

Nagarkirtan: Politics of the Body, Spaces and Religion

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Abstract: This film review explores queer studies, an important academic field from the early 1990s. It uses Kaushik Ganguly's 2017 film *Nagarkirtan* to understand the struggles of the trans community. Drawing on ideas from Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire, it looks at contemporary queer identities and how the queer community interacts with society. Specifically, it examines how religion and architecture influence the experiences of the queer community.

Keywords: Queer community, Trans woman, social structures, religion, Indian society.

Introduction

India represents a dynamic and ever changing cultural melting pot, where attitudes and perceptions towards queerness have undergone multifaceted transformations across epochs. Acknowledging the undeniable presence of diverse sexual orientations, India's historical tapestry unravels intriguing instances that paint a picture of a nuanced past. A case in point is the Chandela Dynasty, particularly during the era of the Khajuraho temples. In this historical context, the temples' intricate carvings remarkably showcased depictions of what could be interpreted as homosexuality – women bonding and fondling each other and themselves – the imagery of *Svasthanasparsha* (to touch) or *Vasanabhrmasa* (exposure of the body).



Fig 1: Erotic sculptures at the Khajuraho (Image via WelcomeNRI.com)

For the purpose of this research, our focus shifts a millennium forward, transitioning from the Chandelas to modern-day Indian media, with a particular emphasis on the 2017 Bengali-queer film *Nagarkirtan*, directed and scripted by Kaushik Ganguly. The choice of *Nagarkirtan* for this analysis is deliberate and strategic. Despite acknowledged technical imperfections (it is not as sublime as Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* or the gripping storytelling of Shyam Benegal), the film holds pivotal relevance due to its release coinciding with a significant political and social turning point in India. Approximately a year after its debut, the Supreme Court amended Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, marking a noteworthy step towards upholding fundamental rights.

Before proceeding, an overview of the film is warranted. It centres on two main characters: Madhu (Ritwick Chakraborty), a working-class flautist, and Puti or Parimal (Riddhi Sen), an adolescent trans woman. Their affection for each other is profound, though expressed differently - Madhu is candid, and Puti is timid. Apart from one intimate scene, their connection thrives through simple acts like sharing meals or sailing through the Ganges lost in their worlds.

The film predominantly follows the duo's journey, gathering information for Puti's gender-affirming surgery and raising funds. It intriguingly contrasts queerness and queer characters with religious institutions. Initially, Puti resides in a Kolkata eunuch community/ghetto, split between an elderly musician's devotional singing group on the upper floor and the eunuchs' living quarters below.

The spatial arrangement in *Nagarkirtan* is an implicit representation of how social structures operate. The eunuchs or the 'Other,' are placed below the religious men, who are seen as more powerful and legitimate. The stratified arrangement of the living quarters serves as a microcosm of the socio-economic stratification that is endemic to many major Indian cities and city planning. For example, in Mumbai, the Dharavi slum area is situated close to a large plot of land that is home to tall buildings and malls. This juxtaposition of poverty and affluence is a stark reminder of the disparity that exists in Indian society.



Fig 2: Drone image of Mumbai slums pitted against tall corporate houses (Image via Johnny Miller/Business Insider)

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, expounded on the strategic role of architecture in his discourses. In his 1975 work titled *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he delves into the idea that architecture wields significant power in society. Foucault contends that the design of buildings holds the potential to influence human behaviour, serving as a means to control and regulate people's actions. The use of height, for instance, creates a sense of dominance. Government buildings are often tall and imposing, which can make people feel small and insignificant.

In line with Foucault's view, individuals under surveillance are significantly influenced by control mechanisms. Government monitoring, according to Foucault, produces "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1) that can be observed and psychologically shaped. This dynamic is evident in the film as Puti and Madhu, perceived as outsiders, contend with constant efforts to categorise and confine them.

This spatial motif extends in another subplot. Much of the film follows Madhu's quest for a new rental home as his current residence faces demolition for a corporate building. Similarly, Puti seeks refuge in a ghetto after leaving her original village. Both characters symbolically search for a home, reflecting their shared pursuit of belonging in an unwelcoming world.



Fig 3: A still from Nagarkirtan as the lead couple contemplate their journey ahead (Image via Nagarkirtan/Acropolis Entertainment)

Another aspect of the film is the compartmentalisation of religion and the "Other." It is prominently manifested in the dialogues of the film as well. A notable instance occurs at the outset, wherein Madhu is acquainted with a congregation of eunuchs who encourage him to play the flute. In response, Madhu candidly enquires:

Ki shunbe? Kirtan? (What would you like to hear? Devotional songs?)

The eunuchs' reply:

Hijre ke abar kirtan shonabe Keshtho Thakur (Krishna's avatar)? (How can the Hijras be expected to be entertained by devotional songs?)

(00:13:13-00:13:16)

This subtle interjection is a significant indication of segregation. The eunuchs openly admit their disinterest in devotional songs, implying that they may not be the ideal audience. The eunuchs' candid expression of disinterest suggests the conditioning they endure, which implies their perceived exclusion from sacred and divine realms. This indoctrination systematically reinforces the belief that the hijra community exists outside the purview of religious sanctity, perpetuating an irreconcilable divide between them and conventional religious spaces.

