

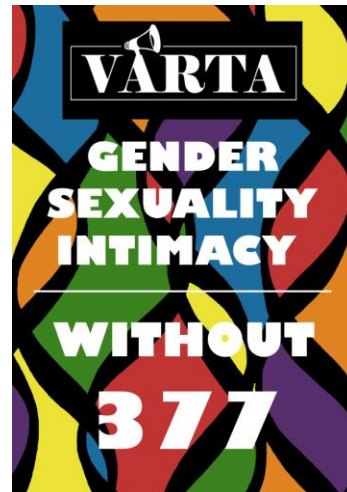


Gender, Sexuality, Intimacy, Publishing

Varta Trust Annual Report

2018-19

*Enabling Access to Community Friendly Health and
Legal Services for Gender and Sexual Minorities
In India – Setting New Standards*



Presented at 5th Annual General Meeting of Varta Trust
September 26, 2019

Varta Trust, C/o DPS Corporate Club, 9A Sebak Baidya Street, Kolkata 700 029, India
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Registered as a charitable trust with ADSR Sealdah, Dist. 24 Parganas (S), West Bengal with no. IV – 00322 of 2014 and with Income Tax Department with nos. CIT (Exemption), Kolkata/12AA/2017-18/A/10033 and CIT (Exemption), Kolkata/80G/2018-19/A/10081

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Front and back cover illustration credits:

- Top: Parvathy (logo for “Reach OUT” – a multi-media campaign from June-December 2018 to generate awareness about an online locator for queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in India developed by Varta Trust, Grindr for Equality and SAATHII).
- Below (left): Anonymous (participants at the North Bengal introductory event of Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project held at Maa Basanti Lodge, Islampur on April 27, 2019 – planning for this event began in 2018-19 itself).
- Below (right): Rudra Kishore Mondal, Pawan Dhall (poster developed under the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project to mark the Honourable Supreme Court of India’s verdict reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code on September 6, 2018).

Founding Trustee's Note

It is my honour and privilege to present the Annual Report of Varta Trust for 2018-19. Since our registration as a trust on May 14, 2014, we continue to move forward in realizing our vision of promoting dialogue and understanding on gender and sexuality as issues integral to good health, social equity and overall well-being in India. In 2018-19, we devoted our energies to enabling access to community-friendly health and legal aid services for gender and sexual minorities in India, and in the process setting new standards as well!

Organizational milestones: In the financial year 2018-19, we completed six years of Varta as a voluntary group on June 3, 2018 and four years as Varta Trust on May 14, 2018. By the end of March 2019, we were a team of 22 people, with a three-member Board of Trustees (BoT), one part time staff member and 18 volunteers based in Kolkata and other places in India and abroad. This was a multi-disciplinary team engaged with promoting dialogue on gender and sexuality equity in spheres like community development among women, children, youth, and gender and sexual minorities; health; law; social security; arts; communications and media; research; academics; and policy making. In terms of administration, in December 2018, we were successful in acquiring registration under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961.

Programmatic achievements: In 2018-19, the pride of place in our programmatic activities must go to the following:

(a) Awareness generation among 1,200 students and teachers of law, psychology, sociology and theology, health care and legal aid service providers, social workers and researchers, activists, media persons and members of the larger public through at least 15 public events and campaigns on educational, mental health, sexual health, universal health coverage, legal, social security, economic inclusion, digital media and other aspects of gender and sexuality.



(b) Successful launch, scale up and updating of an online searchable database (locator) of queer-friendly sexual health, mental health and legal aid service providers in India on our website (www.vartagensex.org/reachout.php). Between its launch in June 2018 and March 2019, this locator, with easy-to-access information, had entries:

- On more than 100 doctors, counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers and other health care / legal aid professionals who were known to be sensitive to the concerns of gender and sexual minorities
- From 30-35 towns / cities in 16 states / Union Territories
- Accessed by 17,000-18,000 unique users from across India and other countries with significant Indian populations
- Talked about in at least 27 media stories in newspapers, magazines and webzines published in multiple languages across India through a multi-media campaign called "Reach OUT"

Photo above shows launch event held at the American Center, Kolkata, June 28, 2018 – photo courtesy American Center.



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(c) Completion of the first six-month pilot of the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme in Manipur with stories that grabbed wide attention among gender and sexual minority community members and their ally activists, academics and lawyers.

d) Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project (with support from CREA, Delhi and SAATHII), which made a small but sure start in provision of legal literacy and legal aid to gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal, and in the process set an important national precedent in case law related to consensual cohabitation rights (SSG Vs. State of West Bengal & Others) in the era after the reading down of Section 377, Indian Penal Code.

Financial highlights: In 2018-19, our financial inflow was Rs.1,14,105/- (excluding cash and bank balances carried over from 2017-18) as per the Audit Report prepared by De & Sinha, Chartered Accountants, Kolkata. This was possible entirely because of generous donations from our Trustees, volunteers and other well-wishers. We are grateful to our Trustees and volunteers for contributing their valuable time and other resources. Now that our income tax registrations have fallen into place, we will be in a better position to raise funds through project grants and other sources (as mentioned in the trust deed).

Awareness generation and publishing activities (website development, and information, education, communication material development) constituted the main programmatic expenditure heads in 2018-19. Some funds were also spent on research, conference and skill development activities. On the administrative front, registered office rent, salaries and accounting / auditing expenses were the main expenditure heads.

Plans for 2019-20: Major plans include a redevelopment of the Varta Trust website (including the *Varta* webzine and online locator) and migration to a WordPress platform. The services of new website development consultants will be availed of to make the website more user-friendly and easier to discover on the web. The locator itself will be redesigned and its data presented in multiple languages. Refresher training activities with service providers already included in the locator will be conducted. The legal aid support group project will be continued and a second-year renewal sought from partner agencies CREA and SAATHII. A second pilot of the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme will be undertaken along with funder prospecting to scale up the programme and make it sustainable. Finally, the queer archival research and oral history documentation activities of Varta Trust will be scaled up through collaborations with educational institutions and other similar initiatives in India and abroad.

As always, a heartfelt thank you to our Trustees, staff and volunteers, all contributors and readers for continuing to motivate the publishing of *Varta* webzine, and to our well-wishers for your support whether moral, in terms of ideas, or through resources. Let our dialogues flow and flourish!

Pawan Dhall
Founding Trustee

Vision, Mission, Objectives and Position Statement

Vision: Promoting dialogue and understanding on gender and sexuality as issues intimate and integral to human development in India so that social stigma and silence around sexual issues can be tackled, gender equity can be ensured, and discrimination around diverse forms of gender and sexuality can be stopped.

Mission: Empowering both mass audience readers and writers for self-realization around gender and sexuality through age and culturally sensitive multi-format, multi-lingual newspapers and other publications. **In addition:** Complementing publishing activities with awareness generation through public events; referrals to health, legal aid and social security services; training programmes; social research; and legal, policy and media sensitization on gender and sexuality.

