisations, focusing on the communities they serve, their structures, and their resources. It provided an unprecedented, original comparative analysis of LGBT+ NGOs in Bangladesh and West Bengal concerning specific themes.

Chapter six explores how queer events act for fostering respectability and shaping collective identity, emphasising the social dynamics that bring community members together. The chapter critically analyses how these events enable interaction and solidarity while also negotiating societal perceptions of respectability tied to queerness. By framing collective identity as a process, it highlights the intersection of individual agency and community formation within broader cultural and social contexts. Among the events and creative workshops, there is also a discussion of how queerness and forms of collective action exist outside the big metropolitan cities. The terminologies like men in drag or trans might be popular in metropolitan cities. The *chukri* dancers and their performances subtly express homoerotic desire, despite

existing within an overtly patriarchal society. This contradiction highlights the anxiety between private sexual identities and public societal norms. Various forms of same-sex sexualities exist in the rural context of Bangladesh and West Bengal, although they are not represented in academic research. In this scenario, homosocial norms allow individuals of the same gender to be together in private and public spaces without being perceived as homoerotic. In such a patriarchal society, homosocial interactions do not provoke cultural anxieties about same-sex sexualities, whereas similar hetero-social interactions are often restricted. A decolonial perspective is employed in this chapter to analyse events, including the outcomes of creative workshops and observations made during the fieldwork. Pre-colonial and contemporary contexts are explored, culminating in a discussion of the dynamics of various resources, such as collective labour and friendship. While some social research from India touches on events like parties, Pride Walk, and film festivals, the events argued in this chapter are original. They offer a fresh perspective on organisations by examining them through the lens of their organised events—something that hasn't been done before.

In Chapter Seven, I explore queer digital life, focusing on how members of the queer community in Bangladesh and West Bengal create alternative profiles and online sanctuaries to resist and cope with the hostile environment around them. To observe two social media groups, I created a separate profile, following ethical protocols approved by the Ethics Committee of the College of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow. The chapter begins by introducing these social media groups and detailing the resources they utilise to sustain and manage their online spaces. It examines how these platforms serve as sanctuaries for collective emotions, where members often choose silence or indirect communication to navigate societal pressures and maintain a sense of safety. Through two case studies, centred on pride and

shame, the chapter delves into the collective emotional dynamics that shape queer digital expression in this socio-cultural context. These case studies illustrate how subtle and nuanced forms of self-expression help build solidarity and resilience among members of the queer community. The analysis highlights the tension between public visibility and personal safety, showing how individuals strategically negotiate their identities in digital spaces. The chapter sheds light on the unique ways queer individuals in Bangladesh harness digital platforms to foster connection, resistance, and emotional support. Additionally, it underscores the role of online spaces in offering an alternative form of activism and self-expression in a context of legal and social oppression. This exploration not only expands the understanding of digital sanctuaries but also demonstrates how collective emotions become a powerful tool for survival and identity formation in marginalised communities. Chapter 6, therefore, situates queer digital practices within the broader socio-political landscape, revealing the complex interplay between digital spaces and lived realities.

There is a disconnect between resource mobilisation and movement building in online groups and offline NGOs, and it reflects broader structural and organisational divides in activism. While both online and offline spaces engage in queer collective action, their strategies, priorities, and modes of engagement often remain isolated from one another. Online groups, despite having a physical presence, prioritise digital visibility and discourse, yet they do not always translate their influence into tangible grassroots activism. Conversely, offline NGOs, though present in digital spaces, often fail to integrate online mobilisation strategies into their movement-building efforts. This disconnect can be analysed through the lens of resource dependency, where NGOs shape their activities based on available funding, institutional constraints, and dominant paradigms of activism. On the other hand, online

groups may have digital resources, but they lack economic resources, whereas offline NGOs may have material resources but lack digital fluency. While some movements transition from digital to physical spaces worldwide and in South Asia, queer activism in Bangladesh and West Bengal remains fragmented due to institutional barriers, differing access to resources, and a lack of mutual engagement strategies, limiting the potential for a cohesive and intersectional movement.

The final data analysis chapter, Chapter eight, explores the distribution of local and international resources, examining how these resources are accessed, allocated, and utilised within queer collective actions. The chapter highlights the organisational culture of resource distribution. It demonstrates how, through creative agency, queer collectives mobilise to overcome different obstacles they face in navigating this terrain. There are discussions around the role of transnational resources and why it is difficult to sustain these organisations without such resources. The chapter underscores a critical tension in how queer collectives in Bangladesh and West Bengal navigate their socio-political realities, particularly under the influence of transnational discourse. This discourse, rooted in Western-centric frameworks of LGBT+ rights and activism, often imposes universalised notions of queerness that may not align with local cultural and political contexts. While non-Western donors might fund aspects of these communities, their influence can inadvertently replicate their dynamics, shaping agendas and priorities that might diverge from grassroots needs. When local queer politics rise to public visibility, the chapter illustrates that they are often co-opted into the globalised narrative of queer rights, reducing their local specificity and political agency. This incorporation risks marginalising the unique, context-specific demands of these collectives, as their struggles are reframed to fit a broader, transnational agenda. The analysis highlights the complexity of balancing the benefits of

global solidarity and resources with the potential loss of autonomy in defining local queer identities and rights. Critically, this chapter reflects broader challenges within LGBT+ activism, where movements in the Global South must resist the dominance of Western paradigms to maintain their cultural relevance. Chapter Seven also highlights the creative ways in which these collectives assert their agency, adopting a nuanced approach that balances local realities while engaging with global networks. By doing so, the chapter ensures that the voices and agency of queer collectives in Bangladesh and West Bengal remain central to their ongoing struggle for rights and recognition. The chapter explores the concept of negotiating margins, emphasising the need to reframe dominant narratives and give voice to marginalised perspectives. It critiques conventional storytelling methods that often reinforce exclusion and advocates for alternative frameworks that challenge power structures. By reimagining how stories are told, the chapter seeks to create a space for more inclusive and diverse representations of lived experiences. Existing literature frequently critiques international funding, highlighting the dichotomy between the East and the West. However, this chapter focuses on the creative agency that organisations mobilise despite these limitations. The creativity explored here is particularly original in the context of Bangladesh and West Bengal, especially within queer organisations and their stories of collective actions.

Srila Roy, in her recent book, argues that she can see how both queer and non-queer feminist movements, in their efforts to avoid being co-opted by mainstream forces, can unconsciously reinforce biases and hierarchies (Roy, 2022, p 168). She critiques how organisational strategies, driven by global funding obligations, often fail to genuinely engage with and politicise these differences, thus limiting the potential for an inclusive approach. Her

observation is based on two organisations in West Bengal, but it is also true if we investigate the analyses of queer collective actions in Bangladesh.

Across all the analysis chapters, it becomes evident that queer collectives in the two Bengals face significant sociocultural challenges. However, they actively negotiate these obstacles with creative agency. In all the data chapters, the highlights are friendship, care and collective emotion to overcome the obstacles and challenges deeply rooted in the culture. At the same time, the analysis also shows how the queer community faces internal conflict due to hierarchy and resource-related tensions. There is a half-truth in the way they form collective action, and there is a fictional solidarity that is projected in their sanctuary of collective action.

The division among different queer collectives in Bangladesh and West Bengal can be understood through the lens of resource scarcity, which is influenced by both historical and contemporary factors. The legacy of colonial resource extraction, coupled with ongoing economic disparities (Appendix 10), creates a context where resources are limited for movement building. The pay disparity in sectors like the ready-made garment industry, a major export for both regions, further exacerbates this scarcity. Workers in this sector receive wages that are far lower than those in the Global North, which reflects broader economic inequalities that impact resource distribution within local communities. As a result, the queer collective actions in these areas are shaped by tension between groups with differing access to resources. This scarcity fosters an environment of envy, where collectives with more access or international connections are seen as privileged, while those without resources struggle to sustain their efforts. This dynamic not only affects the practical aspects of organising but also shapes the relationships and power structures within the queer collective actions, highlighting how broader economic

conditions influence social movements and interpersonal dynamics within them.

The thesis also sheds light upon the relation between collective identity and religion in a nuanced manner, which is evening in the arguments of Hindutva's cultural influence and Shojon's unsuccessful project with religious figures due to funding issues (Chapter Seven). In South Asia, religion deeply shapes collective identity, offering shared values and histories while also being instrumentalised in national and ethnic politics. Despite the region's pluralistic traditions, religious identities have been politicised, fuelling tensions and marginalising minorities. Ultimately, religion in South Asia mediates between unity and division, inclusion and exclusion.

