Cinema for Identity: An Interview with Hill Film Festival Director and Filmmaker Adit Dewan

Accepted for publication in Studies in World Cinema

Cinema for Identity: An Interview with Hill Film Festival Director and Filmmaker Adit Dewan

Shohini Chaudhuri | ORCID: 0000-0003-0611-5346

Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies, University of Essex, UK

Corresponding author

schaudh@essex.ac.uk

Published in: *Studies in World Cinema* 6 (2026): 128–140

DOI:10.1163/26659891-bja10070

Adit Dewan is a Dhaka-based filmmaker and curator from the Chakma Indigenous community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. He studied for a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science in Zoology at Dhaka University and, later, an MA in Film Studies at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India. In 2014, together with Turin Tanchangya and Promod Chakma, he co-founded the Hill Film Festival which, like his filmmaking, negotiates the complex politics of Indigenous identity.

Located in southeast Bangladesh, the CHT is home to over ten Indigenous communities, collectively known as 'the Jumma', each with a distinctive language and faith other than Islam, Bangladesh's state religion. During colonial times, the CHT was not annexed to British India until 1860, due to Indigenous resistance. While it had been autonomous under British rule, the region's status altered following India's 1947 partition (when the CHT, along with eastern Bengal, became East Pakistan) and the 1971 formation of Bangladesh. As Bangladesh's constitution failed to protect the CHT's autonomy, in 1977 armed conflict erupted between CHT guerrilla fighters, known as the Shanti Bahini (Peace Force), and the state. Although a 1997 peace treaty ended armed struggle, the CHT remains under military rule and faces ongoing Bengali settlement.

Held biennially in the CHT's Rangamati district and Dhaka, the Hill Film Festival initially focused on Indigenous-language films from the CHT, where filmmaking began in the 1990s. It has

since expanded to include Indigenous-language films from over fifty Indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Along with screening films in competition, the festival features curated sections, filmmaker talks and educational programmes to foster dialogue, collaboration and networking.

In this interview with Shohini Chaudhuri, Dewan reflects on the intersections of language, Indigenous identity, and CHT film culture. Based on Zoom and email exchanges in 2026, their conversation highlights the logistical and political challenges he navigates as an Indigenous filmmaker and festival director.

Shohini Chaudhuri: I'd like to ask you first about your background.

Adit Dewan: I grew up in a village called Gabachari and studied there 'til grade five, then I moved to Rangamati where I studied from grade six to grade ten. Gabachari is a Chakma village in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It's in a valley surrounded by hills, with streams in between. The *upazila* (sub-district) is on the border with the Indian state of Mizoram. This is one of the *upazilas* where the Bangladesh government didn't massively settle Bengali people during the '80s and 1990s. It's a Chakma-majority area.

SC: Which languages did you grow up speaking?

AD: We spoke Chakma at home and in our village. But when I went to school that's where I first learned Bangla [Bengali] and, later, English. Bangla was the official medium of instruction. We had three teachers. Of them one was Bengali. Even the Bengali teacher used to teach us in Chakma, otherwise we didn't understand. But Chakma was not a permitted language to communicate with in school – it was done unofficially. That's because the state always wants to run everything in the state language. For many students it was really difficult, unlike nowadays when, due to social media and powerful media propagation, people everywhere in this country see Bengali content. But, for us, there was no TV in our area.

I can still remember there was a TV in a nearby Buddhist temple. After Bangladesh became independent in 1971, a political party [the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS)] led by M.N. Larma claimed autonomy of the region and then Bangabandhu [an honorary title of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's first leader] denied that and suggested we transform into Bengali people instead. And after, when talks failed, the PCJSS started an insurgency. In 1997, after a twenty-year war, a peace treaty was signed. So, at that time, we needed to go to the Buddhist temple to watch on TV the ceremony where the Shanti Bahini laid down their guns and submitted to the government.[1]

SC: How did the struggle for autonomy and recognition play out in the terms used to describe your community?

AD: We mostly call ourselves Chakma. But the problem happened when the state needed to define, let's say, the outsiders. They wanted to see us as a unified identity. The British defined us as tribes. Who are the tribes? They are people who live in a particular way. So, for the British, it was easier to categorise those people. Then, the same structure was adopted by postcolonial states. They maintain that same line of defining us. In Bangla, the word for tribe is *upajati*. *Upa* in Bangla means 'sub'. *Jati* means 'nation'. None of the communities, including Chakma, wanted to be a sub-nation of the Bengali people. So, they rejected it. However, we need to tick that box on official papers. For example, I was admitted into university with the tribal quota. So, I ticked the tribal quota.