Key objectives to realize the vision and mission:

- Catering to demand for in-depth, nuanced and accurate information, education, communication and entertainment on issues around gender and sexuality in India through print, audio-visual and internet based publications like newspapers, blogs, e-zines, software apps, leaflets, posters, comics, booklets, anthologies and DVDs to suit different age groups.
- Ensuring that gender and sexuality in all their diversity and association with other key issues of education, health, livelihood, social security and human rights do not remain unvoiced in policies and programmes shaping the great Indian story of human development.
- Mainstreaming gender and sexuality concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Hijra and other similarly socio-economically and sexually marginalized communities into larger discourses on gender, sexuality, health and development in India through advocacy at various levels.
- Building communication, documentation and journalistic skills among Indian youth marginalized around gender, sexuality and other social parameters through training workshops and programmes to enhance their knowledge base on gender, sexuality, health and human rights issues as well as increase their self-esteem and employability within and outside Varta Trust.

Position statement: Varta Trust looks at gender and sexuality through the prism of intersections with age, class, caste, religion, race, marital status, geographical location, sexual and reproductive health, HIV, disability, mental health, education, livelihood, social security, environment and human rights concerns.



Varta Facebook page banner on the occasion of Varta webzine completing five years on August 1, 2018. Artwork credit: Parvathy

Organizational Details

- Started as a voluntary group: June 3, 2012 (first volunteer team meeting); *Varta* monthly blog started: August 1, 2013, evolved into full-fledged website (inclusive of a monthly webzine) from August 2016, completed five years on August 1, 2018.
- Registered as a charitable trust since May 14, 2014 in Kolkata with ADSR Sealdah, District South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, with no. IV – 00322 of 2014.
- Registered address: C/o DPS Corporate Club, 9A Sebak Baidya Street, Kolkata 700 029.
- BoT as of March 31, 2019: Pawan Dhall (Founding Trustee), Kaushik Gupta and Madhuja Nandi.
- Larger volunteer team (including BoT members) as of March 31, 2019: Aniruddha Dutta (*gender and sexuality academic, researcher and activist*); Anupam Hazra (*gender, sexuality and HIV activist*); Arunabha Hazra (*event manager*); Debayan Sen (*advocate*); Debgopal Mondal (*filmmaker and gender, sexuality and youth issues activist*); Debjyoti Ghosh (*advocate and gender and sexuality researcher and activist*); Kaushik Gupta (*advocate and sexual rights activist*); Madhuja Nandi (*transgender and anti-trafficking activist*); Mohammad Gulrez (*social worker*); Nikita Kabra (*dance movement practitioner and social worker*); Owais Khan (*computer professional, poet and gender and sexuality activist*); Pawan Dhall (*journalist and gender, sexuality and HIV researcher and activist*); Pompe Banerjee (*mental health professional and gender and sexuality activist*); Prosenjit Pal (*neurosciences researcher*); Rudra Kishore Mandal (*artist and gender and sexuality activist*); Santanu Pyne (*organizational administration and financial management specialist*); Sayan Bhattacharya (*journalist and gender and sexuality researcher and activist*); Sudeb Sadhu (*gender and sexuality activist*); Sudha Jha (*HIV activist*); Sukhdeep Singh (*IT professional and gender and sexuality activist*); and Vahista Dastoor (*communication specialist*).
- Staff members: Bappa Panja, Administration Assistant.
- *Varta* Trust bank account (institutional current account): Kotak Mahindra, Ballygunge Branch, Kolkata.
- Current Auditor: Sanat Kumar Dey, De & Sinha, Chartered Accountants, located at 76 R. K. Chatterjee Road, 2nd Floor, Kolkata 700 042 with ICAI F. R. No. 329840E and Membership No. 059859.
- *Varta* Trust PAN number: AABTV9002A.
- Income tax registration: Registered with Income Tax Department with number CIT (Exemption), Kolkata/12AA/2017-18/A/10033 since June 5, 2017 (with effect from financial year 2016-17) and number CIT (Exemption), Kolkata/80G/2018-19/A/10081 since December 11, 2018 (with effect from financial year 2018-19).
- Decision making process: Larger volunteer team planning meetings and discussions on *Varta* Googlegroup e-forum provide inputs (ideas and strategies) for quarterly BoT meetings where key decisions are taken and implementation plans worked out; activity specific meetings are also organized as per need.



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Key Activities in 2018-19

a) Organizational development: Varta Trust finally received its pending income tax registration under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961 on December 11, 2018 (registration number mentioned in previous section of this report). The application was submitted on July 13, 2018 under the guidance of advocate Anirban Gupta, an expert in income tax law. This completed the process of the organization's income tax registrations – in relation to Varta Trust being exempt from paying income tax (registration under Section 12AA of the Income Tax Act), and bonafide donors (tax payers) being able to receive income tax rebates against their donations to Varta Trust (registration under Section 80G).

Chartered accountant Sanat Kumar Dey was re-appointed as the Auditor of Varta Trust for the financial year 2018-19 on October 1, 2018. With guidance from him and advocate Anirban Gupta, we filed the returns of the income for financial year 2017-18 on September 26, 2018.

In August 2018, Varta Trust completed one year of its registered office being shifted to C/o DPS Corporate Club, 9A Sebak Baidya Street, Kolkata 700 029 from the previous address of B301 Bhubaneswar Apartment, 36 Palm Avenue, Kolkata 700 019. The change in registered address was duly intimated to the Income Tax Department on September 6, 2017. However, changes in other official documents of Varta Trust (PAN card, trust deed and bank account) were under way as of March 31, 2019.

Human resources development: On November 1-2, 2018, Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall attended the annual "Digital Citizen Summit" organized by the Digital Empowerment Foundation and The Internet Society in Delhi. Given that so many of Varta Trust's activities are digital or online in nature, this was a significant learning opportunity on issues like "digital citizenship", "feminist internet" and "big data". Pawan Dhall also presented Varta Trust's work on using digital media for health and rights promotion in the conference (see **Awareness Generation** section).

b) Publications:

(1) Varta webzine and old blog: As this Annual Report gets written, a positive development to be noted is the extent to which our webzine has become integrated with all our major activities. A quick reading of this report itself will show frequent mentions of the webzine in different sections of the report. The Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme is the best example of such integration (see **Training Activities**), though in 2018-19, the webzine also played an important role in our legal aid, mental health and services referrals activities.

We published 12 issues of our monthly webzine (at www.vartagensex.org from April 2018 to March 2019). A total of 44 articles were published. The website attracted 28,066 page views (5,951 in 2017-18) and 18,825 unique users (690 in 2017-18) from across India and abroad. Of the unique users, 17,779 were from 30 states / Union Territories (24 in 2017-18) and 146 towns / cities in India (47 in 2017-18). The website usage figures, compared to the 2017-18 data, showed a quantum leap, primarily because of the introduction of a unique online locator on queer-friendly sexual health, mental health and legal aid services in India (details in **Services Referrals** section).

This year, the articles were focussed on mental health, disability, child sexual abuse, human rights, socio-economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities, transgender-inclusive sanitation, social research (including queer archival research), related policy matters, cinema and dance. The articles included news reports, first person stories, analytical and research-based writings, interviews, reviews, advice columns, poetry and photo-reports. Coverage of the Section 377 verdict declared by the Honourable Supreme Court of India on September 6, 2018, and the much debated central legislation on transgender rights received significant attention in *Varta*.

