Integration says . . .

Reach out as far as you can
Why Integration?

The heading above has been the most frequently asked question ever since the start of Integration. And rightly so. As many people have asked, what was the need for another organisation for sexual minorities in Calcutta when groups like Counsel Club already existed?

Not surprisingly, most people asking this question were Counsel Club members. Many people suspected that the move to create Integration was a result of Counsel Club's internal politics and that the idea was to split the group. They feared that the split would spell doom for one of India's oldest support forums for gay people (which had turned 5 when the idea of creating Integration was first proposed).

But if Counsel Club had to die out, it would not have celebrated its sixth birthday this year with not one but two gatherings - the first a cultural performance before nearly 150 people and the second a birthday party with the usual good cheer. Also, it would not have been busy setting up local branches in Durgapur and Siliguri!

Besides, how does one explain the emergence of Sappho, eastern India's first support group for lesbians and bisexual women? Sappho is essentially a part of Counsel Club though it is quite autonomous in its functioning (including financial matters).

All this has been happening since the start of Integration and with its full support. So from all accounts, the sexual minority movement in eastern India has only gained from Integration's creation! And in the process, Counsel Club has found a "partner" to ease the pressure on it to provide a wide range of support services.

After five years of groundwork, Counsel Club had reached a saturation point. It had evolved into a diverse and democratic structure, but was unable to address crucial issues like sexual health, resources development and provision of legal support in an organised manner. Hence Integration which, as a small but registered body, is supposed to be "a strategic step forward" to overcome these shortcomings.

Spread affection, not infection. Have safer sex. Use condoms.

Integration's logo (on the cover)

From one to two and from two to many, we will reach out as far as we can and try our best to remove all ignorance about sexuality and sexual health issues.

"The Network": Why this name?

Networking is one of the key tools for Integration in its work. And these pages too contain "a network of people & information" which is itself linked to other networks worldwide.

THE NETWORK SEPTEMBER 1999
WHICH WAY HOME

Dear Readers
This is announcing the WHICH WAY HOME counselling column. This column will help you find answers to questions on issues like HIV/AIDS, sexual health, sexuality, relationships, family situations and related matters. We don't claim to have all the answers, but we promise to share our experience, suggest possible options for action (with the pros and cons of each option), and provide concrete information whenever possible.

Each question will be referred to the Counselling Team of Integration. If required, the team will consult the professional counsellors on Integration's Advisory Panel before answering the question.

Your identity will not be disclosed if so requested.

Please send your queries to:
"The Network", C/o Pawan
Post Bag No. 10237
Calcutta 700 019, India
E-mail: pawan30@yahoo.com

Note: Questions sent via e-mail can be answered through e-mail itself. However, the text of the questions and answers may also be published in "The Network". Please mention if you want your identity to remain undisclosed.

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You can also sponsor a column in "The Network"
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WHAT'S INSIDE

- TEEN MATTERS (Pg. 6)
There is little that can stop 19-year-old Bobby from Daring to hope!

- MAIN FEATURE (Pg. 7)
To change or not to change (one's sexual orientation)? That is the bone of contention between two pen pals. Extracts from their letters.

- FIRST PERSON (Pg. 15)
The story of Dana and Jemi: A lesbian couple recount their love story.

- SEXUAL HEALTH (Pg. 23)
What is sexual health? Is it the same as safer sex?

- ALSO: From the Internet (Pg. 12);
Networking (Pg. 13); Fiction (Pg. 17); Poetry (Pg. 18) and Cityscope (Pg. 19)

- HINDI SECTION (Pgs. 21-22)
Poetry, humour and Sangini helpline information.

It's Party Time in the East!!!

Usher in Year 2000 with Network East '99!
Network East '99, jointly organised by Counsel Club, Sappho and Integration, is the 2nd edition of a bi-annual networking event for sexual minorities in eastern India.

The Network East '99 programme consists of 3 phases:
PHASE I (holding meetings in key places in eastern India and identifying people with the potential to set up and lead local support groups) is already on and will end on November 28. PHASE II will include a two-day conference on December 4-5 exclusively for the "leaders" identified during Phase I. Most of the participants for the conference have already been identified.

BUT PHASE III IS STILL OPEN TO EVERYONE!!!
The last phase of Network East '99 will be based on a fun-filled one-day New Year's entertainment event in Calcutta on or around December 31, 1999. The event will be open to all the members and friends of Counsel Club, Sappho and Integration in eastern India. Members / friends from other parts of India or abroad are also welcome.

SO WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
Get in touch with us for detailed information on the PARTY OF THE YEAR!

Contact: Integration, C/o Pawan, Post Bag No. 10237, Calcutta 700 019.
Or send e-mail to: pawan30@yahoo.com.

THE NETWORK SEPTEMBER 1999
Daring to hope

- Bobby

I am a small town teenager and very much new to this gay world. I joined in with lots of expectations, desires and dreams. I can very well remember the day I stepped into this world. I was so nervous and afraid...but also very excited.