Here, in the subcontinent, we define every ethnicity with the notion of nation: the Bengali as a nation, Chakma as a nation, Mizo as a nation, and so on. As soon as Bangladesh became independent, it adopted in its constitution that all people in Bangladesh are to be known as Bengali. It doesn't recognise Indigenous communities, although Indigenous was not a prevalent word at that time, I guess. However, political leaders, including Larma, wanted to maintain the same status for the

[1] The Shanti Bahini was the military wing of the PCJSS. For a study of peacebuilding and conflict in the CHT, see Mohsin 2003.

CHT as it had during the British period and (more or less) during the Pakistan period. The clashes started from the imposed identity and expanded to other communities. That's when Larma introduced another identity: Jumma. It is based on the idea that we are all *jhum* cultivators – *jhum* means slash-and-burn cultivation. Larma's point was we are not Bengali. Jumma is a unified nationalist identity that directly resists the homogenisation of Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh, particularly in the CHT.

SC: When did the word 'Indigenous' become prevalent?

AD: I think it was in the '90s. Before, only educated people knew the term and how it is aligned with global inclusion politics through the UN. At least, that's my individual experience. I did not hear my father or grandfather use the word Adivasi. Adivasi in Bangla also means people living in this land from ancient times. It, too, has created problems with the Bengali people. I think the main fear for them, as for the state which placed Bengali settlers in Hill Tracts, is that they feel that it will ensure our land rights.

Not only that, during Awami League rule, from 2009-2024, the Bangladesh Government sent directives to the press prohibiting use of the words Adivasi or Indigenous. And there are groups of extreme nationalists who identify Indigenous issues as anti-state activities. Even after the July Uprising in 2024, which took place promising justice and recognition, one such group stormed the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) to remove from the cover of a textbook an image of graffiti that referred to Indigenous people along with diverse religions.[2] When Indigenous students and youth marched to the NCTB to reinstate it, the extremist group attacked them, seemingly attempting to kill Indigenous protesters in front of the police and injuring some very critically.

All the different terms provoke an identity crisis. The term tribe came from outside, as did *upajati*, *khudra nrigoshthi* ['small ethnic minority', a term introduced by the Awami League], and,

[2] The extremists claimed that the word Adivasi does not appear in Bangladesh's constitution which instead refers to those communities as 'ethnic minorities'. See The Business Standard 2025.

similarly, Indigenous. And sadly, even if I consciously claim Indigenous identity, there is real fear of being attacked or jailed. That fear and dilemma took me through immense trauma, sense of inferiority and alienation in my university life. If a government changes, my identities change. From that perspective, I feel that it's really, really important to have the power to define our own selfhood. In that sense, I'm sticking to my 'Chakmaness' or Chakma identity. It doesn't mean that I'm rejecting Indigenous identity. Rather, I see it as a timely framework to give rights to people who are far from the dominant power structure, to include us within the present mode of justice and governance.

SC: In 2011, the Awami League's fifteenth amendment of the Bangladeshi constitution enforced a unified Bengali identity, failing to address Indigenous land rights in the CHT and triggering widespread protests and communal violence. How did this context shape your filmmaking and the Hill Film Festival? I am thinking of your film *Swaban Nahi Pattam* (*Dream or Reality*, 2013), where a student's trauma blurs the line between a nightmare of communal attacks and a reality forever altered by fear.

AD: I was at university at that time. In Bangladeshi universities, especially Dhaka University, there's always a political atmosphere as student politics play a big role. Students have various political party affiliations. Although I was never a listed member of any political organisation, I joined protests and processions for Indigenous constitutional recognition. Plus, as university students, we used to participate in Indigenous Peoples' Day events. We were also moved by many more things. After coming to university, I started to visit Shilpakala Academy, a fine arts academy. I also visited film shows and read books related to films and culture. I can still remember that line by Lenin: 'Of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema'. That struck a chord with me during my university life and maybe influenced my involvement with filmmaking and the Hill Film Festival.

But, mostly, two factors motivated us to begin the Hill Film Festival in 2014. One factor was the identity crisis we have been speaking about. When there is no recognition in the constitution of

the cultural, political and linguistic identity of the more than fifty Indigenous communities [in Bangladesh as a whole] but an immense pressure of homogenisation into Bengali identity, we thought that we could arrange a film festival in response to it, exploring the politics of identities that fall in between. The other factor was to create a platform for Indigenous-language films of the CHT. We knew that there was a filmmaking culture in Indigenous languages in the CHT, but it was not known to national and international audiences. With this in mind, we thought of the Hill Film Festival as a platform to screen Indigenous-language films, to network and to create opportunities.