Queer Communities Celebrate Supreme Court Verdict on Section 377 (September 2018), an article based on a media release prepared collectively by queer individuals and groups across India, became one of the most popular posts of the year gone by (*article lead photo by Randhoni Lairikyengbam*). *Cruel Déjà Vu on Transgender Rights Legislation* written by Pawan Dhall (December 2018 issue of *Varta*) highlighted the debates and critiques around the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2018, a matter as of date still to be resolved in the Parliament.



The articles on economic inclusion (including transgender-inclusive sanitation) were published as part of the *Varta* Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme under a column called *Manipur Diary*. Please see section on **Training Activities** for details.

Among the new columns introduced was *Thought for Food*, which included reviews of eateries and catering units run as social enterprises in and around Kolkata. The first article in this connection (*For that Mental Connect over Cake and Coffee* by Jia Mata, January 2019) covered the story of *Crust & Core*, a bakery in South Kolkata run by adults living with psychosocial disabilities. Many of these individuals, especially women, were once homeless but are now able to sustain themselves through the training and livelihood provided to them by mental health NGO *Iswar Sankalpa* to manage the bakery. As a gesture of support, *Varta* Trust ordered lunch packages from the bakery's catering service for two of its workshops in 2019.

Another new column introduced was a once-in-two-months question and answer column on incest and child sexual abuse issues. Matter for this column was provided by NGO *RAHI* (with operations in Delhi and Kolkata), which has done pioneering work on highlighting concerns around incest and child sexual abuse in India.

Apart from Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall and *Varta* volunteers Debjyoti Ghosh and Debayan Sen, a prominent contributor to *Varta* in 2018-19 was queer activist and writer Jia Mata. Besides the article mentioned above, she anchored the report *To School, with Fear . . . of Confessions!* with inputs from Nikita Kabra and Sudh Jha. This article focussed on the homophobic violation of child rights that took place in the Kamala Girls' High School, Kolkata in March 2018. *Varta* Trust conducted an online campaign (on *Change.org*) based on this story urging schools and colleges in Kolkata, the West Bengal Education Minister, West Bengal Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, and the West Bengal State Commission for Protection of Child

Rights to take up age-specific and age-appropriate gender and sexuality education for students and sensitization for teaching and non-teaching staff.¹

In 2018-19, we continued to avail of the services of OFlipper, Kolkata that developed the website hosted at www.vartagensex.org. But a change in the service provider for website development is on the cards. OFlipper has been unable to sustain the quality and regularity of service needed to develop and maintain the website. Moreover, with the inclusion of the immensely popular online locator on health and legal aid services, the website needs to be migrated to a faster, securer and flexible platform. Preliminary dialogue with Sputznik, a well-established Delhi-based agency, was started in late 2018. Apart from possessing technical expertise, Suptznik is known to have worked with agencies like ours and is familiar with concerns around gender and sexuality. Trustees Pawan Dhall and Kaushik Gupta initiated the dialogue. More details on the intended change can be seen in the section **Activities Planned for 2019-20**.

The earlier *Varta* blog at www.varta2013.blogspot.in continued to attract a small readership every month, and was updated with relevant information parallel to the current website.

(2) Varta YouTube channel: Our first audio-visual publishing channel started in January 2018 attracted significant viewership in 2018-19. Two important videos were uploaded during the year. The first showed a scene from a Thabal Chongba event (linked to the Holi festival in Manipur) for transgender women held in Imphal in April 2018. This video was part of a story published in *Varta* under the Manipur Diary column as part of the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme (see **Training Activities**), and it has been the most viewed video on our channel so far (more than 14,000 views so far). The second video titled *Supreme Court NALSA Judgement on Transgender Rights: Nine Directives* was developed as part of the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project (see **Legal, Policy, Media Sensitization**). This video in Bengali (with English sub-titles) was part of the legal literacy activities of the project, and has become a key tool in community meetings and workshops to explain the essence of the Supreme Court's April 2014 verdict on transgender identities and rights.

(3) Varta Facebook page: We use this page for interactive posts to generate discussion and awareness on various aspects of gender and sexuality, including health, social security and legal rights. Till the end of 2018-19, 72 such posts were made on the page, nine of them in 2018-19. In November 2018, Varta Trust took a key stand on the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace through the page. Responding to a Facebook post by a trusted and well known Delhi-based gender rights activist on her own timeline about the abuse faced by her from her employers in a prominent Indian NGO, we publicized her post through our Facebook page. The NGO in question was planning to organize a consultation on gender issues in Baharampur town in West Bengal, and Varta Trust was invited to the event. But we took a stand of not attending the event till the NGO concerned adequately responded to the complaint against them. This generated significant discussions, experience sharing and legal rights awareness among the page readers.

The page is used also for posting Varta Trust updates and event announcements, and sharing *Varta* articles, writings from other publications, and announcements of key developments in

¹ The sections on **Mental Health Symposium** and **Activities Planned for 2019-20** explain how Varta Trust plans to follow up on the matter of gender and sexuality education and sensitization in schools and colleges in the long run.

research and policy around gender and sexuality. The page banner is used for creative expressions of gender and sexuality issues, which makes the page immensely popular with people interested in following or participating in Varta's activities. In 2018-19, the page acquired net 449 new likes with the total at 1,971 at the year-end. At a jump of nearly 30%, this was one of the highest annual increases in likes for the Varta Facebook page.

c) Awareness generation: In 2018-19, Varta Trust reached out to nearly 1,200 people through at least 15 awareness generation events and campaigns on educational, mental and sexual health, universal health coverage, legal, social security, economic inclusion and other aspects of gender and sexuality. The role of digital media in health and legal rights awareness promotion among marginalized communities was an important part of many of the events. These events included meetings, panel discussions, workshops, consultations, film screenings, and personal storytelling (experience sharing) sessions in small groups.

Either the Trustees and volunteers were invited to the events as speakers or Varta Trust organized them in collaboration with partner agencies. Key articles published in the *Varta* webzine were distributed during some of these events in a printed digest form. Students and teachers of law, psychology, sociology and theology, health care and legal aid service providers, social workers and researchers, activists, media persons, gender and sexual minority community members and the larger public were engaged in dialogue and debate on gender, sexuality and related issues of health, laws, policies and social justice.



The events reached out to people in cities like Chennai, Delhi, Guwahati, Kolkata, Ranaghat and their neighbourhood. Varta Trust was also a part of international events in relation to the online locator on health and legal aid services in India – these have been mentioned in the section on **Services Referrals**. This time around we were part of a much larger number of

events than in the previous years. The following is only a sample of the total number of events mentioned above that Varta Trust was a part of in 2018-19. Mention of more events can be found in other sections of this report and on the Varta Trust website (Talks & Interfaces and Mass Awareness Events sections). Names of the organizers / collaborators have also been mentioned in the list below:

- Kolkata, June 28, 2018: Launch event of Varta Trust's online locator on queer-friendly sexual health, mental health and legal aid service providers in India – this event was hosted by the American Center and organized in collaboration with Grindr for Equality and SAATHII

Note: Similar events were organized at Delhi on July 17, 2018 (venue Instituto Cervantes, Embassy of Spain), Guwahati September 9, 2018 (venue Guwahati Press Club), and Chennai September 29, 2018 (venue British Council). In each city, the local queer networks provided support for the events. All the events were part of "Reach OUT", a multi-media campaign to publicize the locator (see **Services Referrals** and **Media Interactions** sections). In Kolkata, the campaign supported also the fifth birthday event of *Varta* webzine (see entry below)