Oh god! What a relief it was to know that I am not alone. To know that I am not wrong. For the first time I found people accepting me the way I was. They looked so nice, so understanding and it all painted my dreams with rainbow colours.

My heart delved deep into the blue sea of love, in search of the true pearl. But alas, soon this honeymoon came to an end when I found myself exposed to the bitter facts of this world.

Among those nice looking people, I found some not so nice people. Yes, I found people who knew very well how to use others for their pleasure! Once it is over, you are thrown away like waste paper. What such people do not seem to realise is that a person's life is not a piece of lifeless, feelingless paper!

Yes, we all talk about our dreams. Dreams of a life partner to whom we can belong to, with whom we can share our deepest feelings. But how can this be possible?

Tell me how can this be possible when we all go by the rule of "good looks" and not "good heart"?

We all talk of lifelong relations about others behind their back does not even leave space or scope for a workable relationship!

Sometimes I feel totally lost and alone, with no one to go to. But then I hear a voice. Yes, it is the voice of so many who seem to share the same vision as I do.

It is YOUR voice saying: "We want to change - to make our gay world the most beautiful thing on planet earth!" And so I dare to hope.

The author, 19 years old, is a student of commerce and is the youngest member of Integration. His hometown is in Bihar but he is residing in Calcutta in order to pursue a career as a chartered accountant.

To change or not to change?

A gay man shares extracts from his correspondence with a doctor friend: A see-saw battle on whether sexual orientation is something changeable

Dear Sanjay

Hi, Your latest letter dated 13-12-97 found me in sad shape. I broke some of my bones in left foot and the left collar bone - courtesy a young man, whose skills of driving a Maruti 800 failed to live up to the occasion, and he banged into my motor-cycle...This put me out of action for six weeks...

There is a lot of piled up work in the college that will keep me busy for some time to come. This forced break gave me some time to introspect and look at some grey areas of life from a different perspective. I will start writing to you about those some time later.

Now that we are so close, I want to ask you a question. (Don't get offended - I extend apology in advance). Will you like to make a conscious and concerted effort to change your sexuality (mental and/or physical) with the help of counselling and psychotherapy? If yes, why, and if no, why?

Waiting for a reply.

A.K.S.

Dear A.K.S.,

Hill it was sad to hear about your accident. However, it is good that your injury is not too serious. Hope you are recovering properly...I would love to know more about the "grey areas of life" which you pondered over. Yes, I guess we are close, even though we have not met each other!

Your question has not offended me, but has indeed surprised me. After knowing so much about me (and supposedly having understood me) I wonder what relevance this question has. However, assuming that it is part of your study research, I will surely answer it.

I feel that my sexuality is not something which has been imposed on me or I have been tricked into or I want to get rid of or I am ashamed of. The fear that exists is because of society and near and dear ones not accepting me with my sexuality and nobody likes being isolated. The unhappiness is not because I am gay - it is because I am lonely, I don't have a loving partner of my choice and I cannot openly express myself/my feelings. I do not consider homosexuality or being gay as a disease or aberration from which I want to get out. I consider it a part with heterosexuality.

* The doctor in question (A.K.S.) was researching the subject of sexual orientation. Only the initials of his name have been used for reasons of confidentiality.
For me majority is not necessarily the rule. There are more foolish people in the world than intelligent people - does it mean that since the intelligent are in a minority they should change over to foolishness? If a heterosexual is lonely and unhappy, will the solution for him be to change over to homosexuality? Because if homosexuals can be "made" into "heterosexuals" through counseling/psychotherapy, I am sure the reverse process is also possible...

Why isn't this same eternal question of "conversion" asked to heterosexuals? Maybe because we have stopped calling homosexuality a disease only in modern psychology books. In our heart of hearts, we still see it as a disease, a shame for society, etc.

No man/woman changes his/her sexuality - nobody can. It is inherent in them. Nobody has the moral right to even attempt changing it. What we can do is create a suitable and friendly world for them. Let us not be God, let us try to be human beings first. Take care.

Love,
Sanjay

20.02.98

Dear Sanjay,

Hello. I am feeling a little shaky to write you at this time. It seems I have hurt your feelings badly and chosen the wrong words to express myself. Well, let me explain. What I intended to say was different from what you understood. We as doctors are always looking for a remedy to any situation - physical and/or mental, which at best should be able to cure, or at least relieve the pain/agony of the sufferer. For psychological disturbances of personal kind, there are no definite and universally applicable treatments or solutions, they vary from person to person depending on his/her circumstances...