Regarding the question of addressing religion in queer collective actions, there exists a subtle form of activism and movement-building in the two Bengals. In the case study of the Pride Walk (Chapter 6), the comments and criticism about social exclusion remain online, but the activist did not feel safe to confront those arguments offline. Similarly, the Bangladesh community prefers to be silent during the anti-transgender backlash (Chapter 6) and believes that silence at that moment will bring them justice. In the stories of friendship, care and solidarity, there is also a double consciousness that plays a role here. Activists and community leaders are aware of the socio-cultural context of social exclusion, but at the same time, there is a certain anxiety about addressing it directly. In many cases, the organisations detailed in this thesis were uncomfortable discussing their resources.

Because of these half-truths, in case of a backlash or power struggle with donors and fiscal partners, the allies or the civil society members fear to honestly outline the challenges ahead. Due to the socio-cultural context detailed in the thesis, they prefer to live in their sanctuary and perform a role

where they remain quiet. Some of the leadership feel responsible, but there is a common culture of denial, which is also visible in government-level initiatives.

Behind all the arguments of forming collective identity through queer celebration events, digital life and resource sharing, majoritarian cultural identity plays a significant role. The influence of religion in the local culture often disrupts the forms of collective action, which is clear in some of the data presented in different chapters. The lack of representation of queer Muslims in West Bengal and the broader hesitancy to address religion in queer collective actions reflect the complex interplay of identity, secularism, and communal politics in India. Noting the lack of representation of queer Muslims in the History Trust, I discussed this issue with one of its members, Monidipa, along with the broader rise of Hindutva. She explained that in India, queer collective actions generally avoid addressing religion out of fear that it might be labelled as communalism. The member's observation highlights a fear of invoking accusations of communalism, demonstrating how secularism in Indian activism often suppresses discussions of religious identity to maintain solidarity across diverse groups. This approach, while fostering Hindu-Muslim cooperation within queer movements, risks erasing the unique experiences of queer Muslims, who navigate both religious marginalisation and queerness in a politically charged environment. The avoidance of addressing religion might inadvertently reinforce Hindutva's homogenising tendencies, silencing marginalised voices within the queer community under the guise of unity. Such tendencies not only reinforce communal divides but also legitimise Hindu nationalism, perpetuating cycles of violence and oppression (Osella, 2012, p 532).

To fully grasp these reactions, it is essential to situate them within the broader crisis of governance faced by many South Asian postcolonial states. Hyper-nationalism (Hossain & Rahman, 2024, p 7), as a facet of state authoritarianism, reflects deeper insecurities in governance and state legitimacy, often exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities and historical tensions. This phenomenon is closely tied to the patriarchal and homophobic cultural underpinnings that were integral to the anti-colonial nationalist movements in South Asia. These movements often valorised heteronormative family structures and traditional gender roles as symbols of cultural resistance against colonial domination, embedding exclusionary ideologies within the foundations of national identity. In contemporary times, hyper-nationalism sustains these legacies by marginalising dissenting identities and ideologies. It reinforces exclusionary narratives that suppress diversity and opposition. This interconnection reveals how historical trajectories of patriarchal nationalism and authoritarian governance continue to shape and constrain the political and cultural landscape in South Asia.

As discussed in this thesis, queer collectives in the two Bengals tend to avoid reconciling their work addressing religion, likely to preserve the safe spaces they have created. Furthermore, the collective actions of the two Bengals originally emerged within a health-focused framework, which no longer aligns with the current socio-cultural context. In the case of Bangladesh, the juxtaposition of progress in social recognition and its accompanying backlash demonstrates the fragility of advancements for queer communities, suggesting that symbolic progress often coexists with persistent vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the portrayal of religion as an inherent adversary to queer collective action in popular discourse simplifies a complex relationship, potentially alienating religious queer individuals and missing opportunities for solidarity. This critique underscores the need for deeper structural reforms and

nuanced narratives that account for socio-economic, cultural, and religious complexities.

A nuanced scholarly examination of the impact of religion on queer activism in the two Bengals was beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it remains crucial when discussing the broader contribution to understanding the socio-cultural paradox of collective action in both Bengals. The notion that religion is inherently antagonistic to the collective actions of queer communities is not merely misinformation but reflects a deeper sociological dynamic. This issue transcends the simplistic binary. The framing of addressing religion as the 'irrelevant' of queer activism reveals underlying political, social, and material forces that influence how these discourses emerge and are perpetuated. The challenge lies not in uncovering a singular, objective truth but in critically analysing the structures and motivations that give rise to this perspective, as they are deeply rooted in broader societal dynamics and power relations.

The evidence presented in this thesis shows that queer collective actions in South Asia are deeply entangled with transnational influences, religious nationalism, and socio-political exclusion. The HIV/AIDS policy framework has played a significant role in shaping non-Western understandings of sexual diversity, particularly through the increasing visibility and legal recognition of hijras across South Asia. However, the involvement of nations, such as the US, UK, Sweden, Canada, and the Netherlands, through funding and policy promotion has created a form of transnational 'homocolonialism', where queer rights are shaped by external agendas rather than local grassroots needs (Hossain & Rahman, 2024, p 7). This dynamic is further complicated by the risk of backlash; in Bangladesh, international support for LGBT+ initiatives must carefully navigate state hostility and homophobic movements. In India, such support often overlooks marginalised groups, particularly Muslim queers,

further deepening existing exclusions. Both contexts reflect a broader pattern of religious nationalism that ‘others’ sexual and religious minorities, reinforcing a culture of denial and avoidance within queer movements themselves. Many organisations, fearing political and social consequences, refrain from addressing exclusionary practices, leading to a lack of collective action against systemic discrimination.

Recognising South Asia’s distinct socio-cultural landscape is crucial for fostering more inclusive and sustainable queer activism. A decolonial approach to queer politics could challenge this transnational influence by centring local cultures, histories, and solidarities, moving beyond a strictly SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression) and sex education framework. Such a public health-focused model of transnational funding and HIV/AIDS prevention work has facilitated resource mobilisation and the formation of numerous small community-based organisations, as well as contributing to activism and movement building. However, it is equally important to critically assess this funding model and examine the extent to which it has generated a sustainable, long-term impact. Stacy Leigh Pigg, in their ethnographic research and journal article on HIV/AIDS prevention work in Nepal, a context not markedly different from Bangladesh. It offers valuable insights into how such initiatives operate and the challenges they face in fostering enduring structural change. Translating AIDS concepts fully into Nepali risks losing the biomedical specificity privileged in international public health yet retaining the original terms risks alienating local populations who cannot relate them to their lived vulnerabilities.

To collapse AIDS information completely into Nepali would erase most of the concepts they are told define AIDS. Though it would smooth many immediate difficulties of communication, would do so

by creating an unbridgeable chasm between the internationally established facts of AIDS and Nepali vocabularies for knowing it...Much AIDS awareness work that has taken place in Nepal could be criticised for spending too much energy producing complex, overly medical explanations of HIV transmission and AIDS, materials that provide kind of knowledge about AIDS that few can connect to their own realtions of vulnerability to HIV infection. It could further be argued shows just how out of touch urban elite NGO personnel are with privileged comp (Pigg, 2001, p 510).

Their work highlights the tension between transnational biomedical discourse and local epistemologies in HIV/AIDS awareness work. The focus on highly medicalised explanations reflects a technocratic approach that prioritises scientific accuracy over cultural resonance, revealing a disconnect between knowledge production and community engagement. Such practices expose the classed nature of NGO work, where urban elite personnel, often shaped by global health paradigms, remain detached from the everyday realities of those most affected. Sociologically, this underscores how health communication can reproduce structural inequalities when it privileges institutional authority over vernacular understandings of risk and care. Such connections, facilitated by transnational funding, generate parallel flows of knowledge while simultaneously producing ruptures in shared cultural understandings of sexuality and gender within the fields of activism and health promotion. I argue that while terms like *MSM* (men who have sex with men) remain central to contemporary HIV/AIDS prevention models, their uncritical use in contexts such as cruising spaces across urban, semi-urban, and rural Bangladesh and West Bengal imposes externally derived categories that fracture the historically diverse South Asian understandings of gender and sexuality beyond heterosexuality.

Creating and sustaining possibilities for the evolving historical, cultural, and political dimensions of gender, desire, and sexuality is crucial because these dimensions are never static; they are shaped by ongoing social transformations and power dynamics. Without such efforts, discourses around these identities risk becoming rigid, excluding marginalised voices and reinforcing oppressive norms. Sustaining an open and adaptive approach ensures that the complexities of lived experiences can be acknowledged and addressed, fostering inclusivity and resisting hegemonic ideologies. This engagement is essential for imagining and realising more equitable futures.