- Ranaghat, July 15, 2018: Workshop on legal awareness and sexual health among people of marginalized gender / sexual identities – Nadia Ranaghat Sampriiti Society
- Kolkata, August 4, 2018: “Queering Mental Health – Symposium on Mental Health Concerns of Queer People in India” – organised at Seva Kendra Calcutta Training Centre as part of *Varta* webzine’s fifth birthday event in collaboration with Grindr for Equality and Sruti Disability Rights Centre – see more details in the **Legal, Policy and Media Sensitization** section (*collage of photos from the event on previous page courtesy Jia Mata and Kaushik Gupta*)
- Kolkata, September 6, 2018: Discussion “IL/Legal Kolkata” focussing on Supreme Court’s verdict on Section 377, Indian Penal Code – Pride Circle Kolkata, The Lalit Great Eastern Kolkata
- Kolkata, September 21, 2018: Seminar on Supreme Court’s verdict on Section 377 – West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences
- Delhi, November 1-2, 2018: Conference “Digital Citizen Summit 2018” (including panel discussion “How Do LGBTQ+ Activists Mobilise the Internet to Create Safe Spaces?” on November 1) – Digital Empowerment Foundation, The Internet Society (November 1 panel discussion organized by Feminism in India and Varta Trust)
- Kolkata, December 10, 2018: Panel discussion on empowerment of women and queer people on Human Rights Day 2018 and 70th anniversary of signing of Universal Declaration for Human Rights – Varta Trust supported Consulate General of France in organizing this event
- Kolkata, January 5, 2019: Panel discussion “No Going Back: Post 377 Celebration and Possibilities of Queer Magazines” as part of “Kolkata Queer Literary Festival” and “Kolkata Rainbow Pride Week 2019” – Max Mueller Bhavan, West Bengal Forum for Gender and Sexual Minority Rights
- Kolkata, January 6, 2019: Storytelling sessions “Human Library Kolkata – Chapter 1” – Human Library Kolkata and partner agencies (including Varta Trust) – *photo of closing ceremony courtesy Human Library Kolkata*
- Kolkata, January 17, 2019: Consultation titled “LGBTIQA+ Workplace Inclusion in India” – organized in collaboration with AMaNA, ETA, SAATHII, British Deputy High Commission and University of Sussex
- Kolkata, January 21-24, 2019: Sessions titled “Listening to Stories from the Community”, “Medical Perspectives”, “Human Rights Perspectives”, “Symposium on Faith and Rights: Engaging with Human Sexuality and Gender Identities” and cultural evening performances as part of four-day workshop “Training Module for Theological Educators on Human Sexuality and Gender Identities” – Varta Trust supported National Council of Churches in India for this event and also facilitated participation of partner agency Amitie’ Trust
- Kolkata, March 7, 2019: Consultation “Universal Health Coverage” – Kolkata Rista, World Health Organisation (WHO) Country Office for India



d) Social research: In 2018-19, the social research component of Varta Trust's work was mainly centred around oral history and archival research on the lives of gender and sexual minorities in India and the social, legal and health challenges faced by them since the 1950s through to the 2000s. Associated articles were published in the *Varta* webzine, and work on digitization of archival material maintained by Varta Trust was carried out. This archival material mainly relates to the activities of Counsel Club, one of India's earliest support forums for gender and sexual minorities that functioned from 1993 to 2002. Progress was made in uploading of digitized copies of *Pravartak*, a journal published in the 1990s by Counsel Club, on to the Varta Trust website.

Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall and Varta volunteer Sayan Bhattacharya continued discussions for collaboration in the area of oral history, archival research and digitization of archival material with different universities and NGOs. These included Qamra, a new Indian queer archival initiative being established in Bangalore (Pawan Dhall attended the first planning meeting of the initiative in December 2018) and educational institutions in India and USA. The association with Qamra is expected to provide Varta Trust with knowledge and skills in archival management and research.

e) Services referrals: This component of Varta Trust's activities saw a major jump forward in 2017-18 through a project titled Development of Online Searchable Database on Queer Friendly Sexual Health, Mental Health and Legal Aid Services in India, which was elaborated in last year's Annual Report. But it was in 2018-19 that the full impact of this activity was registered as the project implementation achieved full scale. Credit goes to this online database (popularly online locator) hosted at www.vartagesex.org/reachout.php for providing Varta Trust wide media visibility and increasing manifold the public reach of its website.

Implemented in collaboration with Grindr for Equality, Los Angeles and SAATHII, Chennai, the project was conceived of in mid-2017. It was based on our experience of receiving frequent requests for health and legal aid support from queer individuals from across India, and learning from a qualitative study we co-conducted in 2016-17 in Kolkata on the need to deploy digital media for sexual health promotion among gender and sexual minorities in India.²

The project sought to address a serious gap in online availability of information on queer-friendly, good quality and easily accessible services, an issue recognized by the National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS and STI (2017-18 to 2023-24) of the National AIDS Control Organisation, Government of India. The project was also in line with the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 that seek to promote greater availability of health and legal services to marginalized communities. As described in the Annual Report for 2017-18, the project had three major aspects:

- Technical development of the online locator hosted on the Varta Trust website (in a section called Resources – Health and Legal Service Providers)
- Collection / verification / entry of data on service providers for the locator
- Multi-media dissemination of the locator information among potential service users

² Published by Bloomsbury India in May 2017 as a book *Social Media, Sexuality and Sexual Health Advocacy in Kolkata, India – A Working Report* authored by Dr. Rohit K. Dasgupta of University of Loughborough, UK and Pawan Dhall, Founding Trustee, Varta Trust.

Work started in September 2017, and by the end of March 2018, data on around 50 qualified and accredited individual sexual health, mental health and legal aid service providers from across India was uploaded on the locator. In 2018-19, data collection and related activities were stepped up. By the end of the financial year in March 2019, the number of service provider entries had crossed 100 from at least 16 states / Union Territories and 30-35 towns / cities of India. Data collection was relatively higher from the states of Assam, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, and the Union Territory of Delhi NCT. Under the broad heads of sexual health, mental health and legal aid, there were a range of sub-heads and the service providers listed on the locator had diverse specializations in sexual and reproductive health, STI/HIV testing and treatment, counselling, psychology, psychiatry, gender affirmative care, disability and different aspects of law and human rights. The service providers were drawn from both government and private sectors.

Preliminary publicity (dissemination) of the online locator started in 2017-18, while a multi-media campaign called “Reach OUT” was taken up from the end of June 2018. Grindr for Equality appointed Chennai-based communications specialist Brindaalakshmi K. as a consultant to lead and manage the campaign on the creation of the locator. The held through an event at the June 28, 2018. Founding Trustee on the locator context and panel discussion with four health, persons (including Varta Trustee senior psychologist Jolly Laha, sexual health professional Piyali Ghosh, and transgender activist / Varta volunteer Sudeb Sadhu). Jack Harrison-Quintana, Director of Grindr for Equality, joined the event through a video conferencing link from USA. Key American Center officials joined the event speakers for the formal launch of the locator.³



After this event, the campaign covered different social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and organized four similar launch events in multiple cities to publicize the locator. The campaign continued till December 2018. Its timing proved apt given the anticipation around the Supreme Court verdict on Section 377 and a central legislation on transgender rights *during* the campaign period itself. It was anticipated that the verdict and the legislation would trigger an increased demand for legal and health queries among gender and sexual minorities. More details on the campaign and its high visibility impact have been provided in the **Media Interactions** part of the **Legal, Policy and Media Sensitization** section in this report.