Swaban Nahi Pattam was a response to the communal attacks on Indigenous peoples of the CHT at that time. I can still remember the images of those attacks in the national dailies. We even tried to make a documentary exploring how a child can grow up with a progressive mindset surrounded by such communal violence.

SC: Was cinema a tool to explore identity and language?

AD: Yes, we can say that in an era of mostly just TV channels. Now, everybody has the power to access and create media, and tell their own stories, but we are talking around 2011 when social media was just becoming popular. If we speak with a different language – not Bangla – naturally it bears proof of your identity that you are not a Bengali. Even if you say through the constitution that all people living in Bangladesh shall be known as Bengali, we speak differently. So, language was so important here. We always focused on language more than content, because we cannot explicitly ask for political films. Rather, our aim was to go to international film festivals like Cannes so that the world can know us. So that even the Bengali people know who we are. Because when a Bangladeshi film goes to the Oscars or to Cannes, that's also how it reaches the national media.

SC: International success gets you attention back at home.

AD: It's true. So unconsciously or consciously, we were motivated by the same mechanism: making films for international film festivals. And they must be made in our own language because that naturally carries our identity. We were not sure what kind of content we would make – just to make it

in our own language. Though my present understanding is not completely the same as before, that's how I started my filmmaking.

SC: How do you see the relationship between your filmmaking and activism?

AD: Apart from my early university films, my work isn't directly activist; rather, it's a process of self-exploration and a reading of society, culture, and politics. But, as a cultural organiser and curator motivated by my own sociopolitical contexts, I can situate myself between filmmaking and activism – though I am keen to explore cinema in other directions too.

SC: Does your activism stem from a conscious effort to challenge Indigenous stereotypes? For instance, *Bizu in the City* (2017) subverts expectations by documenting a traditional Chakma festival in Dhaka, an urban setting. Or does that subversion happen unconsciously through your storytelling?

AD: I would not align it with tackling stereotypes because I was not aware of the system of stereotyping. I studied zoology, a pure science. It was only when I started studying film that I came to know many terms that are common in cultural studies and film studies. So, I was not tackling stereotypes in that sense, but maybe unconsciously. Because I was so much in a dilemma about my identity with my people, I was trying to say something about Indigenous issues or Chakma issues. Language was the point that I could start from. In between this, I was trying to explore Indigenous realities. If you ask what drives me, of course, Indigenous politics drives me but, alongside this, equally what drives me is self-exploration. As well as dealing with the socioeconomic context of the CHT that I experienced, *Not Only the Ants' Story* (2024) is a film that explores my own self. The story is very experimental, very much about myself – let's say, philosophically.

SC: *Not Only the Ants' Story* is a fiction-documentary hybrid interweaving human, animal and natural worlds. A Chakma family in the CHT (Figure 1) toil to meet the demands of a market-led economy and send their son to a town school, while ants industriously gather food. In what ways is it about yourself?

AD: (*laughs*) I was exploring a question. I found that there are many opposite forces acting simultaneously. Are you Indigenous? Are you a tribe? It's an ethical dilemma, a trauma, when you are confused and powerless and see that many forces are acting on the same point. That's what the film is for me alongside its socioeconomic context. I was searching for that moment and finally found it when the father and mother were talking about the necessity of money, and their son was dealing with the negative effect of money. I live with dilemmas. I'm not entirely comfortable with the 'Indigenous' label as well, as I feel like I'm being categorised – though I accept it as a cultural identity that defines my community well. And I understand how necessary it is to be recognised as Indigenous to claim political and cultural rights.

Figure 1: A studio portrait of the family hangs on the wall. Frame grab from *Not Only the Ants' Story* (2024)

SC: What led you to make the documentary *Felim – Cinema for Identity* (2017), about filmmaking culture in the CHT?

AD: In the early years of the Hill Film Festival, we were incorporating slogans such as 'Cinema for Us', 'Our Language, Our Cinema' and so on. At that time, Turin (festival co-founder and co-director of the film) proposed that we research what other CHT Indigenous filmmakers were thinking. That's how *Felim – Cinema for Identity* developed. We found that a bigger motivation of Indigenous filmmaking was preserving culture and presenting the 'nation' – in the ethnic sense – to others.

SC: Did filmmaking in the CHT develop in similar ways to how Indigenous filmmaking has emerged elsewhere, with cheaper and more accessible video technologies encouraging local filmmakers?