I did not intend to suggest that something is wrong with one's sexuality - I fully accept being gay as a natural phenomenon just like someone's being not so... But I don't accept that sexuality or sexual orientation cannot be changed. Let me illustrate - any friend, no matter how close one is to, if causes more pain and anguish and harm, one needs to distance oneself from him, any home which is not providing the very purpose of a comfortable, peaceful and cozy home needs to be changed... You may argue that home, job and profession cannot be equated with sexuality. But after all the sense of satisfaction and pleasure emerge from the brain and whether it is home, job or sex, the perception is in the mind which has to take a conscious decision to change things in life in order to improve the quality of life. Human life is a dynamic process, change and adaptability are human traits, not GODLY!

Our thinking, our perception, our approach to different aspects of life changes with attainment of knowledge or maturity... I am sure, you, like all of us, have changed over a course of time. So why not again. My logic is only one - if your present sexuality has given you a loneliness, a sense of incompleteness, is there any harm in making a serious attempt at getting the best in life by changing certain ways and norms? I am not saying that overnight you give up your sexual identity...

I need to tell you something here from my very personal experience. A friend of mine at the age 15 years was attracted to his male friend, they became emotionally close and later on became physically close too. He enjoyed these intimate moments and still cherishes the experience. He had many such relationships. But, at the age of 24 years, when he first got an opportunity to befriend a girl, things started changing. Today, 33 years old, he is married. I don't know happy or not. But he has no regrets and guilt feeling towards his sexual relationship in the past. He claims that after meeting the girl, gradually he lost the desire to be intimate with a man. As far as I understand, he had a change in his sexuality from being gay to being heterosexual. Since I have seen this happening, I believe that there is nothing wrong in exploring ways of getting over the loneliness.

I have gone through these phases of loneliness many a times and can appreciate how painful it is at times. I lost the hope of finding a "perfect" female friend, and today I have "changed" my attitude towards friendship and controlled my longing for the kind of a relationship that I wanted. I have stopped feeling so lonely...

With best wishes
A.K.S.

07 MAR 98

Dear A.K.S.,

Thanks for your letter of 20 Feb 98. You seem to feel that my previous letter was an emotional outburst and that I was hurt. Well, I was, but not because of what you suggested. This feeling was more because I find myself helpless when I think that even you don't understand my psyche and also the problem of other people like me. I also feel there were some important points I made in my last letter which escaped your notice.
Let me repeat something I have already mentioned in my last letter - my present loneliness is not the result of my sexuality. It is because I do not have a suitable, sensitive partner; this is something which could happen to anyone irrespective of sexuality...

I have not disputed the sanctity of intentions with which you make various suggestions during the course of your research or understanding of sexuality. However, there is at least one... sub-conscious bias which you should fight - the presumption that a heterosexual way of life is the model way of life...

If anyone is to understand a gay man's loneliness, he will have to change his angle of perception. Gandhi had once said that science without humanity and knowlodge without wisdom are sinist. Unless one comes down from the "medical" dol and starts empathising what gays feel about the issue of their sexuality, it is not easy to fathom their predicament...

As far as your "changing" your attitude towards friendship is concerned - the way I read it is that you have not changed, but rather adjusted to new circumstances. The two are finely, but surely different...

You have written about the case of a 15 year old. That is an age when a person's mind and convicctions are not fully developed. I have a friend who at the age of 25 was subjected to therapy from a psychiatrist at the behest of his parents. The doctor began with counselling and when he discovered that he was not being successful at "converting" the poor chap, he ultimately resorted to shock therapy. Today, my bright, intelligent, smart and sensitive friend has become a nervous wreck who does not like meeting anybody...

Anyway, I guess this argument can go on for decades to come. I also know you are not going to like/accept most of what I have written, but at the same time I cannot help feeling sceptical about an experiment which attempts to change an integral (if not inseparable) part of someone's sensivity...

Love,
Sanjay

Dear Sanjay

20.03.98

This time I will begin responding to your letter in the reverse order. I am accepting everything that you have written and liked too! One of the limitations of written communication is that one cannot clear a misunderstood point immediately. Probably my framing of sentences and maybe your interpretation of them have given an altogether different perspective to my point of view. I indeed feel sorry for having hurt you so much, which was in any case not my intention.

Yes, doctors do tend to be more "medical" than "humane" in their approach, but I

There is at least one... sub-conscious bias which you should fight - the presumption that a heterosexual way of life is the model way of life...

ventured out into this area because I considered myself different from "psychiatrists" and "clinicians" as far as the grey areas of human behaviour are concerned.

I have never proclaimed that heterosexuality is the model way of life... But my point is that something that gives pain, is disturbing and not fulfilling, needs to be overcome with... why not mend those painful aspects of life, sexual and non-sexual both, that give us pain and discomfort. Somebody may not like a particular job, somebody may not like a particular house, don't we think of changing them?

Well, you may have strong objections to my comparing materialistic aspects with sexuality and behaviour. But, dear Sanjay, it has to be this practical approach towards abstract issues that can suggest us solutions to the undefined and undescribed aspects of our thinking and behaviour process. If you had found a very fulfilling relationship in the domain of your sexual orientation, I would have been the first person to congratulate you on your achievement... You may find someone same day who turns out to be a sensitive and perfect partner - but none of us know whether it will be tomorrow or after ten years! Will you like to live your present only on the basis of a hope for future...