Based on the Varta website Google Analytics data, in the period June 28, 2018 to March 31, 2019, the online locator was accessed by 17,000-18,000 unique users from across metropolitan as well as small town India and abroad. This in turn helped increased visibility of other features of the website, including visits to the *Varta* webzine and its subscription.

Several search, disability access, and feedback features were included to make the locator user-friendly. Though not voluminous, there was useful online feedback received on the locator in terms of suggestions on inclusion of more service providers and the services that the users were looking for but did not find (each such query was immediately addressed). This was an indicator that the

³ Our YouTube channel carries a video on the launch event – the video was uploaded in the ongoing financial year.

locator was being accessed by the intended users. Word of mouth feedback was received from service users, community groups and queer activists on the quality of service providers listed – both positive and negative feedback. Some service providers were delisted based on negative feedback from multiple sources, while others were put on a “watch list”.

In early 2019, the locator data was updated through phone calls and emails sent to the service providers listed since more than a year. A needs assessment was also conducted with service providers from Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal on their refresher training needs, which would be addressed through online and physical workshops in 2019-20.

Uniqueness factor: Our online locator of queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers may not be the first such database in India (agencies like Orinam, Chennai have had a crowd-sourced listing on their website since a long time). But in terms of the geographical spread, inclusiveness, numbers and processes deployed to verify the data before listing, the Varta online locator is quite unique. Here’s how:

- While many other similar databases are service or community-specific (example, focussed only on HIV or mental health, or only a few sections of the LGBTIQA spectrum), our locator aims to be comprehensive in terms of its coverage of queer communities and the services they need
- It adopts an intersectional approach – for instance, in reflection of real life, it includes disability concerns along with the health and legal aid concerns of gender and sexual minorities
- Part of the information about service providers may be crowd-sourced (recommended by queer individuals or other service providers), but no service provider is listed in the locator without them responding to a detailed administered questionnaire, followed by verification processes using different methods to cross-check the information provided in the questionnaire
- We look at “queer-friendliness” in service providers as a combination of their knowledge, skills, ethical practices, service accessibility, referral linkages, and flexibility in client interaction and service charges. If these factors are compromised, we delist the service providers concerned in the best interest of the service users

Such an approach has won the locator public endorsements from several community groups and mental health initiatives like the Mariwala Health Initiative, Mumbai. The locator experience was also disseminated internationally. In July 2018, Varta Trust’s poster titled *Digital Media and Sexual Health Promotion among MSM and Transgender Women in India: Exploring the Contours of Online Interventions* was presented at the “22nd International AIDS Conference” at Amsterdam.⁴ This poster profiled the work done on the locator and its impact. In March 2019, Reach OUT Campaign Manager Brindaalakshmi K. won a full scholarship to present a case study on the locator at the “ILGA World Conference 2019” held at Wellington in New Zealand.

Pawan Dhall in his capacity as Varta Trustee and individual consultant to Grindr for Equality led the project in 2018-19 along with volunteers Debjyoti Ghosh and Sudeb Sadhu, and Guwahati-based consultant Shivalal Gautam.

⁴ The presentation was made by representatives of partner agency Grindr for Equality present at the conference.

Note: The Resources – Agencies section of the website continued to contribute to the services referrals component of Varta Trust’s activities. It carried information on 26 NGOs spread across India engaged in the health and well-being concerns of women, children, adolescents, youth, people infected or affected by HIV, and gender and sexual minorities. These agencies focussed on the issues of poverty eradication, anti-trafficking, sexual health, mental health, disability, dealing with substance abuse, care giving, legal aid, and creative pursuits.

f) Legal, policy, media sensitization: There were again four main areas for our legal, policy and media sensitization work in 2018-19:

1) Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project: This project provided some of the significant milestones to Varta Trust’s work in 2018-19. More formally named Project Varta: Expanding Queer Friendly Legal Aid in West Bengal, it was briefly described in the previous year’s Annual Report. Its genesis lies in our Facebook awareness generation / discussion group called Queer Friendly Lawyers Network (QFLN) – West Bengal created in December 2014.

The project started operations in April 2018 based on a concept note prepared earlier by Trustee Kaushik Gupta and other Varta volunteers. The project began with monthly meetings in Kolkata involving gender and sexual minority community members, lawyers, students of law, social workers

and media persons. The meetings focussed on legal literacy, dealing with requests from community members for legal aid, and sensitization of students of law on issues concerning gender and sexual minorities.

Project introductory event in Kolkata, November 30, 2018: An introductory event was organized with 20 people from different gender and sexual minority support forums based in South Bengal, lawyers and students of law, as well as civil society groups working on issues of gender, disability, mental health and human rights. A presentation on the key aspects of the project was followed by a detailed discussion on how the project could address different legal literacy and legal aid concerns of gender and sexual minorities and their community groups; what options they had with regard to seeking redress against rights violations; need for further legal reforms and continued vigilance against regressive legislations; and the need to ensure that the relevant legal services authorities functioned as per their mandate. **Note:** More details on the event available in full-length report submitted to SAATHII.

As mentioned in the 2017-18 Annual Report, Varta Trust was also in dialogue to implement the project in collaboration with NGOs CREA, Delhi and SAATHII, Chennai. Both NGOs work extensively on gender, sexuality, public health and social justice issues with marginalized sections of society like women, youth, and gender and sexual minorities. This dialogue was fruitful and resulted in a formal one-year project that started in October 2018 (and is continuing in the ongoing financial year).

The **project goal** was to run one or more legal aid support groups to promote greater access to legal literacy and legal remedy among gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal so that they could protect themselves from human rights violations primarily in relation to their gender and sexuality and claim their rights from the State through legal means.

Project activities included provision of information and guidance (legal literacy) through district-level monthly meetings (by rotation and in partnership with

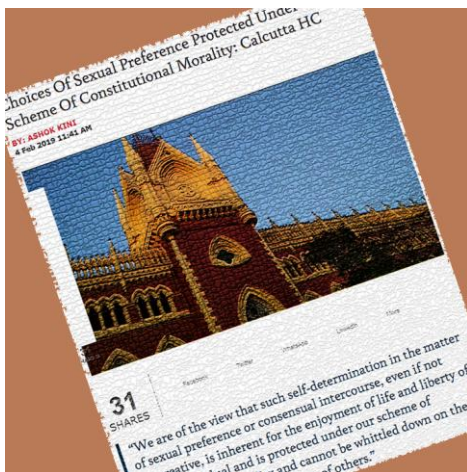
local community groups), legal aid / litigation support, and handholding support during crisis situations to gender and sexual minority community members in West Bengal.

In the period from October 2018 to March 2019, five monthly meetings were held in Baharampur, Murshidabad district; Baruipur, South 24 Parganas district (twice); and Kolkata city (twice). The total attendance in these meetings was 50-60 individuals.