AD: The first film, *Andolot Pohr*, was produced on videotape in 1996 by the Jum Aesthetic Council (JAC). When I interviewed the producer, he claimed identity politics was not a conscious motivation. But looking deeper, JAC consisted of a group of university-returned youths who used culture to challenge hegemonic nationalism. Motivated by an attempt to construct linguistic and cultural identity, and probably by the CHT's autonomy struggle as well, they started in the early 1980s; they produced theatrical productions, which were very popular in Rangamati while I was growing up, and regularly published books and archived cultural artefacts. In *Andolot Pohr*, they highlighted cultural elements like the *dhuti*, which is considered as the national dress of the Chakmas.

Afterwards, probably, all of the films were shot digitally. The second film, *Dulu Kumori*, was released in 2006. The golden period of CHT filmmaking was 2006 to 2013-14, when there was a boom in production. Filmmakers also came from Dhaka to make ethnographic documentaries, including on behalf of state bodies, to preserve CHT lifestyles and culture. JAC was also doing this, but their aim was to be a counterforce.

SC: How do you characterise CHT films?

AD: There are at least five common tropes in my understanding: 1. Tradition-focused films dealing with customs and folklore; 2. Bollywood-style romantic comedy films centred on class or urban-rural conflicts, featuring dance sequences between the hero and heroine; 3. Political documentaries

dealing with CHT militarisation, Bengali settlement and communal attacks; 4. Religious stories, often funded by Buddhist temples; and 5. Ethnographic documentaries showing Indigenous lifestyles and culture.

SC: How were the films circulated?

AD: They were circulated through internal channels because they weren't distributed in national cinema halls. At that time, VCDs were very popular. VCD players were common in every household. So films used to circulate to audiences through VCDs. Similar films also came from India's Northeast – for example, in Mizoram, there are Chakma who were producing films and circulating them through this channel. Then, after 2013, when our activities started, VCD production went down. It was no longer a popular medium of circulation; YouTube was taking over.

SC: During that golden period, were there communal screenings?

AD: Oh, yes. I really miss having a picture of this, where people all come together to watch films – like in a village, if you have a VCD player at home, the room is turned into a venue. And at the end of funeral and marriage programmes, there used to be entertainment nights. People would rent VCDs and watch films outdoors, mostly Bollywood films. As there was no electricity, they used to bring generators. It doesn't happen anymore.

SC: What new trends are you seeing in CHT film production and circulation?

AD: Lots of social media content creators, Chakma and non-Chakma, are making content in Bangla, because it has a large audience. If your starting-point is the market, it is wise to make Bengali-language content. But many people are content creators now, including those who are making content in Chakma. I'm seeing a surge of film production again, this time on YouTube. For the next edition of the film festival, I'm thinking that we will focus on this social media-based production and circulation.

SC: Was the Hill Film Festival the first of its kind? Was it building on the work of any predecessors?

AD: As a film festival, I think it was the first in the area. However, JAC used to organise a cultural fair every year since 1998. Mostly, this consisted of theatrical productions, music, and craft markets. During their cultural fair, they screened their second film in an auditorium. Prior to our Hill Film Festival, that was one event where film was a part, as far as I know.

SC: How do you decide which films to include in the festival programme?

AD: At the beginning, we focused only on films made in the CHT. Later, we included all Indigenous-language films of Bangladesh. Alongside this, we have included films from India's northeastern region, where some of the Indigenous communities belong to the same ethno-linguistic identity as those in the CHT. We also receive films through a nationwide open call; the festival is more or less popular and known among Bengali youth filmmakers. In the last edition, we also received foreign films through an international open call. However, for the upcoming edition, we are thinking to focus more on the country's Indigenous-language films.

I also want to say what kind of film we do not accept. Though it is quite difficult to define what is political and what is not, we cannot accept films that explicitly deal with Indigenous politics. It is such a dilemma for us. We need to go through censorship, so self-censorship plays a decisive role here. However, we try to screen films in Dhaka which we feel un-screenable in the CHT. Because the Chittagong Hill Tracts is a militarised area, it has less open access to art and culture. In 2016, we screened *My Bicy*cle (Aung Rakhine, 2015) there and some army officers reserved some seats at the screening. We did not understand that at all, though the army officers did not come. At that time, the film was not banned as it is now, and people did not know about its portrayal of the military.[3] I am also doubtful now whether we knew about the military portrayal ourselves.

In the beginning, we feared that if we used the word 'Indigenous' we would not get permission to screen the films and organise this festival. Also, we were young. Given all those

[3] Despite only subtly depicting military presence in the CHT – notably through a soldier trampling on a child's toys – *My Bicycle* remains banned from commercial release in Bangladesh. Authorities blocked the film for allegedly portraying the government and security forces in a 'detrimental' light (Hill and Chakma 2020, 91), limiting its screenings to festivals and private institutions.

factors, we used the term ‘Hill People’ instead. Only several years later, after returning from India, I started to use the word Indigenous. It was not used officially for the festival until 2018 or 2020.

