

'Joyland' crosses the barbed wire between India and Pakistan

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Indian audiences are connecting with director Saim Sadiq's acclaimed, queer-affirming Pakistani film, briefly banned in its home country

In the evening of 8 June, the Pakistani director Saim Sadiq's film *Joyland* was screened at Liberty Cinema in Mumbai as part of the 14th Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival. After winning the Queer Palm and the Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival, in December *Joyland* became the first ever Pakistani film to make the shortlist in the Best International Feature category for the Oscars. Before this, however, it was banned in Pakistan, with authorities citing complaints to the censor board about "highly objectionable material". Social-media outrage and fervent appeals from the cast and crew pushed the government to review the decision, and after cuts stipulated by the censor board it was finally released in Pakistan in mid November. In India, where the buzz from Cannes had already piqued interest, *Joyland* had its debut on 5 November at the 2022 Dharamshala International Film Festival in McLeod Ganj. With the controversy over the ban only driving interest further, this was followed by a handful of private and festival screenings before the film was shown at the Kashish festival.

Joyland unravels the intersecting lives of various people in Lahore held hostage by patriarchy. The central characters are Biba (Alina Khan), a trans woman who makes her living as a dancer and choreographer; Haider (Ali Junejo), her cis-male lover, who works as a back-up dancer though he has neither the skill nor the flexibility required for the job; and Mumtaz (Rasti Farooq), a cis woman who works at a beauty parlour and is married to Haider.

My strongest memory from the evening at Liberty Cinema is a scene where Biba gets to showcase the powerhouse that she is. She walks in on Haider being teased and bullied by fellow cis-male background dancers who are curious about Biba's genitals. Her voice cuts through the tension in the locker room like a knife. She calls out Haider for not standing up for her, and proceeds to reprimand the other men for their toxic masculinity. A cis man who wants to know what is between her legs gets an earful, and she spits on him.

The cinema hall filled with thunderous applause. I had gooseflesh, and tears streamed down my face. Though I feel embarrassed every time I express anger, Biba's response felt like a personal victory. She did what so many LGBTQIA+ folks like me have wanted to do in the face of oppression but have not been able to because of perceived consequences. The lights were off, so I had no clue who was sitting beside me, ahead of me and behind me, but I was overcome by a deep sense of community. It was okay to cry and also feel healed.

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As the lights came on, people hugged and held each other. I was struck by how affirming *Joyland* was, despite its tragic end. In the Bollywood films that dominate many Indian and Southasian screens, it is rare to see trans people getting much screen time - let alone owning the stage with a gorgeously shot dance sequence, pursuing their dreams, talking back to transphobes and getting married, like in *Joyland*. They are typically relegated to minor roles that do little justice to their personhood. Sadiq's film is an exception on this front, but that is not the only thing that makes it exceptional. As a person who grew up in India, where Pakistan is routinely demonised as an enemy country, it was moving to see fellow Indians responding to Pakistani characters on screen with respect, warmth and solidarity. The people in the cinema that evening, whether queer or not, seemed to see something of themselves in the film, without national borders or histories of intergenerational trauma getting in the way.

Queer like us

Rit Prasanna, who studies film and new media production at a college in Mumbai, also watched the film that day. "Trans people are used to being objectified, sexualised and ridiculed on screen," they said. "As a non-binary transmasculine person, it was refreshing for me to see an empowered trans person in *Joyland*. The violence that Biba encounters is so real and familiar, but she refuses to be seen as a victim. To see her retaliate was affirming."

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Prasanna recalled changing their location to Lahore and Islamabad on a dating app in the past as they wanted to interact with trans people from Pakistan and learn about their lives. "When you grow up with Islamophobia around you, it is hard to remember that Pakistanis have so much in common with Indians," they said. "Films like *Joyland* help you connect at a human level. You look beyond what your governments tell you, and appreciate cultural similarities."

Prasanna did not see Biba as the central character of the film. For them, the story belonged to Mumtaz from beginning to end. Prasanna said, "The villain of the movie is not the man who cheats on his wife but patriarchy itself. *Joyland* is not a story about Muslims or about Pakistanis alone. It is about desis, their dreams and desires. I also loved how it subtly makes the statement that it is okay for widows and widowers to look for love again."