My sociological contribution in this thesis is the analysis of queer collective actions in Bangladesh and West Bengal, where I particularly identify the traits that have not been discussed in the academic literature before. My main argument is that the collective denial of the queer collectives, sustained through fear, shame, and strategic silences, functions as a powerful social mechanism within queer collective organising in Bangladesh and West Bengal. While queerness is increasingly visible in activist and artistic spheres, its articulation often rests on a narrow, secular-progressive template that renders religion either untouchable or antagonistic. By tracing how affective forces, particularly shame and fear, operate within queer spaces, it highlights the structural and discursive conditions that suppress more intersectional, locally grounded queer politics. Engaging religion as a contested yet lived cultural force remains a critical but underexplored terrain. Without such engagement, the possibilities for inclusive, transformative queer politics remain constrained, reproducing a politics of survival rather than liberation. Addressing this collective denial is thus essential for fostering queer futures that are not only globally legible but also locally resonant, culturally plural, and ethically grounded.

Across the chapters, a recurring theme emerges: the pervasive fear of cultural erosion, particularly of Hindutva in India and Islam in Bangladesh, among the general population. This perceived threat has catalysed longstanding processes of nationalist reimagination, where identity is increasingly shaped through the politicisation of religion. In this process, religion is often rendered as a fixed, homogeneous category, obscuring its internal diversities; there is no singular Islam practised across Bangladesh, nor a monolithic Hinduism in India. Religious nationalism, thus, becomes a powerful force in consolidating majoritarian cultural identities, often at the expense of religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

This entanglement of religion and nationalism has deepened social polarisation, particularly between the public and queer collectives. Many queer activists regard religious institutions as inherently exclusionary, instead turning to international donor organisations for support. Conversely, segments of the public view these INGOs as external threats to local cultural and religious values, reinforcing religious nationalism as a form of cultural self-defence. In some cases, donor interventions inadvertently reinforce this dichotomy by failing to engage religion as a meaningful and influential social force, despite being aware of its centrality in shaping everyday life and social relations.

Within queer and feminist movements, religion is often excluded from political discourse, not merely due to ideological tensions, but also because of strategic concerns over alienating secular-progressive allies. This secularist orientation presumes that progressive politics must be visibly anti-religious and at least secular, limiting the potential to engage religion as a site of both constraint and transformation. Consequently, opportunities to foster alliances

with religiously engaged communities or to reimagine religiosity in inclusive terms are often overlooked.

In the specific contexts of Bangladesh and West Bengal, this disconnects between queer collective actions and religious discourse becomes especially salient. Here, it is important to add that queer identities cannot be understood solely through the lens of religion; they are also shaped by intersecting socio-political conditions and lived experiences. Thus, it is imperative for queer collectives to critically engage with religion, not as a monolith to be rejected, but as a complex cultural force that must be negotiated. Such engagement requires rethinking dominant development paradigms, embracing cultural pluralism, and cultivating inclusive forms of activism that challenge both secular-liberal and religious-nationalist orthodoxies in the broader pursuit of justice and recognition.

One of the key limitations of this project was the inability to focus on organisations and initiatives located outside of Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal. While there are Pride Walks and various innovative approaches, as well as unique funding dynamics in smaller towns, these were highlighted in some of the interviewees' narratives, particularly those who grew up in these areas. They discussed the stigma and social rejection they faced, despite the repeal of Section 377 in India. However, my research primarily focused on organisations based in Kolkata, inadvertently overlooking the challenges and innovations that exist outside the capital.

In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, some queer community members do not support collective actions centered around visibility and activism. This perspective could be interpreted as a form of intrinsic homophobia, though it warrants deeper exploration. Many individuals who exist within the spectrum of gender and sexuality beyond heterosexuality choose to navigate society by

presenting as heterosexual, maintaining a dual identity. Understanding their views and the socio-cultural reasoning behind this choice is crucial, yet it falls beyond the scope of this project. Instead, this study focuses on the collective actions of five organisations and two social media groups, critically analysing their activism and engagement within their respective contexts.

Despite the challenges faced, the stories of solidarity, collective mobilisation, friendship, and care emerge as authentic and central findings throughout the data chapters of this thesis. In addition to the resources discussed, the resilience demonstrated by community groups in their collective actions serves as an often-overlooked resource. This perspective on collective labour and emotion could also be acknowledged by decision-makers, helping to create a true sanctuary of solidarity, free from any half-truths.

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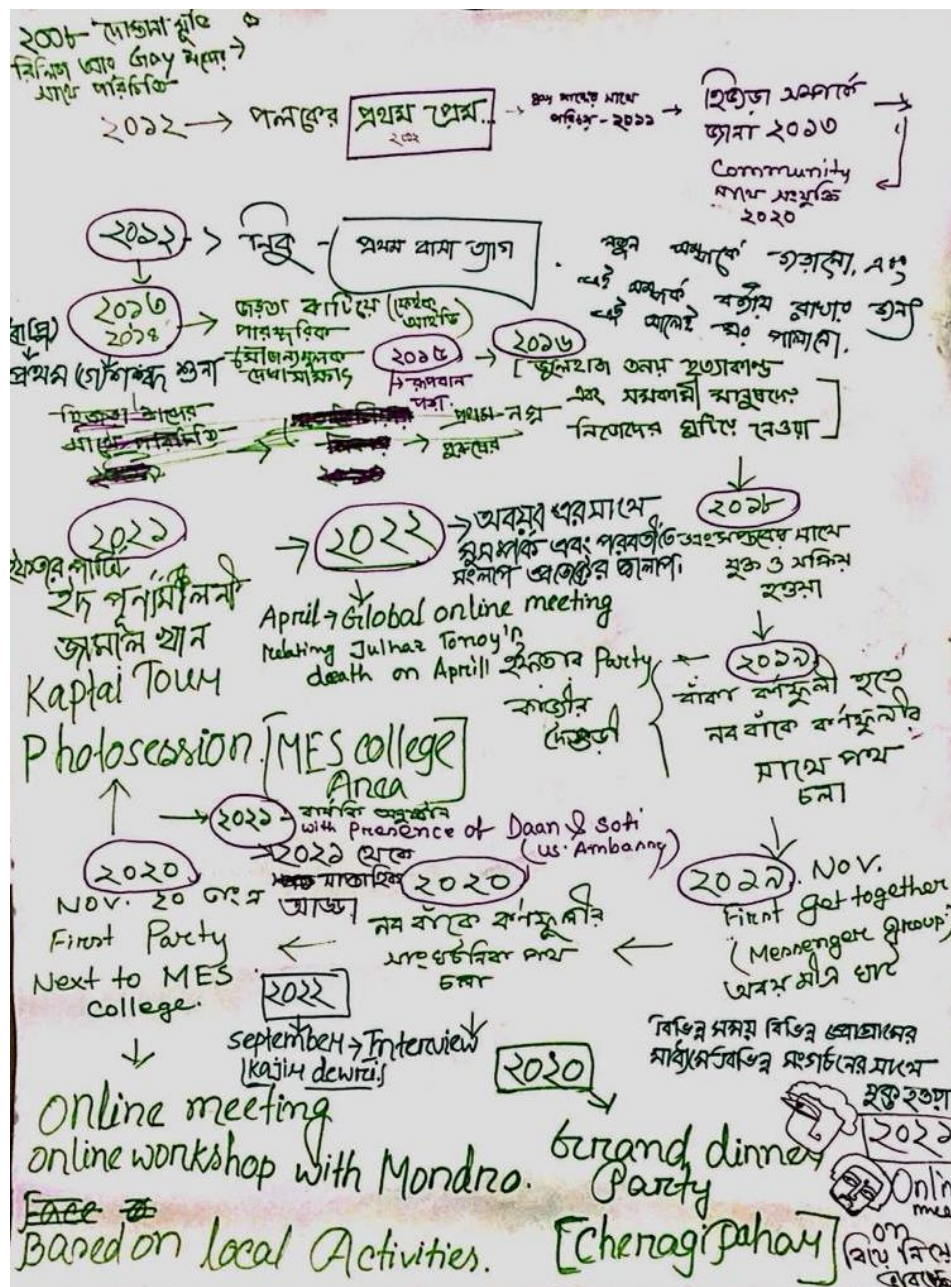
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Appendix 1: Details of the research participants