SC: How do you navigate the risks and censorship process for the films you screen?

AD: It is important for us to be partners with the Khudra Nrigoshthir Sangskritik Institute (Minority Ethnic Cultural Institute), a local government body in Rangamati, so that we can get official clearance easily. For them, it is only a matter of writing a letter to the Deputy Commissioner saying that we are showing some films focusing on language and culture – which is true – and listing the titles. Otherwise, it would mean submitting the films and going here and there for police clearance and for DC clearance. With the help of the Khudra Nrigoshthir Sangskritik Institute, we don’t have to go through any censorship, but we also do not include any films that we feel very political for which the Institute may be held accountable.

SC: Which other non-Indigenous organisations or partners has the festival collaborated with? What have been the opportunities and challenges in these collaborations?

AD: We also partner with Goethe-Institut Bangladesh, DrikTrust, Supporting People and Rebuilding Communities (SPaRC) and many other supporting organisations (see Figure 2). Of them, Goethe-Institut is the international German cultural centre and DrikTrust is a Dhaka-based organisation. Everybody’s support is crucial. As mentioned, the Khudra Nrigoshthir Sangskritik Institute eases our official permissions. They also have an auditorium which we have used for our festival. Last year we used another auditorium which is in the District Shilpakala Academy, an academy of fine and performing arts. DrikTrust provided Drik Gallery in Dhaka for screenings of the last two Dhaka editions. Goethe-Institut provided financial support for the last two editions and SPaRC managed some funding in the last edition. World Theatre Project, a Japan-based film organisation, supported us in the last edition with funding and screenings of a film for children. We also collect crowd funding.

Though we do not get a lot of funding, I personally fear that we will go through more scrutiny by government agencies and may face problems if we involve rights-based organisations and international collaboration. Another issue is that permission from the home ministry is needed if we invite international guests at our venue in Rangamati. Of course, there are struggles to manage funding, but I feel the political pressure most.

Figure 2: The auditorium premises at the Sixth Hill Film Festival. Image courtesy of Adit Dewan.

SC: Who attends the festival?

AD: At the first edition, there was literally zero audience in Rangamati. At the second festival, we had a large audience because we screened *My Bicycle*; we could not even give everyone seats. During the third and fourth editions, we had more or less the same numbers – around three hundred. In the last two editions, we saw a good presence from filmmaking circles.

SC: Is the audience largely drawn from Indigenous communities or the Bengali community?

AD: Every film has its own audience base. Generally, we get a local Indigenous audience which comes regularly and also the audience that goes with each film – mostly, for the last two editions, Bengali youth filmmakers from across the country. In Dhaka, the audience is mainly Bengali and some Indigenous communities living in Dhaka also come. Young people are the most common type of audience at our festival.

Since the Goethe-Institut started partly funding us, we have begun to accommodate filmmakers in Rangamati. That is, if you come here at your own cost, we are ready to accommodate you. In the last two editions, we had – if not lots – enough filmmakers who wanted to come. In terms of generating dialogue about films and politics, I think we did well.

SC: How did other initiatives develop, such as the Hill Film Festival School of Film and Visual Arts with its educational programmes aiming to introduce young Indigenous artists in Bangladesh to artistic media and foster their skills in collaborating and networking with local and global partners?

AD: We always had an interest in skills development and networking through the festival. When I participated in the Prince Claus Fund Biennial Symposium in Sri Lanka, in 2023, I felt that we could incorporate visual arts in our thinking. First, we do not have a film industry, so filmmakers should explore other media; second, I have personally become interested to think beyond film, yet still with a camera. In terms of networking, I felt that, through the platform, we will be able to create opportunities for art practitioners other than for film. Networking is important because it helps artists to grow, to learn and to live. We focus on creating networking both locally and internationally so that they get both national and global contexts, and bigger solidarity, when needed.

Acknowledgements

Shohini Chaudhuri wishes to thank Adit Dewan for his generous reflections and Kabita Chakma for putting us in touch.

References

The Business Standard. 2025. “Ethnic Minority Students Protest ‘Adivasi’ Graffiti Removal from Textbook.” January 13. https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/nctb-removes-adivasi-graffiti-textbook-after-students-protest-1041691 (last accessed 17 February 2026).

Hill, Glen, and Kabita Chakma. 2020. “Silencing Films from The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Indigenous Cinema’s Challenge to the Imagined Cultural Homogeneity of Bangladesh.” In *South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters*, edited by Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Niyogi De. University of Washington Press.

Mohsin, Amina. 2003. *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.