Sumit Pawar heads the QKnit Foundation, which runs leadership, capacity-building and social-media initiatives to win more space for LGBTQIA+ people. He said he did not approach *Joyland* as a Pakistani film because "queer people in different countries often face similar issues." As part of his work, Pawar is the India lead for a Southasian network that connects young LGBTQIA+ activists from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India.

"We have been meeting online for the last few years but we were able to gather in person in Nepal earlier this year and last year," he said, and being part of this effort "made me realise how similar our struggles are." The group's members have been trying to discuss common concerns and forge regional solidarities without drawing much attention, because exposure could compromise their security and endanger their lives. They are keen to expand the network to include LGBTQIA+ people from Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives.

Pawar said that *Joyland* helped him reflect on how deeply entrenched patriarchy is when it comes to

Southasian societies – especially in their preference for male children. He reminded me of how, in the film, Haider is taunted when he is unemployed because he fails to be the breadwinner that he is supposed to be. When he eventually gets a job, Haider tells his family that he is a stage manager and not a background dancer since the former job description sounds more fitting for a man. As soon as Haider begins to contribute financially, his father, Amanullah (played by Salman Peerzada), asks Mumtaz to focus on household chores.

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“The filmmaker does not tell us whether Haider identifies as gay, straight, queer or bisexual,” Pawar said. “But we see the character exploring outside the framework of heterosexuality. As a gay man, I like the fact that the queerness of the characters in *Joyland* is subtle, not in-your-face.”

(Warning: Spoilers in the next paragraph.)

The film left him with many questions. Pawar wondered, for instance, if Haider dies after Mumtaz kills herself. I asked what made him think that. “He takes off his shirt, and walks into the sea, doesn’t he?” he replied. I offered my own interpretation: “I saw it as Haider giving himself permission to be what he wants to be. The ocean is so vast and embracing. Mumtaz had once told him how immense it was. He had never gone in.” Pawar mulled this over and concluded that “perhaps the film is a bit open-ended.”

Sridhar Rangayan, a filmmaker who is the founder and director of the Kashish festival, shared that he had been concerned whether a film by a Pakistani director would get the necessary clearance to be shown in Mumbai, but he was pleased to discover that his apprehensions were unfounded. “We do not have to apply for permission for individual films but for the entire programme,” he said. “*Joyland* was part of that.”

Rangayan was thrilled to see the film get a standing ovation despite the fact that the festival was not able to bring any members of its cast and crew to Mumbai for the screening. “*Joyland* has won so much praise internationally,” he said. “It was an honour to showcase it in Mumbai. The hall was full even on a Thursday evening. The audience received it with a lot of love.”

Close to home

Earlier this year, before the Kashish festival, *Joyland* was also screened in Mumbai as part of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and later as part of Pride Month celebrations at Soho House, a private members’ club. The Soho House screening was held in collaboration with Gaysi Family, a queer-led initiative that promotes creative expression and community-building through art, theatre, music and writing.

“We are all hungry for queer narratives on the big screen,” Sakshi Juneja, a co-founder of Gaysi Family, said. “*Joyland* is beautifully made. You forget it is a queer film – you just connect deeply with all the characters at a human level. You cannot really hate anyone in the film because everyone is suffering due to patriarchy. You just want to hug them.” Juneja added that the film has generated particular curiosity among Indian audiences “because the characters, their circumstances and the cultural context are so close to home.”

Gaysi Family hosted two packed private screenings at Soho House – the first exclusively for LGBTQIA+ community members, the second open to allies as well. “Physical screenings are

important,” Juneja said. “The joy of watching it with your own people is another high. We had discussions after the film because we knew that people would want to share and express themselves in a safe space. It is not just a creative product – it is about our own lives.”