Interview participant's name	Age	The way they identified	Location	Organisation
Arnob	27	Gay	Chittagong	Turning Point
Bandari	37	Gay	Chittagong	Turning Point
Inzeib	36	Gay	Chittagong	Turning Point
Oreo	24	Queer	Chittagong	Turning Point
Pranto	26	Gay	Chittagong	Turning Point
Tayob	30	Non-Binary	Dhaka	Shojon Social Welfare Society
Ahmed	55	Gay	Dhaka	Shojon Social Welfare Society
Islam	65	Gay	Dhaka	Shojon Social Welfare Society
Rashida	58	Lesbian	Dhaka	Shojon Social Welfare Society

Rupali	30	Lesbian	Dhaka	Shojon Social Welfare Society
Singh	55	Gay	Kolkata (India)	History Trust
Proshanta	46	Gay	Kolkata (India)	History Trust
Nandita	52	Trans	Kolkata (India)	History Trust
Dipa	51	Trans	Kolkata (India)	History Trust
Bohemian Bong	43	Lesbian	Kolkata (India)	History Trust
Tinku	29	Kothi	Rajshahi	Shurjer Alo
Piya	26	Kothi	Rajshahi	Shurjer Alo
Jolly	45	Trans	Rajshahi	Shurjer Alo
Ahona	55	Trans	Rajshahi	Shurjer Alo
Ishtiaque	48	Heterosexual	Rajshahi	Shurjer Alo
Janarul	46	Chukri	Khulna	Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi

Alok	59	Chukri	Khulna	Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi
Shaon	26	Kothi	Khulna	Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi
Jui	48	Kothi	Khulna	Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi
Bulbul	51	Chukri	Khulna	Bahurupi Nattya Goshthi
Mondol	45	Gay	Kolkata (India)	Azadi Festival
Raki	23	Trans	Dhaka	Equality Network Family
Anha	25	Bisexual	Dhaka	Equality Network Family



Appendix 3: Code of Conducts for attending an event by Turning Point

Dear Guest,

Thank you for accepting our invitation. Your presence will make the event truly special. For the safety and success of the event, please adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Arrive by 9:45 am with your ID card at the venue reception.
2. Sign the guest list and collect your badge; wear it throughout the event for security reasons.
3. After checking in, please stay within the venue and avoid wandering outside unless necessary.
4. Keep your phone on silent or vibration.
5. Turn off GPS on all devices and avoid sharing your location on social media.
6. Sharing event details or location on social media is prohibited.
7. Refrain from carrying harmful items.
8. After the event, avoid lingering around, taking pictures, or causing disturbances.
9. Photo guidelines:
 - No unauthorised photos or online sharing.
 - Avoid capturing others in your photos without permission.
 - Do not share photos on social media for 2 days after the event.
10. Harassment Policy:
 - Any form of harassment will be addressed by the authorities.
 - Report any harassment immediately to a volunteer.

- Strict action will be taken against those found guilty of sexual harassment.

11. Smoking:

- Smoking is prohibited inside the venue and event spaces.
- Violators will be ejected from the event.

12. Changing Room:

- Arrive by 8:30 am if using the changing room.
- Inform a volunteer before using it for rest.
- No smoking allowed in the changing room.

13. Special Notes:

- A volunteer will be present at the entrance of the Kazi Deuri BRAC Bank building for guidance.
- Feel free to approach any volunteer for assistance.

Thank you for helping us make this event a success by following these guidelines.

Best regards,
Event Organising Committee,
Turning Point.

Appendix 4: Cyber Security Act (CSA) 2023 (Bangladesh)

24. Identity fraud or personation (1) If any person, intentionally or knowingly, by using any computer, computer programme, computer system, computer network, digital device, digital system or digital network- (a) holds the identity of another person or exhibits the personal information of another person as his own in order to deceive or cheat; or (b) holds the personal identity of any person, alive or dead, as his own by forgery in order to- (i) get or cause to get the benefit for himself or any other person; (ii) acquire any property or any interest therein; (iii) cause harm to a natural person or individual by personating another, then such act of the person shall be an offence. (2) If any person commits an offence under sub-section (1), he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 (five) years, or with a fine not exceeding Taka 5 (five) lac, or with both.

25. Transmission, publication, etc. of offensive, false or threatening data-information (1) If any person, through any website or any other digital medium, (a) intentionally or knowingly transmits, publishes or propagates any data-information which he knows to be offensive, false or threatening in order to annoy, insult, humiliate or malign a person; or (b) publishes or propagates or abets to publish or propagate any information, as a whole or partly, which he knows to be propaganda or false, with an intention to affect the image or reputation of the country, or to spread confusion, then such act of the person shall be an offence. (2) If any person commits an offence under sub-section (1), he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 (two) years, or with fine not exceeding Taka 3 (three) lac, or with both.

28. Publication, broadcast, etc. of information on a website or in any electronic format that hurts the religious values or sentiments. (1) If any person or group willingly or knowingly publishes or broadcasts or causes to publish or broadcast anything on a website or any electronic format which hurts religious sentiment or values, with the intention to hurt or provoke the religious values or sentiments, then such an act of the person shall be an offence. (2) If any person commits an offence under sub-section (1), he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 (two) years, or with a fine not exceeding Taka 5 (five) lac, or with both.

31. Offence and punishment for deteriorating law and order, etc. (1) If any person intentionally publishes or transmits anything in website or digital layout that creates enmity, hatred or hostility among different classes or communities of the society, or destroys communal harmony, or creates unrest or disorder, or deteriorates or advances to deteriorate the law-and-order situation, then such act of the person shall be an offence. (2) If any person commits an offence under sub-section (1), he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 (five) years, or with a fine not exceeding Taka 25 (twenty-five) lac, or with both.

42. Search, seizure and arrest without warrant. (1) If any police officer has reasons to believe that an offence under this Act has been or is being committed or is likely to be committed in any place, or any evidence is likely to be lost, destroyed, deleted or altered or made unavailable in any way, then he may, for reasons of such belief to be recorded in writing, proceed with the following measures, namely: - (a) to enter and search the place, and if obstructed, to take necessary measures in accordance with the Code of Criminal Procedure; (b) to seize the computer, computer system, computer network, data- information or other materials used in committing the offence

or any document supportive to prove the offence; (c) to search the body of any person present in the place; (d) to arrest any person present in the place if the person is suspected to have committed or be committing an offence under this Act. (2) After concluding the search under sub-section (1), the police officer shall submit a report on such search to the Tribunal.

Source : <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/7125/2023/en/>

Appendix 5: Cyber Crime Act and Stalking (India)

In India, the offence of stalking is governed under Section 354D of the IPC, where stalking is defined as the act of following, contacting, or attempting to contact a person persistently despite their clear indication of disinterest or through any other means of communication, causing fear or distress in the victim. **Section 354D (2)** of the IPC deals with stalking punishment in India, which is imprisonment for a term that may extend to three years and with a liable fine for the first conviction. For a second or subsequent conviction, the offender is punished with imprisonment for a term that may extend to five years and with a liable fine.

The case of cyberstalking is dealt with in India mainly by the Information Technology Act, 2000. **Section 66A** of the IT Act, 2000, illustrates ‘punishment for sending offensive messages through communication service, etc.’ As per this Section, any individual “who sends, by means of a computer resource or a communication device, (a) any information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character; or (b) any information which he knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred or ill will, persistently by making use of such computer resource or a communication device; (c) any electronic mail or electronic mail message for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience or to deceive or to mislead the addressee or recipient about the origin of such messages, shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine.”

Section 67 of the IT Act deals with the offenders who publish or transmit obscene material in electric form. It states that “Whoever publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted in the electronic form, any

material which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect is such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it, shall be punished on first conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years (3 years) and with fine which may extend to five lakh rupees (Rs. 5,00,000) and in the event of second or subsequent conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years (5 years) and also with fine which may extend to ten lakh rupees (Rs. 10,00,000).”

Also, **Section 67A** and **Section 67B** of the IT Act provide ‘punishment for publishing or transmitting of material containing sexually explicit act, etc., in electronic form’ and ‘punishment for publishing or transmitting of material depicting children in sexually explicit act, etc., in electronic form’ respectively. The punishment under Sections 67A and 67B is defined as whoever commits such an offence as mentioned under the provisions of this Section “shall be punished on first conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years and with fine which may extend to ten lakh rupees and in the event of second or subsequent conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years and also with fine which may extend to ten lakh rupees.”