The key issues discussed included basics of legal and human rights; implications of the two Supreme Court verdicts on transgender identities and rights (April 2014) and Section 377, IPC (September 2018); legal gender identity change; legal validity of same-sex or mixed gender (non-normative relationships); dealing with family / intimate partner violence; sexual violence; property rights; child sexual abuse; lack of inclusive sanitation; and police harassment (including frequent denials of FIR registration).

The meetings included personal experience sharing by gender and sexual minority community members; information sharing on human rights, laws and judicial verdicts; suggestions for realizing one's rights and resolving socio-legal problems; screening of audio-visual legal literacy material; and identification of individuals seeking legal aid support.

With regard to provision of legal aid to gender and sexual minority community members, seven cases were handled till March 2019 involving issues around family violence (including confinement at home as well as eviction from home), forced heterosexual marriage, enforced separation from



queer partner, property rights, police harassment and access to legal gender identity change processes. Most of the complainants were transgender persons or women with different sexual orientations, and were residents of Baharampur, Haldia, Kolaghat and Kolkata and its immediate neighbourhood. The project ensured that the complainants (legal aid clients and in some cases also their intimate partners) received free or partially free legal advice / legal aid from the lawyers associated with the project.

Significant legal aid milestone: In one of the legal aid cases argued in court by advocates Kaushik Gupta and Debayan Sen (in November 2018), a transgender man (age

25) from Kolkata was supported in filing a writ petition in the Calcutta High Court to protect his cisgender female partner (22) from extreme family violence and confinement in a rehabilitation clinic for substance use survivors. Though in the end the transgender man's partner decided to return to her family of her own volition and for reasons best known to her, the petition resulted in a landmark ruling by the court on January 29, 2019, which said that consensual cohabitation between any two adults, whatever be their sexual orientation or gender identity, cannot be illegal. The court issued this verdict in light of last year's Supreme Court ruling decriminalizing gender and sexual minorities while reading down Section 377. The Calcutta High Court verdict (issued by a Division Bench comprising of Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Ravi Krishan Kapur in *SSG Vs. State of West Bengal & Others*) not only set an important national precedent in case law in the post-Section 377 reading down era, it also had a beneficial impact on other similar legal aid cases taken

up within the project. Interestingly, there would also be no legal bar on the transgender man concerned and his partner if they were to choose to live together as a couple in future. *Illustration on previous page is from an article on the verdict in LiveLaw webzine (February 4, 2019).*

Development of print, audio-visual and online communication material towards legal literacy was also part of the project. In this regard, till March 2019, the project had undertaken the following:

- Development of a one-page project profile in English and Bengali
- English to Bengali translation of UN Equal fact sheet on key concerns of gender and sexual minorities
- Development of a short video on the nine directives included in the Supreme Court verdict on transgender identities and rights – Bengali with English sub-titles (see also **Publications** section)
- Development of a short documentary film outlining key aspects of the Supreme Court verdict on Section 377 – work in progress (into the ongoing financial year)
- English to Hindi translation of a summary booklet of the Section 377 verdict published by Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore
- Publishing of articles based on Section 377 verdict and legal aid cases handled through the project for the legal advice column of *Varta* webzine
- Distribution of a legal rights manual for gender and sexual minorities developed by Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, Delhi – the manual was shared with different community groups in West Bengal through the project meetings and workshops

The project also included sensitizing and engaging lawyers, paralegal workers and students of law (from Kolkata-based institutions like the West Bengal University of Juridical Sciences and Hazra Law College), and making them a part of the legal literacy and legal aid activities (including the monthly meetings and interaction with individuals seeking legal aid). Sensitization of legal aid stakeholders also included building linkages with the West Bengal State Legal Services Authority and their district level counterparts. See also **Training** section for more information on the project sensitization activities.

The Varta Trust website was used to document project activities and progress and acted as a repository of legal information useful for queer people, lawyers and researchers. The website was linked to the QFLN – West Bengal Facebook group that acted as a public information, discussion and networking forum on issues related to the project activities.

Research on socio-legal issues that concern queer people in West Bengal in collaboration with other agencies, researchers and students of law, media and social sciences remains one of the long-term activities of the project.

CREA provided technical and financial resources for the project, with the funds being provided to SAATHII. In turn, SAATHII shared its expertise in running similar projects elsewhere in India with Varta Trust and employed three of its representatives as part-time consultants to implement the project. While Trustee Kaushik Gupta and Varta volunteer Debayan Sen (both advocates) took up the responsibility of conducting monthly community meetings, legal aid provision, and sensitization of legal and other stakeholders, Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall was responsible for overall project coordination, development of legal literacy material, assisting the advocates with legal aid provision

as a paralegal worker (providing counselling, moral support and guidance to individuals seeking legal aid on the necessary steps to be taken), project documentation and reporting. Varta volunteer Sudeb Sadhu was also engaged as a transgender activist in the project and she had the responsibility of facilitating the monthly community meetings in different districts.

2) Gender and Sexual Minorities Economic Inclusion Advocacy Project: This activity involved continuation of an earlier project advocating for greater economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in Manipur (especially transgender people). This training, research and sensitization project emphasized the need for greater educational, skills building and livelihood opportunities for gender and sexual minorities; enabling them to have better access to health, sanitation and social security; and framing of laws and policies that were inclusive of their concerns. The rationale being that these communities are often left out of the socio-economic mainstream because of stigma around their genders and sexualities. The project was implemented in collaboration with two Manipur-based community groups AMaNA and ETA, NGO SAATHII and other civil society organizations. It started in August 2016 and continued into 2018-19 till January 2019.

The project advocated with entrepreneurs running small businesses, officials of vocational training centres, media persons, child protection officials and a key official associated with the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Manipur. The project also helped build long-term linkages between gender and sexual minority community groups and these stakeholders. It had a positive impact in terms of a number of entrepreneurs and vocational training centres coming forward to offer work and training opportunities to gender and sexual minorities, promotion of transgender-inclusive sanitation as a tool for economic inclusion, and the publishing of a community blog called *Rainbow Manipur | Inclusive Manipur*, which recorded case studies as evidence of socio-economic exclusion of gender and sexual minorities and some examples of inclusion successes.

An elaboration of the project activities, its impact and follow-up action can be found in the Annual Report for 2017-18. Activities relevant to the financial year 2018-19 have been detailed in this report. One of the final project activities was its linkage with the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme. The first pilot of this programme (March to August 2018) was conducted as part of the Gender and Sexual Minorities Economic Inclusion Advocacy Project, and the objective of doing so was to ensure that at least a degree of documentation and reporting on issues around economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities continued even after the project was over. This objective was indeed achieved. Apart from articles on issues of economic inclusion being published in the *Varta* webzine, the project itself was cited in a number of peer reviewed articles in journals like *Waterlines* (an international journal on water and sanitation issues) and the *Economic and Political Weekly*. More details in this regard can be seen in the **Training** section of this report.