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I watched the film again in mid June as part of Pride Month celebrations at the G5A Foundation for Contemporary Culture, which operates out of a repurposed warehouse in one of Mumbai’s old mill areas. The private screening was followed by an interaction with director Saim Sadiq, the producer Apoorva Charan, and the actors Ali Junejo and Rasti Farooq, who joined the gathering via video call. Among the audience were some key figures from Mumbai’s film industry, including the actors Naseeruddin Shah, Ratna Pathak Shah, Vidya Balan, Tillotama Shome, Kunal Kapoor, Jim Sarbh and Dolly Thakore, the directors and also the filmmakers Sudhir Mishra, Anand Patwardhan, Siddharth Roy Kapur and Nikkhil Advani.

The screenings at G5A and at Liberty Cinema were entirely different experiences. Unlike at the Kashish festival, where the audience was unabashed in its responses, the invitation-only audience at G5A seemed restrained, and I felt like I was at a solemn occasion. Any laughter was muted, and there was no whistling, hooting or clapping. There were some queer people present, but perhaps, outside of a queer film festival, most of the audience was watching a story not as closely connected to their own lives.

Charan, who is of Indian origin and based in the United States, was a classmate of Sadiq’s in film school at Columbia University, in New York City. “We have known each other since we were students, and really wanted to work together on this story,” Charan explained in the post-screening discussion. But it “took a while to piece together the talent and the finances.” Sadiq added, “Apoorva has been really gung-ho about showing the film in India. It has been screened before but this is the first time that we are interacting with audiences.”

When the audience was invited to ask questions, Naseeruddin Shah – as big a star in Pakistan as he is in India – said he was stunned by Alina Khan’s performance as Biba, and wanted to know about the casting process. Sadiq was so thrilled to see the veteran actor that he almost fell out of his seat. He explained that he and Charan were keen from the outset to cast a trans actor in the role. “Alina and I have worked together on a short film earlier,” Sadiq said. “She is a docile person in real life, completely different from Biba in the film. It was quite challenging for her to be assertive and snappy on camera.”

Southasian eyes

When I got to ask a question, I told Sadiq that *Joyland*’s reception in India reflected a popular hunger for stories from Pakistan. This is something local audiences are increasingly denied because of geopolitical tensions between the two countries and xenophobic domestic politics targeting Pakistani artists and productions; until recent times, Indian films often featured Pakistani actors and numerous Pakistani films and television shows were big hits with Indian viewers.

Sadiq said he was grateful for the support he and his film received from the Indian media at the Cannes Film Festival. “There was no Pakistani media, and the Indian media embraced *Joyland* as a Southasian film,” he said. “They platformed it really well. The film has also been circulating through queer networks. They are able to fly under the radar and make important contributions.”

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In early July, *Joyland* was made available to Indian viewers on some streaming platforms, pay-per-view. Earlier, it was widely reported that the film would also have a theatrical release in India, pending required certification, but when I asked about this Sadiq said there were no new updates.

When another viewer prodded him to talk about censorship of the film in Pakistan, Sadiq was in no mood to hold back. He confessed that he felt a lot of anger when the film was banned because he was proud of the film yet forced to defend it. "We had to do interviews for national television, dress up nicely and say a lot of 'Inshallah' and 'Mashallah'," he recalled, adding that he had to adopt an apologetic tone because he was "hungry for the film to be released."

Abhra Das, the manager of the Dharamshala International Film Festival, recalled the film's Indian debut last year. "We had only one screening planned but the queues were so long that we had to add another screening," Das said. "When all the seats were full, we put mattresses on the floor. People huddled close to each other. There was so much love and excitement in the air. It was touching."

Aseem Chhabra, the director of the New York Indian Film Festival, was present at the Dharamshala festival. Most striking for him, he said, was that "people just stood up and started applauding ... they were crying and hugging each other." Chhabra had also watched the film at the Cannes Film Festival earlier, but the McLeod Ganj experience was far more memorable. "It is a film that hits you emotionally, especially because of the tragedy at the end," he said. "Apart from being a film with a major trans character, who is depicted with dignity, the film also stays with you because it explores relationships in such a gentle, beautiful, realistic way."

Chhabra added, "It does not showcase Lahore in a way that would cater to the tourist. It captures everyday life, street scenes, the interiors of homes. There is an ordinariness about it that is heartwarming."

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