Paradoxically, eunuchs experience fleeting moments of respite (albeit amidst disdainful gazes) lasting briefly. Within these intervals, they navigate their routines cautiously, avoiding potential clashes with authorities. This passive acceptance of marginalisation, however, encounters opposition through another character – Manabi Bandyopadhyay, a professor, activist, author, and openly trans individual. Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) offers a profound insight into the dynamics between the oppressed and oppressor:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. (Freire, 47)

Manabi's character possesses a more profound understanding of the politics of the body and identity. Unlike others in the hijra community who may shy away from religion and divinity due to their marginalised position, Manabi willingly engages with these aspects. She has a collection of clay dolls, one of which depicts Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (considered the combined avatar of Radha and Krishna). She picks up one of the dolls and states:

Erokom nikhut kaaj hote hobe. Erom Thakurer moto til til kore gorey tulte hobe narir deho (The woman's body should be flawless. She must mould herself steadily like the clay dolls of the Gods)

(00:38:28-00:38:26)



Fig 4: Manabi showcases her miniature clay dolls from Krishnanagar (Image via Nagarkirtan/ Acropoliis Entertainment)



The symbolic act of presenting Puti with the clay doll of Chaitanya reflects Manabi's vote of confidence in Puti to assert the reclamation of her divinity. Thus, Manabi's spirituality emanates from her internal struggles, triumphs, and self-discovery, free from external manipulation or control by those in power. A continuation of Paulo Freire's work further explains this point:

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity...Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanising and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity. (Freire, 45)

Manabi is inherently knowledgeable, aligning with Freire's perspective on education as a pivotal instrument in breaking free from societal oppression. Freire criticizes traditional education, asserting its entrenchment within oppressive structures. In the film, Manabi similarly charts her transformative journey, dismantling pre-existing societal frameworks to forge her own identity.

The film also exhibits the portrayal of the politics of language. Language emerges as a potent vehicle of societal norms and values. As an illustrative instance, a scene unfolds wherein the protagonist, Madhu, is seen travelling in an auto-rickshaw, where he encounters a trans woman soliciting monetary aid (a scenario common in the streets of Kolkata). Herein, the auto driver sneeringly remarks:

Du bocchor age ato chilona. (They [the hijras] were less in number two years ago)

(00:12:38-00:12:39)

The rickshaw driver's remark illustrates how language can function as a form of social control. By reducing the trans-community to mere numerical digits, he diminishes their individuality, consciousness, and autonomy. Subsequently, the trans woman's lack of response is not an inherent trait but a reaction to societal constraints. Conforming to expected roles, like money collection, becomes a survival tactic for the hijra community in an unwelcoming environment.

The hijra community does create its ethos, cultural structure, and social ecosystem as a way to assert agency. This is seen when Puti instinctively chooses to showcase her dancing skills to Rabindra Sangeet (songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore). However, the rejection of Puti's choice by a senior member of the ghetto, who orders her to dance to more rustic love songs, highlights the complexities within the hijra community itself. It provides a nuanced portrayal of how marginalized communities forge their own cultural identity while navigating the influence of the dominant culture and intra-community dynamics.

The film delves into the intricate theme of body representation, notably through Puti's character. Her wig symbolizes her identity struggle, externally concealing her short hair. This symbolic mask allows her to conform, evade scrutiny, and navigate societal norms tied to her gender.

Madhu's persistent reminder to Puti (to wear her wig) highlights societal pressure and Puti's internal conflict in reconciling her identity with external expectations.

Despite the internal struggle, she does take strides. The gradual progress she makes in embracing her identity, symbolised by her taking minor steps like fleeing the ghetto with Madhu and visiting his hometown, depicts her journey toward self-acceptance. The progress is, however, shut down rather quickly when, at the end of the film, she is stripped naked and assaulted by a group of local hijras. Unable to bear the weight of humiliation, she hangs herself.

What follows, in my humble perception, is the most striking scene of *Nagarkirtan*. Following Puti's passing, Madhu, ostracised by his family due to his romantic involvement with a trans individual, deliberately seeks solace within the same enclave once inhabited by eunuchs - a place where Puti had once found refuge. The previously carefree Madhu now wears a vacant expression, draped in a saree as he enters the ghetto, holding a clay-sculpted figurine of Chaitanya, a gift previously given to Puti.

The question of his motivation remains open. Madhu seems to have rejected a society that rejected his love, possibly viewing it as an oppressive influence stifling his authentic feelings. This act could signify his readiness to explore his own queer identity, despite no prior indication.



Fig 5: The film's closing shots depict a bereaved Madhu walking into the ghetto. (Image via Nagarkirtan/Acropolis Entertainment)

I conclude this essay with the closing lines from Allen Ginsberg's 1956 free-verse masterpiece, "Howl." These lines fervently denounce modern society's oppressive and exploitative aspects:

Dreams! Adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!

Breakthroughs! Over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years' animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!



Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! The holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street! (Ginsberg, lines 91-93)

By invoking these lines, this essay aspires to fulfil its intended purpose as a potent reminder that queer and trans communities are not isolated in their struggles.

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