Source: Stalking Laws in India - Legal Articles

<https://www.freelaw.in/legalarticles/Stalking-Laws-in-India#:~:text=In%20India%2C%20the%20offence%20of,or%20distress%20in%20the%20victim>

Appendix 6: Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance

Penalty for soliciting for purposes of prostitution

74. Any person who in any street or public place or within sight of, and in such manner as to be seen or heard from, any street or public place, whether from within any house or building or not,

- (a) by words, gestures, or indecent personal exposure attracts or endeavours to attract attention for the purposes of prostitution; or
- (b) solicits or molests any person for the purposes of prostitution.

shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with a fine, which may extend to five hundred taka, or with both.

Penalty for indecent behaviour in public

75. Whoever wilfully and indecently exposes his person in any street or public place or within sight of, and in such manner as may be seen from, any street or public place, whether from within any house or building or not, or uses indecent language or behaves indecently or riotously, or in a disorderly manner in a street or public place or in any office, station or landing place shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine which may extend to five hundred taka, or with both.

Penalty for begging and exposing offensive ailments.

81. Whoever in any street or public place begs or applies for alms, or exposes or exhibits any sores, wounds, bodily ailment or deformity with the object of exciting charity or obtaining alms shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to one month.

Appendix 7: Digital Security guideline during anti-transgender Backlash

Anti-LGBT+ Movement Background, Risks and What We Can Do

(This message was circulated online in the Facebook secret groups based on the backlash that took place in Bangladesh in 2023.)

Context:

- Our transgender, Hijra, gender-diverse, and LGBT+ activists and organisations are being exposed online by extremist groups, with many targeted on ID pages.
- Leaflets are being distributed in mosques after Friday prayers, and transgender entertainers are facing harassment.
- Online and physical seminars are being held in mosques, with ministers and officials involved.

Risks:

- Transgender and Hijra people wearing a sari or makeup are at serious security risk. There's growing finger-pointing between real and fake Hijras. Wearing makeup or feminine clothing is unsafe now, and violent online threats are increasing.
- The Transgender Bill is facing opposition, with demands for medical testing.

What we can do:

1. Unpublish all websites to prevent exposure.

2. Lock social media accounts, check friend lists, and remove unwanted connections.
3. Keep LGBT+, Hijra, and Gender Diverse-related information private.
4. Set photos with different gender expressions or personal photos (makeup, cross-dressed) to private, remove tags.
5. Avoid posting event or workshop information on social media.
6. Change passwords for Gmail, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media accounts. Log out of other devices.
7. Remove all previous logins from Facebook.
8. Keep your phone's password secure; avoid using fingerprint unlocking in risky situations.
9. Avoid posting or commenting in public online communities.
10. Organise safe, private events with trusted people to ensure safety.

Appendix 8: List of some donors and their work

Transnational donors working in two countries

CREA: CREA is a feminist international human rights organisation based in the Global South and led by women from the Global South. CREA was registered in April 2000 in New Delhi, where it is headquartered, and in New York in 2001, with the long-term vision to create a strong Global South-based organisation that works at local, regional, and international levels.

MAMA Cash: Mama Cash was the first international women's fund in the world, established in the Netherlands in 1983. They work to ensure that feminist collective action led by women, girls, and trans and intersex people is resourced, supported and connected within and across social movements.

Woman Fund Asia: Their journey began in 2004 when they were launched as South Asia Women's Fund to support women's human rights activists, groups and networks in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

ASTRAEA: The ASTRAEA lesbian foundation for justice is the only philanthropic organisation working exclusively to advance LGBT+ human rights around the globe.

The Global Fund: The Global Fund is a worldwide partnership to defeat HIV, TB and malaria and ensure a healthier, safer, more equitable future for all.

Transnational donors working in Bangladesh

The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW): Established in 1993 upon a needs assessment arising out of a regional women's health project, where the originating vision was to create a resource

centre that would ‘enable women to better define and control their lives’, ARROW is a regional non-profit women and young people’s organisation based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. They have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) of the United Nations.

FJS: In 2011, Audrey Cappell brought together a group of women to achieve a simple yet ambitious vision: a world without discrimination. Under her leadership, the Foundation for a Just Society was established and began making grants to advance the human rights of marginalised women, girls, and LGBT+ people globally. The organisation's headquarters is in New York

APC: The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international network of civil society organisations founded in 1990, dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communications technologies (ICTs).

CFLI: The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) provides modest funding for small-scale, high-impact projects in more than 120 countries eligible for official development assistance (ODA). The CFLI has an annual programming budget of \$26.8 million, with projects averaging \$31,000 each.

COC Netherlands: COC Netherlands has been advocating the rights of lesbian women, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people (LGBT) since 1946. In Bangladesh, they run the Power of Pride alliance, which brings together COC, Pan African ILGA and ILGA Asia in a five-year partnership (2021-2025) with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to work towards diverse and inclusive societies in which LGBTI can participate to their full potential.

Transnational donors working in India

American Jewish World Service: AJWS is the leading Jewish organisation working to fight poverty and pursue justice in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) is an American private foundation founded by Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates.

Foreign embassy, High Commission and national aid that supports both Bangladesh and India

GIZ, USAID, Norec, DFID, USAID, European Union, UK aid, Netherlands embassy, Royal Norwegian Embassy, American Embassy, Canadian high commission

Local organisations in Bangladesh and India

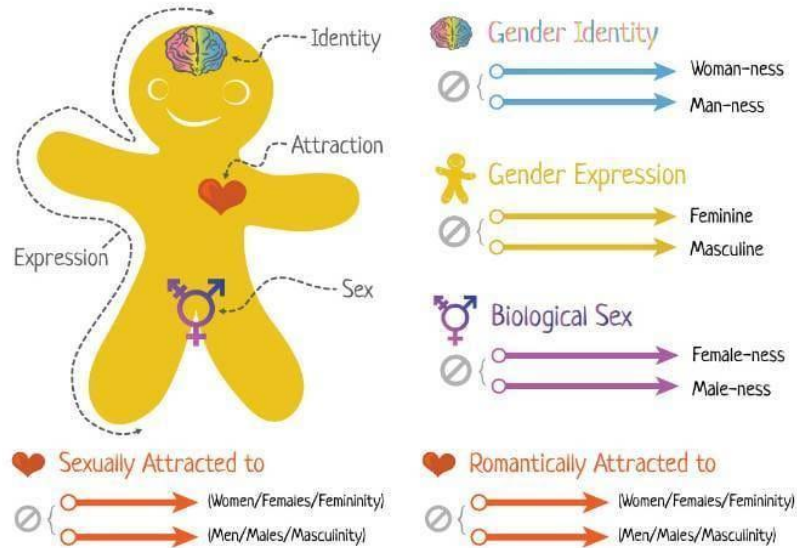
The Lalit Great Eastern, Kesav Suri Foundation, Cognizant, Wipro Technologies, Ambani, Goenka, Godrej, Piramal Foundation, EMK Centre Bangladesh, Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust,

Small-scale funding in two countries

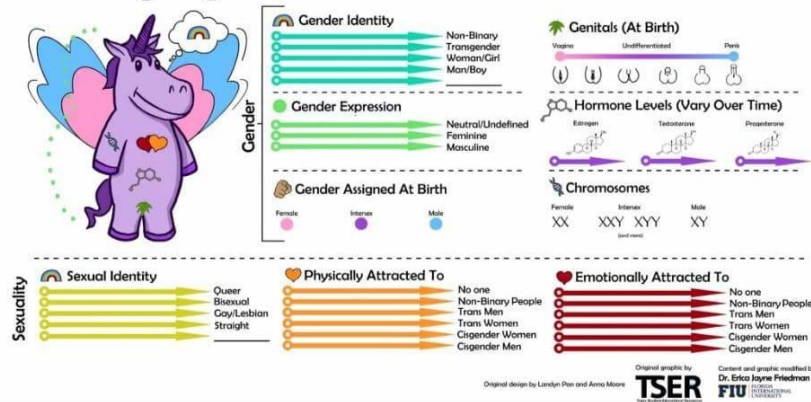
Care Bangladesh, Plan International, Article 9, Intl Trans Fund, Oxfam, Outright International, Christian Aid, APTN

Appendix 9: Content used in gender training

The Genderbread Person v3.3 *by its pronounced METROsexual*



The Flying Gender Unicorn



Appendix 10: Average monthly basic wage of garment workers in selected Asian countries