The last activity organized under the project was a one-day national meeting held in Kolkata on January 17, 2019. Titled “Consultation on LGBTIQ Workplace Inclusion in India”⁵, it was organized in collaboration with AMaNA, ETA, SAATHII, University of Sussex, UK and the British Deputy High Commission, Kolkata (who hosted the event at the British Club). The consultation was an experience sharing and strategy building session involving 30 gender, sexuality and disability

⁵ LGBTIQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning or queer, and asexual people, often collectively referred to as gender and sexual minorities or queer communities.

activists, entrepreneurs, corporate representatives, researchers, mental health professionals and lawyers from Bangalore, Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, Imphal, Mumbai and the UK. Lessons learnt from the Gender and Sexual Minorities Economic Inclusion Advocacy Project were shared during the consultation. Orinam, Chennai and Diversity Dialogues, Bangalore shared their pioneering work, an inclusion guide titled *Supporting Gender Affirmation: Towards Transgender+ Inclusive Workplaces in India*. Economic inclusion was also discussed from the perspectives of disability and mental health. However, given that the majority of the country's workforce is employed in the informal sector or is self-employed, a key outcome of the consultation was that LGBTIQ+ economic inclusion in India cannot be conceptualized only with regard to the formal workplace. The consultation discussions and strategies will be presented through a comprehensive manual on economic inclusion, which is work-in-progress.

The main part of the project was supported by the Sussex Social Science Impact Fund (SSSIF) of the University of Sussex. The final consultation held in Kolkata in January 2019 was supported by the Fast Track Engagement Fund (FTEF) of the same university. Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall led the project as an individual consultant to the SSSIF and FTEF (with affiliation to Varta Trust). Anthropologist Dr. Paul Boyce from the University of Sussex partnered him in the project.

3) Mental health symposium: On August 4, 2018, Varta Trust organized "Queering Mental Health: A Symposium on Mental Health Concerns of Queer People in India" on the occasion of our webzine *Varta* completing five years (the actual foundation day being August 1). The participants at the symposium included around 30 mental health professionals, students of psychology, academics, researchers, lawyers, health care workers, activists, and gender and sexual minority community members. This event, similar to the consultation on economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities, drew speakers from across India, including representatives of Mon Foundation, Kolkata; National Neurosciences Centre, Kolkata; Nazariya, Delhi; SAATHII, Chennai and Kolkata; Sruti Disability Rights Centre, Kolkata; Undefeated Mind, Delhi; as well as Varta Trust.

The symposium discussed and debated the mental health concerns of gender and sexual minorities in India, and how these concerns could be better addressed through advocacy on changes in the school and college curricula and teaching practices, elimination of bullying and inclusion of counselling facilities in educational institutions, changes in the MBBS syllabus and sensitization of mental health practitioners and family members, and framing of inclusive policies, laws (like the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017) and associated rules and regulations.

The symposium was held at Seva Kendra Calcutta Training Centre and was a joint effort of Varta Trust and Sruti Disability Rights Centre. The event was supported by the "Reach OUT" multi-media campaign to generate awareness about our online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in India (described in the **Services Referrals** section). Participation in the symposium was based on prior registration against a nominal suggested contribution. The event report was carried in *Varta* webzine as part of an article titled *Symposium on Queering Mental Health* written by participant Jia Mata.

4) Media interactions: In 2018-19, Varta Trust's visibility shot up in the media thanks to the launch of its online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in India (described in the **Services Referrals** section). "Reach OUT", the multi-media campaign organized to publicize the locator since its official launch in Kolkata on June 28, 2018, led to 27 stories being published in

a variety of newspapers, magazines and webzines in India and abroad till the end of October 2018. These stories were in English, Bengali and Tamil. Prominent among these were *Online Help for LGBT Community* published in Kolkata newspaper *The Telegraph* (June 29, 2018); *Varta Trust Launches Online Locator for Queer-Friendly Services in India* in Delhi-based webzine *Feminism In India* (July 3, 2018); *Online Safe Space for LGBTQs* in the Guwahati edition of *The Telegraph* (September 2, 2018); and *Medical, Legal Aid to 'Queer' at the Click of a Button* in the Chennai edition of *Indian Express* (October 1, 2018).



The regional spread of media coverage was achieved since the launch of the locator was multi-city (in Kolkata, Delhi, Guwahati and Chennai) and in collaboration with local gender and sexual minority networks and supportive institutions like the American Center, British Council and Spanish Embassy. The online locator also received considerable coverage on social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This resulted in the Varta website receiving unprecedented numbers of visitors throughout 2018 – as described in the **Publications** section. *Photo above shows launch event at Guwahati, September 9, 2018 (photographer anonymous).*

Another key reason for increased media interaction in 2018-19 was the Supreme Court's verdict on Section 377. Given Varta Trust's extensive work on gender, sexuality and human rights awareness generation, there was keen interest among media agencies to obtain comments from our representatives. In November 2018, Pawan Dhall was interviewed by online streaming Bengali channel GetBengal on the verdict, while earlier, just a day after the verdict Kaushik Gupta was interviewed by *The Hindustan Times* on September 7, 2018.

The Varta Legal Aid Support Group Project was yet another reason for increased media interaction. A key success for the project was the Calcutta High Court verdict in the matter of SSG Vs. The State of West Bengal and Others in January 2019. This matter was argued for by advocates Kaushik Gupta and Debayan Sen, both associated with the project, and the case received prominent coverage in webzine *LiveLaw* on February 4, 2019 – *Choices of Sexual Preference Protected under the Scheme of Constitutional Morality: Calcutta HC.*

g) Training activities: In 2018-19, the high point of our training activities was the national attention garnered by the **Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme.** This programme seeks to build communication, documentation and journalistic skills among Indian youth marginalized around gender, sexuality and other social parameters. It also aims to enhance the knowledge base of the participants on issues of gender, sexuality, public health, social security and human rights (full programmatic details available on the Varta Trust website).

We completed the first pilot of the programme in Manipur. As mentioned in the Annual Report of 2017-18, essential planning for the programme (concept note, identifying training areas, enlisting resource persons and other preparations) were completed in early 2017, but a pilot planned in Kolkata in August 2017 could not be implemented because of clash with other activity schedules. Eventually, the pilot was carried out under the Gender and Sexual Minorities Economic Inclusion

Advocacy Project in Manipur (mentioned in the **Legal, Policy and Media Sensitization** section) with some modifications to the original plan.

Six transgender community representatives were taken through a three-day interactive workshop in Imphal in late March 2018. The training covered gender, sexuality, sexual and mental health, disability, human rights, economic inclusion, sensitization approaches, documentation, observation and communication skills, journalistic writing and citizen journalism issues. Key resource persons included Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall, Kolkata-based disability rights activist Shampa Sengupta and Imphal-based journalist Thingnam Anjulika Samom.

After the training, the next phase of the programme (April to August 2018) focussed on content generation – writing of short news reports and feature articles for publishing in *Varta* webzine and other publications like *Rainbow Manipur | Inclusive Manipur*. Mentoring and handholding support was provided to the trainees in researching and writing articles connected to different issues around economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities. The articles were published in *Varta* under a new column called Manipur Diary. Out of eight story ideas, four were finally published. Of the six trainees, two dropped out after the training phase.



Among the key stories published was *Trans Inclusive Public Sanitation in Manipur Needs a Bigger Push* by Bonita Pebam in the July 2018 issue of *Varta* (photo from article courtesy the author). This story was quoted in an article titled *Challenges for Transgender-inclusive Sanitation in India* written by Durba Biswas and published in May 2019 (in the ongoing financial year) in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, a leading journal on social development issues. Another story *Wrong Arm of the Law!* by Oinam Hemabati (on the misuse of Section 377), published May 2018, was included as evidence

base in the legal campaign against Section 377. This law was irreversibly read down by the Supreme Court in a landmark verdict on September 6, 2018 to decriminalize any form of adult consensual sex in private.