A.K.S.

Dear A.K.S.

02-Apr-98

Dearest A.K.S., both you and me know fully well that "fulfilling relationships" hardly come as "achievements". A lot of it depends on love, trust, compatibility, what not - these things are not easy to find for any person experiencing any sort of sexuality. Suppose that you had a younger sister of 35 who somehow is not finding a compatible partner. Given our social conditions, she may find it very difficult to get married. What would your advice for her be?

Some arguments have no end, some opinions never meet. But remember that true friendship does not have limitations. I know that you care for my loneliness, but are you completely sanguine that your suggestion is the only way you can see me "happy and contented"?... Suppose that you make a small effort towards finding a suitable partner for me - you may not succeed, but wouldn't it feel that you tried something positive for me make me much more "happy and contented"?

Love : Sanjay

THE NETWORK SEPTEMBER 1999
FROM THE INTERNET

LOOKING FOR THE PERFECT MATE? TRY THIS...

Get your life (career, finances, fitness etc.) in good working order. And come out to your friends, neighbours and co-workers as single, available and looking.


Go everywhere and meet everyone. Dating is a participatory sport. Learn to enjoy being alone. You won’t come across as needy or desperate. Be open to life’s endless possibilities.

Make a short list of qualities your next lover must possess. Don’t compromise. You deserve the best.

Make a longer list of qualities you would prefer your next lover to possess. Be willing to compromise as lovers don’t come made-to-order. Expand your circle of friends. Set your charming, sexy self free.

Stay in the game. Perseverance is the key to finding love. Don’t let rejection shut you down. Pick yourself up and start again!

Adapted from “Tips for finding the perfect mate” by Maura Rothman.
Source: Gay India listerv.

The Calcutta Collective!

Calcutta today has not one but four organisations dealing with the issues that concern the sexual minorities (lesbians, bisexuals, gay men and transgendered people or “LGBT” for short).

It all started with Counsell Club (CC) in 1993. Today CC is one of the oldest support groups for sexual minorities in India. It is also the largest such group in eastern India in terms of reach and networking both within and beyond the emerging LGBT community.

Though it started as a lae-bi-gay support group, CC has been increasingly focussing on gay and bisexual men ever since the emergence of Sappho as a lesbian and bisexual women’s support group in June 1998.

Similarly, in 1998, Sarani, a performing arts group, took up the responsibility of partnering CC in talking about sexuality and sexual health issues through music, dance and theatre.

And early this year the city witnessed the launch of Integration, a registered social development organisation which plans to focus on the human rights and sexual health issues of sexual minorities.

(See contact details in the Our Friends column, Pg.14)

RULES & REGULATIONS

• PLEASE send us your listing as you want it to appear in print. We may need to edit the listing.

• EACH appearance of the listing will cost Rs.25, payable in cash or postage stamps. (Money orders will not be accepted). Integration members also need to pay.

• READERS abroad need to send two International Reply Coupons as payment along with their listings.

• FOR a prompt response, use a personal mailing address — residential or a post box/bag at the local post office.

• IF you don’t want your address printed, we will forward your mail. You will be given an advertisement code number.

• ALL mail to be forwarded to an advertiser with a code number should be sealed in a properly STAMPED envelope. Only the advertiser’s code number need be written in pencil on a corner of the envelope. Put this envelope into another envelope addressed to “The Network”.

• WE take no responsibility for what happens as a result of meeting people through “The Network”.

• PLEASE reply to any response as a gesture of courtesy.

• THE NETWORK reserves the right to refuse a listing.

• SEND your listings and mail for forwarding to: “The Network”, C/o Pawan, Post Bag No.10237, Calcutta 700 019, India.

45-YEAR old gay man seeks smart, handsome, strong males in the age group 18-50 for intimate friendship. I’m interested in movies, music and photography. Write in Hindi or Gujarati to: Siddik, Mohmed Essa Street, Nani Bazaar, P.O. Gonda, Dist. Rajkot, Pin 360 311.

MEDIUM built, 5’7”, 25, tanned guy looking for caring, decent gay men between 18-35 for long-lasting friendship, possible relationship. Write to: Pradeep, C/o S.C. Patnaik, Murad Khan Patna, College Square, Cuttack 753 003. E-mail: ppatnaik74@yahoo.com

ENGINEER, 30, 168 cm, single, understanding and humourous guy looking for a good looking, healthy and sincere guy for a close committed friendship. Age and place no bar. Write to Anil (Jammu). (Code No.1A)

GUY, 20, fun loving freak, desperately seeks hunky middle-aged fellas for fun-friendship. Permanent relationship possible with one and only. Reply assured. Waiting for you: LOVIN (Calcutta). (Code No.1B). E-mail: hereme@123india.com