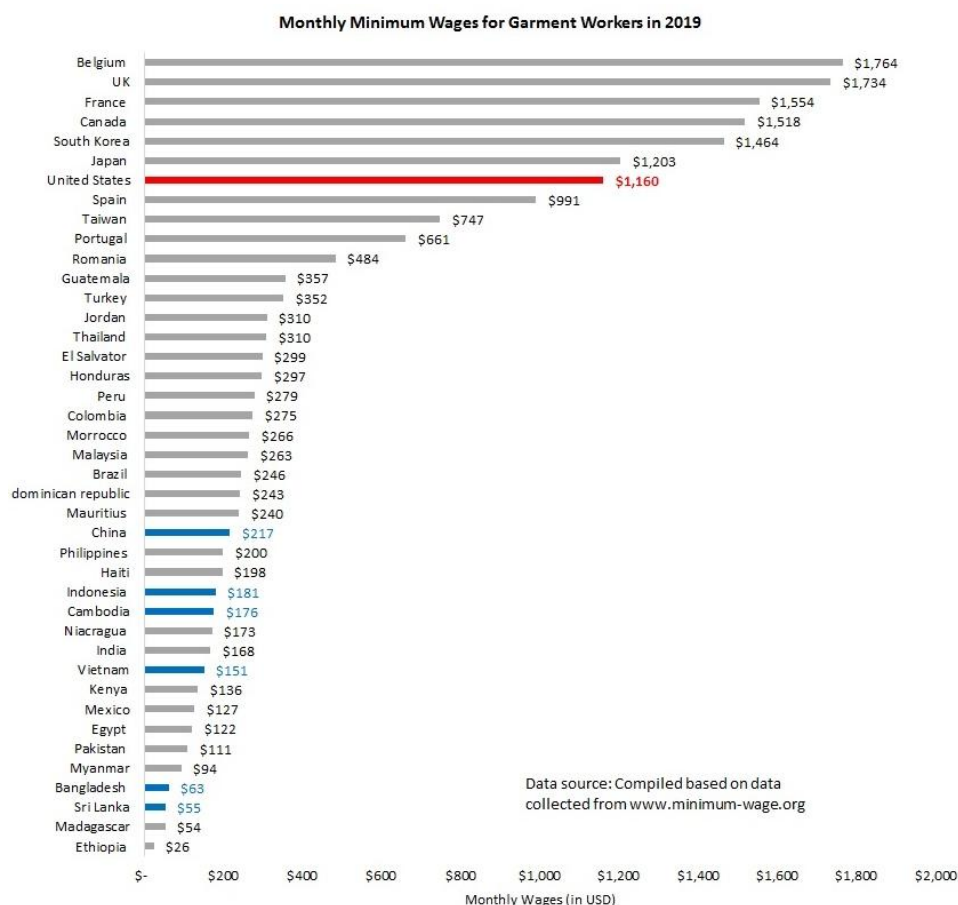
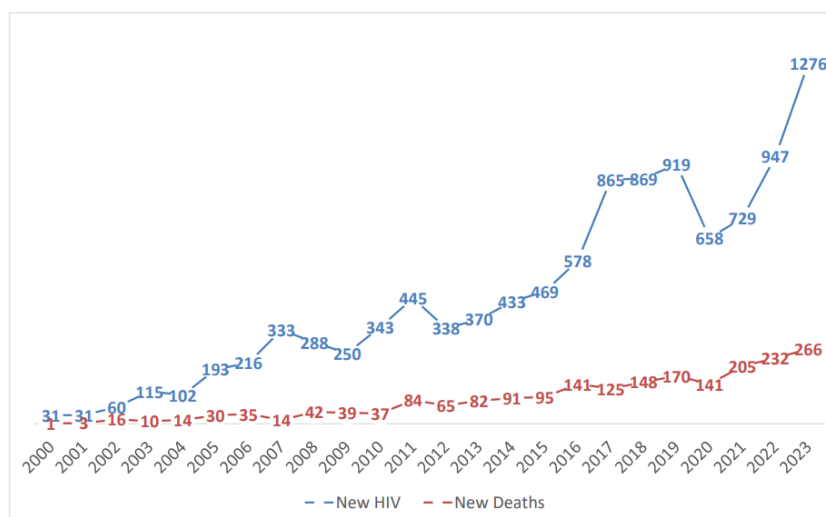


Image: Minimum Wage Level for Garment Workers in the World (Updated in December 2020)

Source : <https://shenglufashion.com/2020/12/04/minimum-wage-level-for-garment-workers-in-the-world-updated-in-december-2020/>

Appendix 11: HIV Death case increasing in Bangladesh

New HIV and Death Cases Per Year (1989-2023)



Source: ASP



Image: HIV death cases along with new HIV-infected population increasing in recent years in Bangladesh.

Gender and Marital Status: 2023

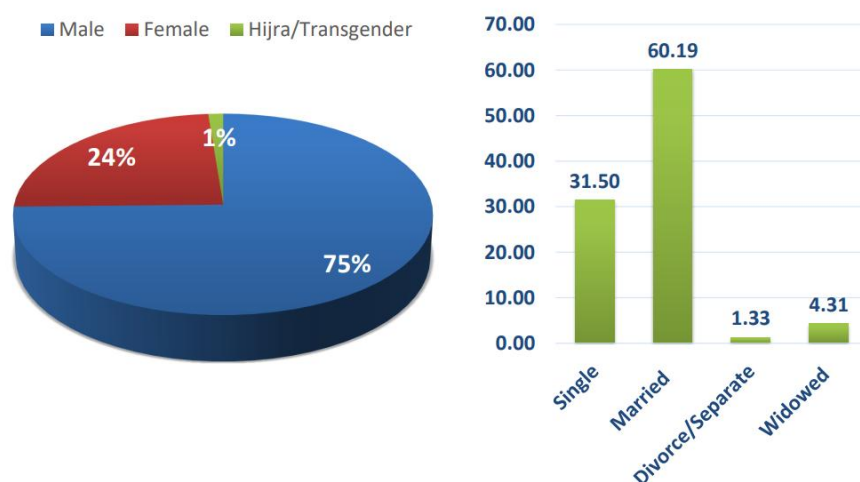


Image: According to the government report, among males, females and transgender individuals, the transgender population is not getting infected at a higher rate than before, but the males are. During the fieldwork, participants shared that many of their Kothi friends are infected, and the rate has been increasing in recent years. However, this increase is not reflected in the government report, as the report categorises the population as male, female and trans, not any other identity or sexual behaviours.

Source:

https://asp.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/asp.portal.gov.bd/page/febb60ca_6e01_40df_89d7_e4b23954e191/2024-01-01-04-25-efadb44a8d21d4de4197c85593206752.pdf

Appendix 12: Constitution of Turning Point

(One constitution is shared in the appendix as an example to show how the groups in the grassroots form collective actions with their rules and regulations. The other constitutions are similar and were reviewed thoroughly for the project)

Constitution of the Group (Regional).

Chapter One

- **Article 1:** (Group Name) Turning Point
- **Article 2:** (Objective)
Build a strong LGBT+ community in Chittagong, focusing on friendship, trust, rights, art, and creativity, and expand this decentralisation to other regions of Bangladesh. Chittagong admins will act as advisors to other regional groups.
- **Article 3:** (Eligibility for Membership)
Members must live, work, or study in Chittagong or frequently visit the district. Proof of participation in group events is required.
- **Article 4:** (New Member Inclusion)
Members must recommend new members, who will be assessed by the Welcome Panel after participation in events. If approved, they will join the group and agree to follow the rules.
- **Article 5:** (Leave of Absence)
Members taking leave must inform admins and leave respectfully. A “fair leave” allows easy return, while “unfair leave” requires more steps to rejoin.

- **Article 6: (Inactive Members)**
Inactive members for 1.5-2 months may be removed, with efforts made to re-engage them. Decisions on inactivity will be made by the Welcome Panel.
 - **Article 7: (Admin Panels)**
Three panels manage the group: Advisor and Director, Welcome, and Executive. The Electoral Committee will hold elections for panel selection and replacements.
 - **Article 8: (Panel Responsibilities)**
Panels oversee group conduct and rule enforcement. Violations will be addressed personally. Admins resolve conflicts with panel assistance when necessary.
 - **Article 9: (Constitution Updates)**
The constitution is flexible and updated regularly based on feedback. Panel members may resign with prior notice, and replacements will be decided by admins.
-

Chapter Two

- **Article 10: (Sense of Humour)**
The group encourages fun and mischief, but conflicts should be resolved privately with admins, not in the group chat.
- **Article 11: (Respect and Conflict)**
Serious conflicts, insults, and allegations are prohibited. Personal complaints should be resolved privately with admins.