After a reasonably successful first pilot of the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme, a second pilot was started in February 2019. It followed the same model as the first pilot. However, this time the initial training was conducted entirely online (through conference calls) from February to April 2019. Ongoing in the current financial year, this pilot has four participants (one transgender woman and one gay identified man from Imphal in Manipur, another gay identified man from Guwahati, Assam and a transgender man from Kolkata, West Bengal). Apart from Pawan Dhall, Shampa Sengupta and Thingnam Anjulika Samom, the trainers this time include Varta volunteer and queer rights advocate Debjyoti Ghosh from Kolkata and queer activist / photography enthusiast Rafiquel Haque Dowjah from Mumbai.

The second pilot aims to facilitate community monitoring of sexual health, mental health, legal aid and social welfare services in India, especially with regard to how sensitive these services are

towards the concerns of gender and sexual minorities. The content generation phase of the pilot started in April 2019 and was continuing at the time of this report being finalized. The second pilot is being carried out through the project on the development of an online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in different parts of India (see description in the **Services Referrals** section).

Other training activities: In 2018-19, Pawan Dhall, Trustee Kaushik Gupta and Varta volunteers Debayan Sen, Debgopal Mondal and Sudeb Sadhu conducted a number of one-off workshops on issues around gender and sexuality. On October 30, 2018, Debayan Sen, Pawan Dhall and Sudeb Sadhu participated in a panel discussion on gender and sexual minority issues organized by child rights NGO terre des hommes (TDH) for their partner agencies from across India in Kolkata. The next day, a daylong film and case study-based orientation session on gender and sexuality was conducted for the youth group affiliates of TDH's partner NGOs in and around Kolkata. This session was conducted by Debgopal Mondal and Sudeb Sadhu. Another similar daylong orientation (see *photo courtesy Siraj*), this time more focussed on transgender issues, was conducted with youth groups associated with TDH partner Lake Garden Women and Child Development Centre on January 19, 2019. This session was led by Sudeb Sadhu and guest speaker Rith Das, a trans man activist.



In end January 2019, Varta Trust conducted a two-day grant writing training and mentoring session for four representatives of partner agency Amitie' Trust, Belur. They were guided in preparing a proposal on gender affirmative care for transgender people in West Bengal for submission to the Dutch Embassy in Delhi.

On March 9, 2019, Varta Trust, Pride Circle Kolkata and Bishop's College, Kolkata organized a workshop on the struggles of gender and sexual minorities with loneliness and other mental health issues, and their legal concerns after the reading down of Section 377, Indian Penal Code. This workshop was part of the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project. The session on mental health concerns was taken by Deepak Kashyap, visiting mental health professional from Toronto, Canada, and the discussion on legal issues was conducted by Kaushik Gupta, who is a senior advocate with the Calcutta High Court. Apart from the students and faculty of Bishop's College, the workshop hosts, the participants included queer community members and students of psychology and law from different institutions in Kolkata. On the occasion, Varta Trust and Bishop's College also announced the launch of a study circle on gender and sexuality from April 2019.

Fundraising Update

Varta Trust continued to depend on donations (monthly and one-off) from its Trustees, volunteers and other well-wishers as well as website sponsorship related donations for fundraising. In 2018-19, donations were also received in relation to prior registration for the mental health symposium organized on the occasion of *Varta* webzine's fifth birthday (August 2018). Some donations

(suggested contributions) were also received against copies of Varta Trust studies and printed digests of articles published in the *Varta* webzine. Varta Trustees and volunteers continued to take up social research, training, sensitization and legal aid consultancies on an individual contractual basis (as described in the previous sections). The most important of these consultancies in 2018-19 were in connection with the Legal Aid Support Group Project, which was implemented in collaboration with NGOs CREA and SAATHII. No funds were granted to Varta Trust from these consultancies. The organization spent small amounts of its own funds on the projects related to these consultancies, and benefitted in terms of networking, knowledge and skills building, and organizational profile development through the consultancies.

Activities Planned for 2019-20

On the organizational development front, the process of recording the change in the registered address of Varta Trust in official documents like the PAN card, trust deed and bank account will be completed. Given that registration under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961 is complete, an online donation payment channel for Varta Trust will be set up on the website (example, Instamojo). We will make renewed attempts to raise funds for investment in a fixed deposit account with our bank (Kotak Mahindra). This will help generate a long-term corpus fund for Varta Trust.

On the programmatic front, the priority areas for 2019-20 will be as follows:

- Redevelopment of Varta Trust website through the services of new website development consultants – preliminary dialogue was started with Delhi-based agency Sputnik in late 2018 (formal contract signing slated for 2019-20). Redevelopment will include a complete overhaul of the webzine pages, online locator and other sections of the website in terms of design, user-friendliness, search engine optimization and security features. The redeveloped website will be migrated to the WordPress platform, and will be compatible with Indian language script fonts allowing us to publish material in languages like Bengali and Hindi. As a priority, we will aim to present the data included in the online locator in at least two or three of the following languages – Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Odia and Tamil (keeping in mind that the locator has most data from regions where these languages are spoken predominantly). The arrangement with the earlier website development consultants OFlipper, Kolkata will be discontinued in January 2020 given their inability to provide the level of services required for upgrading the website.
- Continuation of dialogue with publishers Queer Ink, Mumbai for bringing out the print version and an updated e-book version of the anthology *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Re-Imaginations of Urban Queer Spaces in India* (e-book version first printed in August 2016).
- Scaling up of queer archival management and research in collaboration with initiatives like Qamra, Bangalore and educational institutions for cataloguing, digitization and hosting of the archival material for greater public access (with confidentiality measures built in). We will also assist other support forums for gender and sexual minorities and even individual community members in different parts of India to take up similar preservation of archival material.
- Continuation of the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project in collaboration with partner agencies CREA and SAATHII will be of utmost priority – to help maintain the momentum generated in 2018-19 with regard to legal literacy and legal aid work among gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal. Greater emphasis will be put on sensitization and inclusion of more

lawyers in the project team. The first year of the project will be completed in September 2019, and a renewal of the project for another year will be discussed with CREA and SAATHII.

- Apart from the activities mentioned above, new grant writing and donation drives in 2019-20 for fundraising will be focussed on taking forward work on:
 - Development of audio-visual material on gender, sexuality and related issues for inclusion in the Varta Trust YouTube channel
 - Online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers, including addressing the refresher training needs of the service providers
 - Expansion of Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme through a third pilot programme, possibly in collaboration with NGO CREA
 - Increased collaborations with educational institutions and NGOs on gender and sexuality orientation / sensitization workshops in West Bengal and other states
- Some of these fundraising efforts will be undertaken in collaboration with partner agencies like SAATHII. One of the key areas of collaboration with SAATHII will be to raise resources for work with central and state government agencies and educational institutions towards development of queer-inclusive education policies, curricula, teacher training modules and teaching methods, countering gender and sexuality-based bullying in schools / colleges, and preventing drop-out of students because of such bullying. It should be noted that the Draft National Education Policy 2019 already mentions some concerns of transgender persons. This welcome development needs to be built up on. Work in this area will also feed into Varta Trust's work on socio-economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities.

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