Hi, I’m a handsome engineering student, 23, 5’6”, 61 kg, looking for a gay friend (18-25 years). I am ready to share everything with you, if you are ready to be my partner. I like films, music, drinking Pepsi and romance! So rush your letters with photo and phone number. Reply assured. Write to: Ratul (Calcutta). (Code No.1C)
OUR FRIENDS

INDIA

• AASRA CIRCLE: GPO Box 68, Patna 800 001. ☏: 91 612 27 1598. Gay/bisexual men's support group, run by the AASRA Project, a sexual health agency for vulnerable groups. Publishes bulletin "Time-share". E-mail: aasra11@hotpop.com

• ABVA (AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan): Post Box No. 5308, New Delhi 110 053. Community work on issues of education, health, law, women, les-bi-gay people, professional blood donors and drug abuse. Meets Wednesdays, 6.30-9 pm at Indian Coffee House, Connaught Place.

• BOMBAY DOST: 105 Veena Beena Shopping Centre, Opp. Bandra Station, Bandra (W), Bombay 400 050. They are the group for those who are interested in the magazines published by Pride Publications Pvt. Ltd., Bombay Website: www.bombay-dost.com

• CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights): P.O. Box 3525, Jaipur Nagar Post Office, New Delhi 110 024. A coalition of individuals and organisations working on lesbian visibility and rights issues. E-mail: caleri@hotmail.com


• COUNSEL CLUB: C/o Ranjan, Post Bag No. 794, Calcutta 700 017. Les-bi-gay support group, with branch in Durgapur. Also includes separate lesbian/bisexual women's circle (SAPPHO). Publishes Bengali newsletter "Naya Pranavaksh". E-mail: wrongzone@hotmail.com

• FPAL (Family Planning Association of India): 68 C. N. Neelamber, 228 Shakespeare Sarani, Calcutta 700 017. ☏: 91 33 247 3524. NGO providing reproductive health education, services and training.

• GAY CALCUTTA: An e-group mailing list under the www.egroups.com website. To join send an empty e-mail to gaycalcutta-subscribe@egroups.com

Note: An e-group is an Internet-based message exchange/ information sharing/chat facility, accessible only through membership.

• HUMSAFAR TRUST: Post Box 6913, Santa Cruz (West), Bombay 400 054. ☏: 91 22 618 7476. Associate NGO of "Bombay Dost". Runs helpline 'Humsafar Ki Awaaz' on 972 6913 (voice mail service) and 'Humsafar Drop-In Centre' for les-bi-gay people. E-mail: humsafar@vsnl.com Website: www.humsafar.org

• ICHRI (India Centre for Human Rights and Law): 5th Floor, CVOD Jain High School, 84 Samuel Street, Dongri. Bombay 400 009. ☏: 91 22 370 2592. NGO focussing on the human rights of marginalised groups in India. E-mail: huright@giasbm01.vsnlnet.in

• INDEV (India Development Information Network): British Council Library, 5 Shakespeare Sarani, Calcutta 700 071. ☏: 91 33 282 5370. Internet-based India-related development information network. Website: www.indev.org

• JABALA: 9 Bank Colony, Dhakuria, Calcutta 700 031. NGO working with sex workers, their children and children living in slums in Calcutta and Barrackpore.

• LGBT-INDIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered - India): A network of Indian sexual minority individuals and groups and their supporters in India and abroad. E-mail: lgbt-india@hotmail.com Website: www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Cafe/8033

• LIFELINE FOUNDATION: P.O. Box 9455, Calcutta 700 016. Helpline/referral service on 474 5255/5886, 10 am-6.30 pm.

Continued on Page 20

FIRST PERSON

The story of Dona and Jemi

Jemi

This love story is no less than any commercial film hit formula. There is only a little difference. That is, both the central characters are girls. That was and is being the cause which makes this story hard to swallow for our families and society.

Let us start where it all started. I was 13 when my family shifted and I enrolled in a new school. The very next day, Dona's mother asked her mother to let me and Dona go to school together. She was also in the same class but in a different section. We became friends.

The next year I moved into her class. I think, around that time, I began to understand myself and my feelings towards Dona. It was somewhat disturbing, but at the same time I went on loving her more and more. But there was a problem. I did not know if she felt the same way.

Anyway, we were best friends. As Dona was beginning to look beautiful, boy friends began lining up. And you know, it was a hard time for me to brush them away. Of course, I did not tell her. But some of the boys were really "big bad wolves".

By the time I was 17 growing on 18 and she was 16 growing on 17, I proposed to her. It was a desperate act. Because before that I had tried out many other ways to make her understand. Once I gave her a poster with "I love you" boldly written on it in red. All she did was hang it up in her room and thank me! Then another time I gave her Suman's "Tomake chai..."* and she went ahead and listened to the cassette with her parents!! What do I say friends — even before she understood my love for her, the whole locality knew about it, including her mother!

However, she accepted me readily when I proposed to her. Today she says that maybe she was already in love with me.

I feel that is true. We both crossed the invisible line between friendship and love without knowing it. And for that reason we are both lovers and best friends.

Two years passed by in love and laughter since Dona accepted my proposal. But without problems. Our mothers even caught us in some intimate moments.

* "Tomake chai..." meaning "I desire you" in Bengali is a popular song sung by Suna Chatopadhyay, one among the better-known singers who have led the Bengali pop wave in the 1990s.
mate positions. The clouds of tension were gathering, but we were too engrossed to pay attention. We did not know it would soon be crying time.

Pressure at my home was increasing and her parents' frown was deepening. Then came a major blow. I failed in chemistry in my Higher Secondary examination. She went ahead and I fell behind. She was always with me but I gave in to pressure.

I ruined our chemistry as well. I ditched her. I cut all relations to make my home happy. She tried a lot to come back but I was stubborn. We got separated. Physically, mentally, it went on and on.

Three years went by. She became sick with shock. I became impatient. I could not stand it but I had no other way. I never told her the real reason for my breaking off from her. I always wanted her to become disgusted with me so that she could settle down with someone better than me. But this time she was stubborn.

In those three years, I got a black belt in karate but neglected my studies as much as I could. I had no dream left. All was gone with her. I wondered away into some other relationships. But it was impossible. I knew it was Dona I needed. I went on dreaming about her but could not gather enough courage to tell her.

Finally I gave up. I gave up the idea of making my home happy and making society happy. I found it easier to make only two persons happy - me and Dona. I went back to her and she was there, waiting for me.

And here we are now. We are happy about being in Sappho (Calcutta's newly formed support group for lesbians and bisexual women). We are happy to have friends who understand us.

Today I am 24 years and Dona is 23 years old. We have a long way to go and we are trying. We don't care what awaits us in the end. Let it be rainbow or rain. As long as we have each other, it is heaven.

Sappho

A support group for lesbians and bisexual women in eastern India

It has finally happened! Calcutta and eastern India now also have a support group for lesbians and bisexual women.

Founded on June 20, 1999, Sappho functions as "a separate circle for women" within Counsel Club (CC). It has its own monthly meetings and core group. However, it takes part in all major activities of CC like the publishing of "Naya Pravartak", general networking and friendly counselling. And...

Its postal address is also the same as CC's: Sappho - Counsel Club, C/o Ranjan, Post Bag No. 794, Calcutta 700 017, India.

THE NETWORK SEPTEMBER 1999

Fiction

A talk with my parents

This happened after I came out to my parents as gay and before they finally accepted me.

One night I found my father sitting alone in the living room. He was having a difficult time dealing with my sexual orientation. I walked up to him and sat down next to him.

I asked him, "What's wrong with my being gay?"

"Because it's bad," he replied.

"Why is it bad?"

"Because it's lower than being a whore."

"How is it lower than being a whore?"

"Because I said so," came the angry reply.

I simply smiled and stared at him as if he had something funny. He got a little embarrassed with his own answer and walked away. The next day, my mother walked into my room and said, "Can I talk to you?"

I guessed that my parents had probably discussed the conversation I had with my father the previous night. I decided to adopt a new strategy.

"Sure we can talk," I said, and before she could say anything, I asked, "What's wrong with my being gay?"

"What's wrong with being straight?" she asked back.

"Nothing wrong," I said and added, "So don't worry. I won't discriminate against people because I'm gay and they're straight!" This sent my mother away, leaving me with a big smile on my face.

But moments later, she returned with my father and they said, "We think being gay is wrong because you cannot have children."

I asked, "Why is not having a child a bad thing?"

"Well, it's against the tradition. We gave you life and you should give life in return. If not, then you're selfish."

"Why is this tradition good?" I asked. "And if it is good, then why do we have a population problem in the world?"

"We don't care about the world."

"And I'm supposed to be the selfish one!" I retorted.

"If everyone starts thinking the way you do, the human race will go into extinction," they persisted.

"I didn't know everybody in this world could be gay!" I shot back with a bit of make-believe excitement at this new "revelation."

I love confronting and being confronted by my parents. It can be so much fun. It strengthens my beliefs and helps them to think about what they say and believe in.

This is just part of my coming out story. I hope that it will help some of those who are still in the process of coming out.
Ode to Sandhya Gokhale

Writer's note: In the summer of '95, I met a girl called Sandhya Gokhale. The present poem is dedicated to her and what she brought out in me. The initials RB and MC refer to girl friends in the past. "Kalki" is a pet/dream project for Holistic Health. The individuals involved in the project are very dear to me.

i read of you in the books of ayn rand
i internalized your character -
strong willed
determined
single
alone
totally free of dependency.
a girl standing
alone
immaculately pure
untouched . . . untouchable.
i dreamed of seeing you
in the cradle
born out of my womb
my child - dagny taggart commissariat.
but you did not arrive . . .
in my silent hours
i heard your childlike voice in my ears
and held your little hands in my mind
and felt the warmth of holding you to
my heart
and knew that if you touched me
or smiled at me
i would feel helpless
and surrendered
i would dissolve . . .

love is an overpowering emotion
without direction
without need to own
without need to disown
without any real message

in the eyes of RB
in the strength of MC
in the power of Kalki
and in the freedom of SG.

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INTEGRATION is getting ready to provide a comprehensive Counselling Service to the youth and sexual minorities . . .

On: Sex, sexuality, sexual health (including information about safer sex and STI/HIV testing/treatment) and related issues. Through: Personal meetings, letters, telephone, Internet and the Which Way Home column in this publication. The service will be managed by:

- Integration's Counselling Team (made up of trained Friendly Counsellors).
- Professional Counsellors on Integration's Advisory Panel whom the Friendly Counsellors may consult and refer people to from time to time.

For details write to: Integration, C/o Pawan, Post Bag No.10237
Calcutta 700 019, India. E-mail: pawan30@yahoo.com

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Calcutta's year gone by

Hectic would be the right word
to describe the pace of the
Indian minority movement during the year gone by.
The gap between successive events
shrunk "alarmingly". And more than
ever before, Calcutta figured big on
the happenings list. Here is an
account of the Calcutta related events:

- August '98: Counsel Club turns 5
  with grand party. Founder member
  Pawan proposes new organisation
  (Integration) to partner Counsel Club.
- September '98: Seven Counsel Club
  members/friends participate in discussion
  on homosexuality on All India Radio FM. Counsel Club
  lesbians face the media for the first time!
- January '99: Integration starts off
  on January 10 (though the birthday is
  fixed for January 26).
- Presidency College organises seminar on the film
  "Fire" where many speakers take a
  positive stand on homosexuality.

"Counsel Club" members build rapport
with the Joint Secretary, West Bengal
Dept. of Health & Family Welfare at a
seminar on AIDS organised by Life-
line Foundation/Cathedral Relief Ser-
dvices. *Calcutta Book Fair* sees release
of a book in Bengali on male sex-workers (
"Parash Jaukhen Journakmon") written
by social researchers Niloy Basu
and Ajay Mazumdar, both Counsel
Club members. Four other members
also contribute articles in the book.

- February '99: India Centre for Human
  Rights and Law, Bombay, publishes "Humjinsi", the long-awaited
  resource book planned at a 16s-bi-gay
  strategies meet in November 1997 in Bombay. The report includes several
  contributions by Counsel Club,
- March '99: Counsel Club and Integration jointly hold the first of the series
  of MediaMix events. Receive unprecedented media coverage and reach
  out to nearly 600 (till date) les-bi-gay
people in eastern India, particularly through "Ananda Bazaar Patrika".
- June '99: Sappho, Calcutta's very own lesbian/bisexual women's support group is born.
- July '99: EVENT OF THE YEAR: LGBT-India, India's national sexual minority collective in the making, stages Friendship Walk in the city on July 2. Calcutta creates history again. The Walk is the first time India marks the Stonewall Riots Day event. *Integration* holds first of its Fun (Health) Quizzes under Project Infotainment.
- August '99: Counsel Club turns 6 with a music, dance and film gala witnessed by nearly 150 people.

Pawan

**OUR FRIENDS**

Continued from Page 16

- **NARI NIRJATON PRATIRODH MANCH**: 29/9 Ballygunge Park Lane, Calcutta 700 019, ©: 91 33 240 2480. NCO working on women's rights issues.
- **NAZ FOUNDATION (INDIA) TRUST**: P.O. Box 3910, Andrews Gunj, New Delhi 110 049, ©: 97 11 685 1970. A South Asian sexual health organisation. E-mail: info@naz.unrv.ernet.in
- **SAATHI**: P.O. Box 571, Pathibowli P.O., Hyderabad 500 095. Support group for gay and bisexual men. Meets Sundays. E-mail: saathi99@hotmail.com
- **SAMIKSHANI**: 37 South End Park, Calcutta 700 029, ©: 91 33 466 3504. Centre for counselling, psycho-analytical studies and training in psycho-therapy.
- **SANGINI**: P.O.Box 3910, Andrews Gunj, New Delhi 110 049. Support group for lesbians/bisexual women. Runs helpline on 685 1970/1, Tuesdays 6-8 p.m. Hold meetings Saturdays 3:30 p.m.
- **SAPPHO - COUNSEL CLUB**: C/o Rajan, Post Bag No. 794, Calcutta 700 017. Support group for lesbians/bisexual women. E-mail: malv99@hotmail.com
- **SARANI**: 84 Jhawtalla Road, Suite No. 2, Calcutta 700 017. Experimental performing arts troupe focussing on development issues like sexual minority rights and sexual health. E-mail: wrongzone@hotmail.com
- **SWAYAM**: 1 Balu Hakak Lane, Calcutta 700 017, ©: 91 33 260 3429. NCO fighting violence against women.
- **THOUGHTSHOP FOUNDATION**: 2G Memura Centre, 48 Gariahat Road, Calcutta 700 019, ©: 91 33 264 0904/0059. Social communication agency focussing on sexual health issues for adolescents. E-mail: thoughtshop@cal2.vsnl.net.in Website: www.indev.nic.in/thoughtshop

**ABROAD**

- **IGLHR (International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission)**: 1360 Mission Street, Suite 200, San Francisco, CA 94103, USA. ©: 415 225 8660. Works for the human rights of sexual minorities. Publishes bulletin "Emergency Response Network". E-mail: iglhr@iglhr.org
- **TRIKONE**: P.O. Box 21354, San Jose, CA 95151-1354, USA. ©: 1 408 270 8776. Support group for South Asian sexual minorities. Publishes "Trikone Magazine". E-mail: trikone-web@trikone.org Website: www.trikone.org

**POETRY**

Hmare nam

Koön?
Pasa baindh tund
Jhool se taiyari bhar
Hai yeh dhar
Kari Hai kaise nam
In aothe koi Aaj
Tum
Jo band rahi hai hor din
Mun rang bohoti hai
Suchi itkaa hukka, bhum
Kahki se ban paai
Tum hi batyaam
Utha patte hui bhar yeh tulaa
Loida jani kaise?
Aap ko hai
Othhe koi Inteqam paati shahi

Maane paadifer liya
Hai haal diya
Fir kis baindh rahe
Pasa tum nee Ikthi?
Aap yeh anajani
Sapn kii sah
Tum hi batyaam
Kaise saahe, kuchh manu
to kruth aur hai
Dekh kisi tumhe bhi tha
Us din gali me
Oarse kii sah khadi
Budhula rahe the bhi me bhii
"Jhaad Aaye hai ye, chhooth chhoote
Apane anam
Oor pari kii shak koi"
Jab koil Rahi bhi Tum
sexual health

A term closely related to many major health problems like HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), teenage pregnancies, sexual abuse, drugs abuse etc. Hence the need to clearly understand what it means.

So what is sexual health? Does it simply mean keeping one's genitals clean? Or is it something more?

One way to define sexual health would be as follows: Sexual health is a concept related to the mental, physical and social aspects of having sex. When all three are in harmony, a person is said to have good sexual health and he or she is able to have enjoyable and fulfilling sex.

Now what does this definition mean to a gay, lesbian, bisexual or any other sexual minority person? Let us break it up and see what a sexual minority person needs in order to have good sexual health:

- Mental aspects: Self-esteem which comes from self-acceptance for one's own sexual attraction or orientation.
- Physical aspects: Disease-free sexual systems (including the genitals), general hygiene and fitness.
- Social aspects: Social acceptance and state sanction for one's sexual attraction and behaviour.

The question that arises is: How many sexual minority people are contented mentally, physically and socially? The answer is probably very few and therein lies the need for sexual minority support groups like Counsel Club and Sappho and health agencies working with sexual minorities like Integration.

What can such organisations do? In this issue let us focus on their role with regard to the mental aspects of sexual health.

The most important contribution of these organisations is that they provide a safe space where hitherto isolated sexual minority people get a chance to meet others like themselves, share their feelings and realise that:

- They are not alone.
- There is nothing wrong with their sexual attraction.

This realisation raises their self-esteem and encourages them to take better care of their body. Which in its turn is related to the physical aspects of sexual health.

But more about the physical and social aspects of sexual health IN THE NEXT ISSUE. In this issue, we end with a teaser. See box:

Keeping sexual systems free from diseases is possible through

SXAFRES

Unjumble letters to form 2 words!
(Answer in the next issue)

- Pawan

The love that dare not speak its name!

"The Network" urges its readers to give this love a respectable voice.

TO HELP IT DARE SPEAK ITS NAME!

Through...

Fiction • Poetry • Paintings/Sketches

Selected entries from each category will be published in future issues of "The Network".

And the best entry in each category will win a

(SUR)PRIZE!

- Fiction and Poetry contributions may be in English or Hindi and should be clearly typed out or hand written.
- The word limit for Fiction entries is 2000.
- The Fiction and Poetry categories will have two sub-categories each: English and Hindi.
- All illustrations (paintings/sketches) should be in black and white. Maximum size: 11.5 cm x 18.5 cm. Please do not fold the artwork.
- You can send entries for more than one category.

Last date for receiving entries is: January 15, 2000

Please mention your name and address and give a brief introduction about yourself.

Mail your contributions to: "The Network", C/o Pawan, Post Bag No. 10237, Calcutta 700 019, India. Or hand them over to: Any Integration member in person. Superscribe the envelope: "Contest".

Integration members are not eligible to participate in the contest.