- **Article 12:** (Privacy)
Screenshots or personal information shared in the group cannot be shared externally without permission.
 - **Article 13:** (Personal Friendships)
Members are not obligated to be personal friends but should remain respectful and inclusive in the group.
 - **Article 14:** (Obscenity)
Obscene or inappropriate content is prohibited. Any violations will be addressed by admins privately.
 - **Article 15:** (Sexual Harassment and Bullying)
Complaints of harassment or bullying during get-togethers will be addressed by admins. Repeat offences may result in removal from the group.
 - **Article 16:** (Photo Sharing)
Group photos can be shared externally only with consent from everyone in the photo.
 - **Article 16A:** (Rule Summary)
A simplified version of the rules will be available in Schedule 3.
-

Chapter Three

- **Article 17:** (Get-Togethers)
At least one group gathering will be held monthly. Members are encouraged to attend, and should inform admins if they cannot.

- **Article 18:** (Absence)
Absences from events should be communicated privately to admins, not in the group chat.
- **Article 19:** (Guests)
Guests can attend events only with admin approval. Outsiders can be invited to outdoor meetups but must be informed in advance about restrictions.
- **Article 20:** (Donations and Expenses)
Members are encouraged to donate to the group fund, and to cover their own costs for events. Financially unable members should inform admins for support. Funds from external sources will be spent responsibly.

Appendix 13: Interview Questions

What is the preferred name that you would like to be used instead of your real name when I write about you in this research?

Organisational affiliation(s)

Plain language sheet

Privacy notice

Consent form

Location:

Category: Identity

1. Defining identity: how do you identify yourself? With whom?

Sexuality/sexual orientation, gender/gender identity, ethnicity and race, caste, religion.

2. Can identity change? When? How?

Category: Community

1. Which communities do you feel part of?
2. What does collective action mean to you?
3. Can you tell us something about the traditional practice of organising that you heard from veteran organisers?
4. Why do people remain together in a group?
5. Views and examples around exploitation, social privilege, and power

6. What are your views about international funding for continuing your work?
7. What are your views about activism and donor-driven projects?
8. Is there any tension between community groups?
9. What can be a way out to resolve this tension in your view?
10. What is the role of personal relations in community mobilisation?
 - a. Do personal contacts overlap with other issues?
 - b. Can you give an example when your political stance was different from the organisational decision?

Category: Organizing

1. Can you tell me any oral history about traditional organising
2. How do you use digital tools for collective action?
3. Is there any power structure that works in collective action?
4. If there is no hierarchy in the structure, do you think your team will function better?
5. Would you like to talk about LGBT+ groups or activists you do not work with?
6. Leader-member relationship
7. Do/will you perform in different social settings? At work, at khol, at home?

Category: Organization

1. Tell me about the structure of the organisation

2. Timeline of the organisation
3. Can you talk about the previous collective action structures that you heard about?
4. Are the rules written down? If so, where?
5. Do all community members meet? If so, where and when?
6. How are leaders appointed?
7. Are there any starring committees/ advisors? How do they function?
8. Can you talk about the unpaid care work that members do for each other: cooking, health care, and recreation
9. Tell me an experience of working in this organisation
10. What are your views about the role of this organisation in collective action?
11. Decision of funding in the organisation: Who is involved in making final decisions? Why?
12. What are your views about the decision-making process in your organisation?

Category: Digital Culture

1. Tell me about the use of computers and the internet in collective action.
2. What is your perception of Facebook?
3. What are your views about creating a safe space online?
4. What are your views about the role of using digital tools for collective action?

5. What are your views about religion and secularism on the internet?

Category: NGOisation

1. What are your views about partnerships (national and international)
 - a) With whom?
 - b) Since when?
 - c) How did you come in contact?
2. What kind of activities are carried out within partnerships? What kind of support was provided and received?
 - a) Frequency
 - b) Mode of interaction?
3. What are your views about NGOisation and activism?
4. What is the funding application framework that you use?
5. Are there other resources besides finance in the organisation?

Category: Governance and legal system

1. Census, tax, and gazette - Reaction
2. Involvement in what capacity in the above-mentioned directives
3. Why were these actors involved? Why not others?
4. Issues debated after the process.
5. International advocacy and local advocacy

Category: Allies

1. Definition of allies

2. Role of ally organisations in collective action
3. When and how did you establish partnerships with them?
4. What type of partnership? What kind of support or collaboration?
5. What are the benefits of a partnership? Any constraints?
6. Feminist movement and owning LGBT+ issues
7. Tension among Hijra and trans activism
8. Views about religious leaders becoming allies

Category: Life history

1. Can you share a story about the LGBT+ community from the past?
2. How did you come to work in this organisation?
3. What are your views about personal politics? Can you give an example?

Category: Miscellaneous

1. What are your views about Media reports from the past?
2. Where do you see the movement after 10 years from now?

Debrief

How are you feeling now?

Summary of the interview

Opinion regarding the interview

Any questions?

Appendix 14: Ethical clearance

From: ResearchEthicsSystem@glasgow.ac.uk <ResearchEthicsSystem@glasgow.ac.uk>
Date: Thursday, 25 August 2022 at 15:00
To: Tanvir Ailim (PGR)
Subject: Research Ethics Application Approved [Sexualities and Genders Beyond Heterosexuality in India and Bangladesh: Contestations Between Decoloniality and Digital Cultures]-[400210276]

Dear Tanvir Ailim (PGR),

The following research ethics application has been approved:

Project Title	Sexualities and Genders Beyond Heterosexuality in India and Bangladesh: Contestations Between Decoloniality and Digital Cultures
Application Number	
Committee	College of Social Sciences
Submitted By	Dr Matthew Waites

Please [log in](#) to the Research Ethics System to download the approval letter from your Application.

This is an automated message. Please do not reply to this email.
If you need additional help, please contact your ethics administrator or visit the IT Services [helpdesk](#).

Appendix 15: Poetry - Rebel Women by Hasna Hena

Dear Leaders,
congratulations,
At the court of the world
To your representation

For the World Conference on Women,
For a long time,
You have suffered a lot.
Ran around
Outside and inside the country.
Held numerous meetings and conferences.
And wrote many reports.
thank you

Dear Leaders,
At the end of the World Conference
Everything again
Quiet silence.

Numerous Nur Jahans And Yasmin

We have high expectations.

Please be direct.

Say the essence from Beijing

What did you bring for us?

Will we survive?

We are small with a small soul

I didn't want anything else.

Without just wanting to live.

however, we are constantly being killed.

I hear you

Three more before it

World Women's Conference.

I don't know what you analyse.

Determined which strategy,

I only know this in our lives

It did not bring any benefit.

Killing and torture, there was no change.

Dear Leaders,

say,

For the right to live

And some of the World Women's Conference

Do we have to wait?

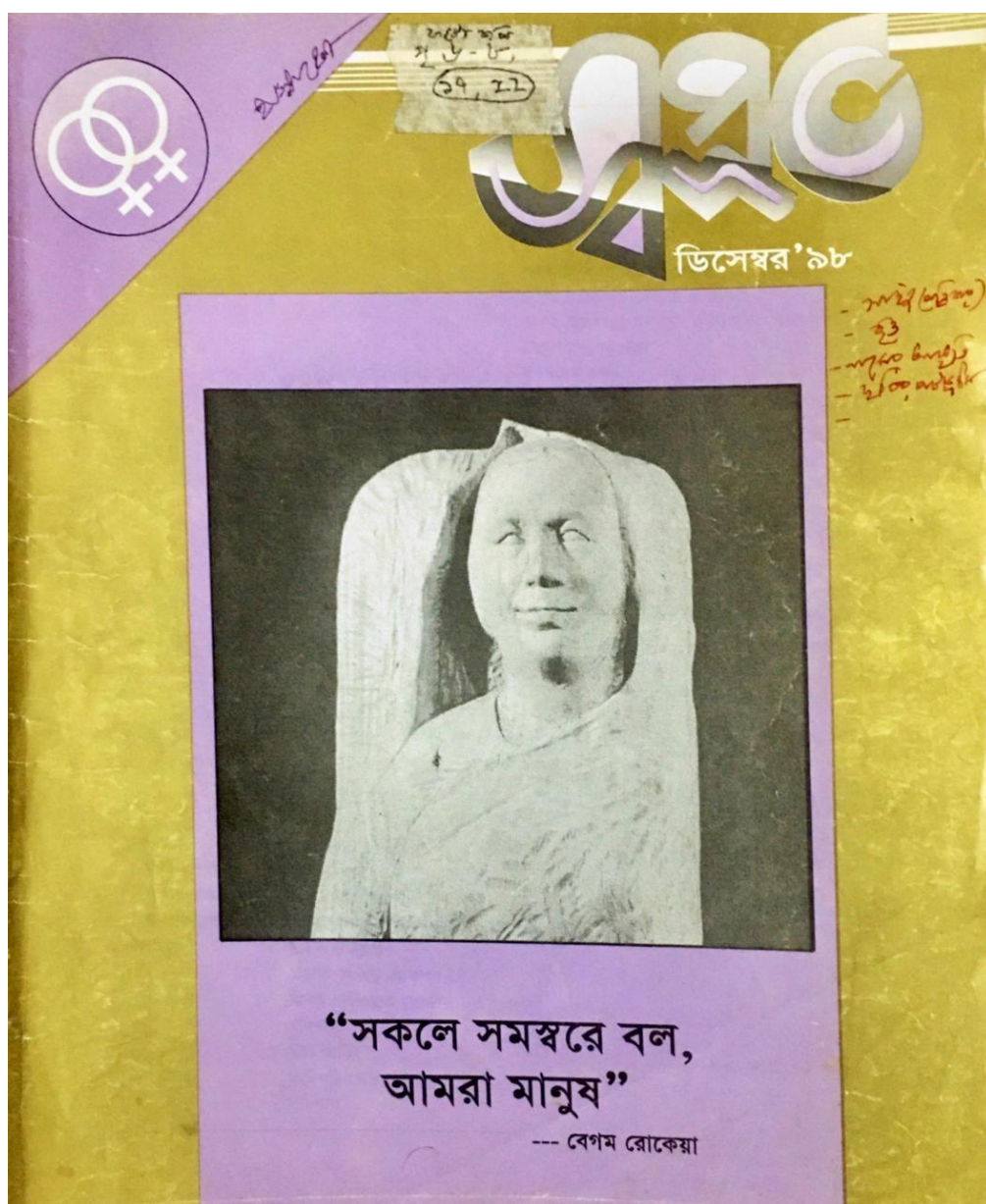
Why so dark around?

Say with your hand on your chest

are you really

Beside us

Appendix 16: Publication cover of the 1st Issue of Swaprobho (December 1998) by Hena and her friend



Appendix 17: Development partners of a funded NGO in Bangladesh

Acknowledgements



Some of the development partners of Bandhu over time



Appendix 18: Quotes by different participants about their connection with two Bengal's

I have a special connection to Bangladesh, as my great-grandfather migrated from there to West Bengal, and I grew up hearing stories about Bangladesh.

I visited West Bengal twice from Bangladesh for Hijragiri, and we travelled without passports. At the border, I jumped off the train and took shelter in a local house, and the border guards never asked for any documents.

Olivia Guru promised me she would visit my election campaign in West Bengal and help me with campaigning here in Bangladesh.

My parents are from Bangladesh and migrated to West Bengal in 1947, and I have always had a deep appreciation for Bangladeshi music and films.

My journey into queer activism in West Bengal was inspired by someone who had immigrated from Bangladesh.

We once performed near the West Bengal border, and our play became the talk of the town—people were aware of our production from West Bengal.

At the time, I was also running a boutique business, importing clothes from West Bengal and selling them in Bangladesh.

One of my most cherished memories is when I made my first disciple here in Bangladesh. Leaders from West Bengal attended the program, and everyone blessed her.

I've travelled from Bangladesh to West Bengal several times for performances, and I also had the opportunity to see their fantastic performances.

The first transsexual person I met here in West Bengal was from Bangladesh. They had come here for a sex change, and the doctor referred them to our organisation in West Bengal.

Appendix 19: Risk Assessment for Ethical Clearance

Field Work Risk Assessment

Many research students will spend periods conducting fieldwork, often in places far from Glasgow and often in remote locations far from conventional academic facilities. Ideally, such fieldwork should not be conducted alone, but it is recognised that lone fieldwork will on occasion be unavoidable. Sometimes such fieldwork will be conducted from a base in another institution, in which case the regulations in Section 2 of the University [Research Furth Regulations](#) also apply.

A formal risk assessment must be undertaken, and the risk assessment form completed by the student, and approved by the supervisor(s) before being submitted to the Graduate School for noting. Where appropriate, reference should be made to the CVCP Code of Practice for Safety in Fieldwork, to the University Code of Practice for Fieldwork and to relevant professional guidelines.

Student Details

Student Name: Tanvir Alim

Student ID: xxxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk

Tier 4 Visa Holder: Yes ☒ No ☐ Tier

4 Visa expiry date: 31.12.2024

Registration Status: Full Time ☒ Part Time ☐

Principal Supervisor: Dr. Matthew Waites

Second Supervisor(s): Dr. Rohit Dasgupta

Please complete the following:

(a) Identify precisely the field area and/or field sites;

The organisations for the proposed project in Bangladesh and West Bengal are stated below with address and contact number.

- Monidipa Chakraborty, Programme organiser, History Trust, West Bengal, India
- Joly, Founder, Shurjer Alo Hijras Shongho, Rajshahi, Bangladesh

- Bulbul Islam, Founder, Bahurupi Natyogosti, Kushtia, Bangladesh
- Ahmed, Executive Director, Shojon, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Anha, Founder, Equality Network Family Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Bhandari, Founder, Turning Point, Chittagong, Bangladesh

(b) Identify the likely field conditions (i.e. climate, topography, remoteness, political sensitivities);

Summer can be very hot in the region, and that is why the visit to West Bengal, India is allocated at the end of winter and the beginning of summer. According to the FCDO website, there are natural disasters in four categories in Bangladesh. Monsoon is very strong in the region, which often causes floods in the lowlands

Tropical cyclones

The climate in Bangladesh is sub-tropical and governed by monsoon winds. Extreme weather episodes like tropical cyclones can occur.

Monsoon season

In the monsoon season from June to September, there is widespread and extensive flooding. This can disrupt travel in urban and rural areas; however, the research area is not under those rural locations.

Earthquakes

Most of the rest, including Dhaka, is considered moderate risk. Tremors and earthquakes, usually minor ones, occur from time to time. The concern is discussed with supervisors, and the home office guidelines are checked to be prepared according to their advice

Tsunamis

Bangladesh can be affected by tsunamis, and the government of Bangladesh can issue tsunami warnings.

(c) Establish what resources (i.e. shelter, clothing, provisions, safety equipment) will be required to cope with these conditions;

As a Bangladeshi citizen, I grew up there and know the local language, which is Bangla. For precaution, I will keep a regular look at the local newspaper and update my supervisors regularly for suggestions and advice. The concern is discussed with supervisors, and the home office guidelines are checked to be prepared according to their guidelines.

(d) Establish what safety procedures (e.g. to do with moving across rough terrain, avoiding fatigue, keeping warm) will be required to cope with these conditions;

The locations that I mentioned are not extreme considering the weather and climate, so this does not apply to my fieldwork in Bangladesh and India. The concern is discussed with supervisors, and the home office guidelines are checked to be prepared according to their guidelines. The website mentioned the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which is not my research location.

(e) Identify any persons who can provide local advice on safety matters.

For local advice, I will discuss it with one of my postgraduate teachers. The details are given below:

Dr. Arifatul Kibria

Faculty Member

Primeasia University

(f) Confirm that all possible training for fieldwork has been identified and completed before entering the field. Where specialist training is required, which goes beyond generic training in the Graduate School and School/Research Institute courses, arrangements should be made by the supervisor(s) to ensure that such training is provided.

All the training, such as data protection, equality, diversity, GDPR and IT training, is done before the Annual Progress Review. Besides, there were two courses on qualitative research and one on research design done in my semester one and semester two, which will be extensively used in this field work, along with a course on social theory.

(g) Confirm that the research student is trained in all appropriate first aid and emergency procedures. Again, if the generic training on offer is insufficient, arrangements should be made by the supervisor(s) to ensure that such training is provided.

In several supervision sessions, the emergency procedures as well as the sensitivity of the topic in the context of Bangladesh are discussed, as there has been violence against activists taking place in 2016. For that reason, special precautions such as confidentiality and other measures are taken in the methods of the research design.

(h) Specifically, definite procedures should be established in advance whereby the research student can report a fieldwork problem to his/her supervisor(s) as swiftly as possible.

To report the problem, WhatsApp communication will be used, which is encrypted. The concern is discussed with supervisors, and the home office guidelines are checked to be prepared according to their guidelines.

Signatures

Student name: Tanvir Alim

Student signature:

Date: 25.06.2022

Supervisor Name:

Supervisor

Signature:

Date:
