

Varta Trust Annual Report 2019-20

*Focus on the World of Students and Books to
Generate Understanding of Health and Legal Aid
Needs of Gender and Sexual Minorities in India*



Presented at 6th Annual General Meeting of Varta Trust

January 14, 2021

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 cover illustration credits:

- Top: DPS Pune (participants at concluding session of conference 'The Idea of the Indian Constitution – Chapter II' organized by Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Kolkata; Takshila Educational Society, Delhi; and DPS Pune at DPS Pune campus, February 7-9, 2020).
- Middle row (left): Cover of anthology *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Re-Imaginations of Urban Queer Spaces in India* edited by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall and published by Queer Ink, Mumbai in November 2019.
- Middle row (centre): WBSU (Trustees Madhuja Nandi and Pawan Dhall conducting a workshop on gender and sexuality at West Bengal State University, Barasat, June 24-25, 2019).
- Middle row (right): Cover of book *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India* written by Pawan Dhall and published by Seagull Books, Kolkata in November 2019.
- Bottom: Anonymous (participants after conclusion of conference 'Rising through the Challenge – International Dialogue' organized by Centre for Health, Law, Ethics and Technology, Jindal Global Law School and ARC International at O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, December 9-12, 2019).

Founding Trustee's Note

It is my privilege again to present the Annual Report of Varta Trust for the financial year 2019-20. 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 2019-20, we undertook intensive dialogue on gender and sexuality with educational institutions and youth groups in different parts of India. We also made new strides in the world of books on the concerns of gender and sexual minorities.

Organizational milestones: In the financial year 2019-20, we completed seven years of Varta as a voluntary group on June 3, 2019 and five years as Varta Trust on May 14, 2019. By the end of March 2020, 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 in promoting dialogue on gender and sexuality equity in the spheres of community development among women, children, youth, gender and sexual minorities¹; public health; law; social security and social justice; arts; communications and media; research; academics; and policy making.

Varta milestones

Varta Trust's timeline

- Formation of Varta volunteer group: June 3, 2012
- Start of *Varta* webzine: August 1, 2013
- Registration of Varta as a trust: May 14, 2014
- Full acquisition of charitable trust status: December 11, 2018

Varta website / webzine development

- Started on Blogger platform on August 1, 2013 (designed by Varta volunteers Rudra Kishore Mandal and Vahista Dastoor)
- Moved to a PHP platform website on August 1, 2016 (developed by OFlipper, Kolkata)
- Moved to current WordPress platform on January 28, 2020 (developed by Sputznik, Delhi)

Varta webzine statistics (as of August 1, 2020)

- Completed 79 issues over seven years
- With 414 posts
- At least 112 writers, agencies, photographers and artists as contributors
- And more than 30,000 website users since September 2016

Programmatic achievements: In 2019-20, our programmatic milestones included:

(a) Awareness generation among 1,300-1,500 students and teachers of law, philosophy, sociology, political science, theology and psychology; sports persons and their coaches; health care and legal aid service providers, government officials; social workers and activists; researchers, media persons; gender and sexual minority community members; youth groups; and the larger public

¹ Alternate expressions include 'queer communities' or 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning or queer, and asexual people'.

through at least 20 public events and campaigns on gender, sexuality and related issues of public health, policies, laws and social justice. Three of these events were of particular importance:

- Gender and sexuality workshop for 50 post-graduate students of English, philosophy, political science and psychology at the West Bengal State University, Barasat. The workshop was conducted by Trustees Madhuja Nandi and Pawan Dhall and other Varta volunteers.
- Conference titled “The Idea of the Indian Constitution – Chapter II” organized by the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Kolkata; Takshila Educational Society, Delhi; and Delhi Public School Pune with 100 teachers and higher secondary students in Pune. Pawan Dhall and social activist Rafiquel Haque Dowjah made a presentation titled *Gender Rights and the Classroom: Queer Story of Section 377 in Our Lives*.
- International conference titled “Rising through the Challenge – International Dialogue” (on the human rights concerns of gender and sexual minorities) organized by the O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat and ARC International. Trustee Kaushik Gupta presented our legal aid achievements through a presentation *Mobilizing Queer-Friendly Legal Resources towards Greater Access to Social Justice: Case Study from West Bengal, India*.

b) Publication of the print version of the anthology *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Re-Imaginations of Urban Queer Spaces in India* in November 2019 by Queer Ink, Mumbai. This anthology has contributions from several Varta volunteers and Trustees Madhuja Nandi and Pawan Dhall (who also edited the anthology). Simultaneously, Seagull Books, Kolkata published *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India*, a book written by Pawan Dhall based on extensive research into recent Indian queer histories. This book was an important outcome of our social research work.

c) Complete redevelopment of our website on WordPress platform with better design, searchability, disability access and security features. Our online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in India was also overhauled with better reader interface, search and feedback features. By March 31, 2020, the locator had data on 135 service providers from 22 states / Union Territories and 41 towns / cities across India.

d) Provision of legal aid support for gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal in 19 cases from six districts by the end of 2019-20 through the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project (a collaborative effort with CREA, Delhi and SAATHII, Chennai). The project also developed an important documentary film outlining key aspects of the Supreme Court verdict on Section 377, Indian Penal Code – *Dhara 377 Raye, September 6, 2018: Kichhu Joruri Katha*.

Financial highlights: In 2019-20, our financial inflow was Rs.1,51,235/- (excluding cash and bank balances carried over from 2018-19) as per the Audit Report prepared by Rajarshi Bhattacharya, Chartered Accountant, with M. No. 062550 and office located at 251A/6P, N. S. C. Bose Road, Kolkata 700 047. 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. Awareness generation and publishing activities (website development, and information, education, communication material development) again constituted the main programmatic expenditure heads. On the administrative front, registered office rent, salaries and accounting / auditing expenses were the main expenditure heads.



Gender, Sexuality, Intimacy, Publishing

Plans for 2020-21: Registration of Varta Trust under Section 12AB of the Income Tax Act, 1961 and subsequently under Section 80G of the same Act will be prioritized (as necessitated by the amendments announced by the central government in the Union Budget for 2020-21). We will develop a Hindi version of our online locator for queer-friendly health and legal aid services. *Varta* webzine will publish articles on the health concerns of gender and sexual minorities around the coronavirus pandemic. On the research front, we will continue with the study *Cross-Border Queers: The Story of South Asian LGBTIQAs Migrants*. Work will continue on legal aid provision and the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme. The latter will document the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on gender and sexual minorities in eastern and north-eastern India. We will begin work on an economic inclusion mentoring forum for gender and sexual minorities. This assumes importance in the context of the coronavirus lockdown and Amphan cyclone, both of which have severely impacted the livelihoods of gender and sexual minorities. We will also provide relief during and after the coronavirus lockdown to vulnerable communities.

A heartfelt thank you once again 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 for a public event organized by Varta Trust, one among several such events in 2019-20. Artwork credit: Rudra Kishore Mandal

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 six years on August 1, 2019.
- 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, 2020: Pawan Dhall (Founding Trustee), Kaushik Gupta and Madhuja Nandi.
- Larger volunteer team (including BoT members) as of March 31, 2020: 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: Rajarshi Bhattacharya, Chartered Accountant, located at 251A/6P N. S. C. Bose Road, Kolkata 700 047, with membership number 062550.
- *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.

Key Activities in 2019-20

a) Organizational development: In the Annual General Meeting for 2018-19, it was resolved to continue with the services of Sanat Kumar Dey, De & Sinha, Chartered Accountants, as the Auditor of Varta Trust for the financial year 2019-20. With guidance from him and advocate Anirban Gupta, we filed the returns of the income for financial year 2018-19 on September 27, 2019. Subsequently, on December 15, 2020 it was decided to appoint Rajarshi Bhattacharya as the new Auditor of Varta Trust. This decision was based on deliberations during BoT meetings on May 9, 2019 and December 10, 2020.

In August 2019, Varta Trust completed two years of its registered office being shifted to C/o DPS Corporate Club, 9A Sebak Baidya Street, Kolkata 700 029. The change in registered address was duly intimated to the Income Tax Department on September 6, 2017. Changes in the other official documents of Varta Trust (PAN card and bank account related records) were under way as of March 31, 2020.

Human resources development: From December 9-12, 2019, Trustees Kaushik Gupta and Pawan Dhall attended a conference titled “Rising through the Challenge – International Dialogue” on documenting and analyzing best practices for advancing human rights related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics using tools of international law, domestic litigation, and apology / reparation. The conference was held at the O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, and organized by ARC International and the Centre for Health, Law, Ethics and Technology, Jindal Global Law School. Apart from a learning experience for the Trustees, it also provided them an opportunity to present Varta Trust’s legal aid work for gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal through a presentation *Mobilizing Queer-Friendly Legal Resources towards Greater Access to Social Justice: Case Study from West Bengal, India*. Earlier in the year, in July 2019, Varta volunteer Sudeb Sadhu attended a consultation in Hyderabad on assessing the self-care and burnout prevention needs of gender, sexuality and health activists organized by Delhi-based NGOs Nazariya and TARSHI.

b) Publications:

(1) Varta webzine and old blog: In 2019-20, the most significant development with regard to our website (including the monthly webzine) was its complete overhauling, redevelopment and move to a WordPress platform from the earlier PHP platform. After the formal introduction of an online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in the website in June 2018, Brindaalakshmi K., a communications specialist who worked with us on a six-month multi-media campaign in 2018 to publicize the locator, advised that the website needed better user-friendliness, search engine optimization and security features. This was corroborated by verbal feedback received from some of the website users and an incident of the website being hacked on November 16, 2018 (all damages caused were repaired).

Subsequently, Brindaalakshmi K. facilitated a dialogue between Varta Trustees Kaushik Gupta and Pawan Dhall, and digital media experts from the Centre for Internet & Society, Bangalore. It was agreed that the website should be redeveloped and migrated to a more versatile platform that would allow better searchability, stronger security and a wider range of design possibilities.

Consequently, this would enable greater access for the general public to the online locator, monthly webzine and all other information features of the website.

As mentioned in the previous year's Annual Report, we approached Sputznik, Delhi for their services as Varta Trust's new website development consultants in December 2018, and the formal appointments were made in 2019-20². The arrangement with the earlier website development consultants OFlipper, Kolkata (engaged with us since 2016) was discontinued given their inability to provide the level of services required for upgrading the website.

The new website became operational on January 28, 2020. The entire website and the webzine pages were given a fresh look, easily readable on any computer device (including mobile phones). The disability access features were improved. The reader interface, search and feedback features of the online locator were made far more user-friendly. A few old features of the website were dropped, while some new ones were added. Example: A section called World of Books, which provides details of the book projects Varta Trust has been involved in. The website now also has detailed data privacy and copyright policies. It has been made compatible with Indian language script fonts like Bengali and Hindi. To begin with, work started in early 2020 on creating a Hindi version of the locator, and it is expected to be completed by early 2021.

The impact of time and resources spent on the website redevelopment was felt on the monthly webzine (available at www.vartagensex.org/webzine). We could publish only eight issues from April 2019 to March 2020. The webzine was not published from October 2019 till January 2020 (though in this interim period the old website remained functional). As a result, only 26 articles were published. Overall, the website attracted 13,522 page views and 5,878 unique users from across India and abroad. Of the unique users, 5,105 were from 124 towns and cities located across 31 states and Union Territories of India. Almost all these figures were lower in comparison with 2018-19, but the overall growth trajectory of the website readership was maintained. Once the new website became operational and the webzine also resumed publishing from February 2020, the monthly website readership climbed back higher than in the case of the old website.

In 2019-20, the articles were focussed on the mental health and legal aid concerns of gender and sexual minorities, prevention of violence against women, and artistic endeavours of transgender persons and persons with disabilities. Since the Lok Sabha polls were held in 2019, a few articles looked at the inclusion of gender, sexuality and disability issues in the manifestos of the political parties. One of the articles looked at the inclusion of transgender voters in Manipur in the Lok Sabha polls – *Trans Participation in Manipur for Lok Sabha Polls – Some Hits, Many Misses* by Bonita Pebam, an Imphal-based transgender activist (see lead illustration on next page; photo credit Bonita Pebam). Another important issue covered was the emerging health and development concerns of gender and sexual minorities after the Honourable Supreme Court of India irreversibly

² Varta Trust signed an annual website hosting and maintenance contract with Sputznik. The website redevelopment expenses were supported by the project titled Development of Online Searchable Database on Queer Friendly Sexual Health, Mental Health and Legal Aid Services in India – the project has been elaborated in the Annual Reports of 2017-18 and 2018-19 and also later in this report.

read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in September 2018. For example: *Explorations of 'Self' Pride beyond Section 377* written by Pawan Dhall.

In March 2020, the webzine started publishing news reports and podcasts on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown on gender and sexual minority communities, people living with HIV (PLHIV) and other vulnerable sections of society (*Coronavirus Outreach News from 'Varta'*). These articles talked about how the affected communities



An area of concern was the mismatch of gender identity on the voter identity card and on other identity documents like Aadhaar. Many trans women in Manipur have had their gender identity changed to transgender on their Aadhaar card, but their voter identity card still mentions their gender identity as male. When this issue was pointed out to the Election Commission officials during the SVEEP campaign, they assured that the voter identity cards would be updated. But this eventually did not happen.

were responding and helping people face the survival challenges thrown up by an unprecedented public health and livelihood crisis. This theme also became the focus of the third pilot of the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme (henceforth VCR Programme), which is ongoing in the current financial year.

As usual, the webzine articles included news reports, first person stories, analytical and research-based writings, interviews, advice columns, poetry and photo-reports. Apart from Varta Trustees Kaushik Gupta and Pawan Dhall, the contributors to the *Varta* webzine included old names like Bonita Pebam, Diksha Sanyal, Jia Mata, Shivalal Gautam and Sayan Bhattacharya, and a significant number of new names as well. These included Mihika Poddar and Namrata Mukherjee, both past students of the West Bengal University of Juridical Sciences, an institution where Varta Trust has conducted a number of gender and sexuality awareness generation events; Chandrima Mukhopadhyay, Subhradeep Chatterjee and Utsa Ghosh, all current students of English Literature at Jadavpur University; and Rith Das and Sadam Hanjabam, both Varta Community Reporters in the second pilot of the VCR Programme.

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) World of books: In November 2019, Varta Trust had a double reason to be proud. First, our collaboration with publishers Queer Ink, Mumbai was successful in bringing out the much awaited print version of the anthology *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Re-Imaginations of Urban Queer Spaces in India*. An e-book version of this book was published in August 2016 (a fresh e-book version is awaited). This anthology has contributions from a number of Varta volunteers as well as Trustees Madhujā Nandi and Pawan Dhall (who also edited the anthology). Simultaneously, *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India*, a book written by Pawan Dhall (with individual fellowship support from Svrān-Apeejay Journalism Foundation, Delhi), was published by Seagull Books, Kolkata. This book is based on extensive research into the Counsel Club Archives³ maintained by Varta Trust, and thus was an important outcome of our social research work as well. Details of both books can be seen in World of Books, a new section

³ Counsel Club (1993-2002), based in Kolkata, was one of the earliest support forums for gender and sexual minorities in eastern India as well as India as a whole.

introduced in the Varta Trust website. As of now, Varta Trust has collaborated in the publication of three important books on the historical, public health and social justice concerns of gender and sexual minorities in India.⁴

(3) Varta Facebook page: We use this page for interactive posts to generate discussion and awareness on various aspects of gender and sexuality, including public health, social security and legal rights. Till the end of 2019-20, 80 such posts were made on the page, eight of them in 2019-20. 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 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 2019-20, the page acquired net 74 new likes with the total at 2,045 at the year-end.

(4) Varta YouTube channel: In 2019-20, three important videos were added to our channel:

- The first was a documentation of the launch of the “Reach OUT” multi-media campaign to promote Varta's online locator for queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in India (details in the Annual Report for 2018-19). The launch event took place at the American Center, Kolkata on June 28, 2018. The video's production was delayed because of technical problems.
- The second video was a short documentary film titled *Dhara 377 Raye, September 6, 2018: Kichhu Joruri Katha (Section 377 Verdict, September 6, 2018: Highlights and Implications)*. This film was in Bengali with sub-titles in English, and was developed as a legal literacy tool under the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project. It was based on short interviews with a number of activists, lawyers and law students, writers and researchers engaged with gender, sexuality, HIV and human rights issues in West Bengal.
- The third video was a documentation of a series of events organized to mark the 20th anniversary of “Friendship Walk '99”, which was held in Kolkata on July 2, 1999. This LGBTIQ rights event, which over the years evolved into the “Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk”, is often billed as the very first rainbow pride walk to be held in India and South Asia. The commemorative events were held over two days, on June 29 and 30, 2019, in Kolkata and Chandannagar.

By the end of 2019-20, we had eight educational videos uploaded on our YouTube channel.

c) Awareness generation: Awareness generation and sensitization activities in government and private educational institutions constituted the major achievements of the financial year 2019-20 for Varta Trust. Key events among these were:

- Barasat, June 24-25, 2019: A two-day gender and sexuality orientation workshop for 50 post-graduate students of English, philosophy, political science and psychology at the West Bengal State University – Trustees Madhuja Nandi and Pawan Dhall along with Varta volunteers and

⁴ The third book being *Social Media, Sexuality and Sexual Health Advocacy in Kolkata, India – A Working Report* authored by Dr. Rohit K. Dasgupta of the University of Loughborough, UK and Pawan Dhall, Founding Trustee, Varta Trust and published by Bloomsbury India in May 2017.



transgender activists Sudeb Sadhu and Rith Das conducted the sessions that included case studies, personal accounts, brainstorming, games and exercises, and formal presentations. Varta Trust received a letter of appreciation for the workshop from the university.

- Sonipat, December 9-12, 2019: Participation of Trustees Kaushik Gupta and Pawan Dhall in a conference on documenting and analyzing best practices for advancing human rights related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics using tools of international law, domestic litigation, and apology / reparation. The conference, titled “Rising through the Challenge – International Dialogue”, was organized by the Centre for Health, Law, Ethics and Technology, Jindal Global Law School, O. P. Jindal Global University and ARC International. On December 11, Kaushik Gupta spoke about the experience of the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project through a presentation titled *Mobilizing Queer-Friendly Legal Resources towards Greater Access to Social Justice: Case Study from West Bengal, India*. Around 60-70 Indian and foreign delegates (including students, teachers, researchers, lawyers and United Nations officials) attended the conference. Both the Trustees also got an opportunity to interact with Victor-Madrigal Borloz, UN Independent Expert on SOGI, who was a keynote speaker at the conference.
- Pune, February 7-9, 2020: Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall participated in a conference titled “The Idea of the Indian Constitution – Chapter II” organized by History for Peace, Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Kolkata; Takshila Educational Society, Delhi; and Delhi Public School (DPS) Pune. On February 8-9, 2020, Pawan Dhall and Rafiqueel Haque Dowjah, Mumbai-based public speaker on LGBTIQA issues, made a presentation titled *Gender Rights and the Classroom: Queer Story of Section 377 in Our Lives*. The presentation was well received by students and teachers alike. The conference saw the participation of nearly 100 teachers from different parts of India and higher secondary students from DPS Pune.

Overall, in 2019-20, Varta Trust reached out to 1,300-1,500 people through around two dozen awareness generation events on educational, mental and sexual health, constitutional and legal rights, social security, migration, economic inclusion and other concerns of gender and sexual minorities. Child rights in the context of gender equity were also addressed. These events included meetings, panel discussions, workshops, consultations, film screenings and a study circle.

Either the Varta Trustees and volunteers were invited to the events as speakers or Varta Trust organized the events in collaboration with its partner agencies. Students and teachers of law, philosophy, sociology, political science, theology and psychology; sports persons and their coaches; health care and legal aid service providers; government officials; social workers and activists; researchers; media persons; gender and sexual minority community members; youth groups and the larger public were engaged in dialogue and debate on gender, sexuality and related issues of public health, policies, laws and social justice.

The events reached out to people in both big cities and small towns like Barasat, Chandannagar, Chinsurah, Delhi, Gangarampur, Islampur, Kolkata, Pune and Sonipat. This year too we were part of a large number of events compared to the previous years and even higher than in 2018-19. Three of the key events have already been described above. The following is a sample of the other

events that Varta Trust was a part of in 2019-20⁵. Names of the event organizers / collaborators have also been mentioned in the list below:

- Kolkata, April 11, 2019: First session of Bishop’s College and Varta Trust’s “Queer Study Circle” on gender, sexuality and associated public health and legal issues for theology and social sciences students and teachers associated with Bishop’s College and other educational institutions in Kolkata⁶
- Islampur, April 27, 2019: North Bengal introductory event of Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project organized in collaboration with local transgender support group Dinajpur Natun Aalo Society – around 20 queer individuals, lawyers and members of queer support groups in North Bengal participated (a similar event was organized in Kolkata in November 2018)
- Delhi, May 25, 2019: Consultation: “Queering the law: Making Indian Laws LGBT+ Inclusive” – Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy
- Kolkata, June 29, 2019 and Chandannagar, June 30, 2019: Public events to mark 20th anniversary of “Friendship Walk '99” held on July 2, 1999 in Kolkata – this event is often billed as the oldest rainbow pride walk in India and South Asia, which grew into what is now known as “Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk” – the anniversary events were a collaborative effort of Amitie’ Trust; Dumdum Swikriti Society; InterPride; Nazariya – A Grassroots LGBT+Straight Alliance; Queer Ink; Wings Employee Resource Group, Tata Steel; and Varta Trust.
- Chinsurah, July 24, 2019: Sensitization programme on transgender livelihood, social welfare and legal rights issues with Hooghly District Legal Services Authority officials – Kolkata Anandam



- Kolkata, August 13, 2019: Seminar on inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in sports – Academic Wing of Sports Authority of India, Netaji Subhas Eastern Centre (*photo shows seminar participants; photo credit Sports Authority of India*)
- Kolkata, September 6, 2019: Interface with youth groups working in and around Kolkata to observe first anniversary of Honourable Supreme Court of India’s verdict on Section 377, Indian Penal Code – Thoughtshop Foundation, SAATHII

- Kolkata, November 9, 2019: First public screening of film *Dhara 377 Raje, September 6, 2018: Kichhu Joruri Katha* produced by Varta Trust under its legal aid support group project (which is

⁵ Details of more events can be found in other sections of this report, on the Varta Trust website (Talks & Interfaces and Mass Awareness Events sections) and in other organizational records.

⁶ The study circle could not be continued because of the examination and holiday schedules of the students. It was to be revived in 2020-21 but could not be because of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

supported by CREA and SAATHII). The event also included a discussion on issues around transgender citizenship rights in India

- Kolkata, December 3, 2019: Panel discussion: “Hate Speech and Social Media: Gender and Sexual Minority Perspective” – organized in collaboration with the American Center, Grindr for Equality, CREA and SAATHII
- Kolkata, December 7, 2019: Panel discussion: “Child Rights and Gender Violence” – terre des hommes Germany (TDH Germany – Eastern India Office)
- Delhi, December 7-8, 2019: Launch of *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India*, book written by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall, and panel discussion titled “When they Gave us Pride – Stories from the First Pride” (speakers included Pawan Dhall, Varta volunteer Owais Khan and queer activist Rafiquel Haque Dowjah) – both events were part of “Rainbow Lit Fest - Queer and Inclusive”, a literary festival organized by Embrace: Music Justice Arts and Epic India
- Gangarampur, January 11, 2020: Community meeting on legal aid concerns of transgender community members in Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal as part of Varta Trust’s legal aid support group project (including an interaction with officials of Dakshin Dinajpur District Legal Services Authority) – organized in collaboration with Dinajpur Natun Aalo Society, CREA and SAATHII
- Kolkata, January 18, 2020: Discussion titled “AKLF Adda: Pride and Prejudice – Experiences and Perspectives across the Pride Rainbow Spectrum” as part of “Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival 2020” – Pawan Dhall’s book *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India* was again the focus in this event organized by Apeejay Surrendra, Oxford Bookstores and Max Mueller Bhavan Library
- Kolkata, January 23, 2020: Orientation session on gender, sexuality and LGBTIQ issues for *pranic* healing practitioners – World Pranic Healing India Pvt. Ltd.
- Kolkata, January 25, 2020: Conference: “Archiving the City”, including a presentation on Varta Trust’s engagement in queer archival research and Pawan Dhall’s book *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India* – Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Hyderabad Urban Lab, Centre for Policy Research (representing Tacit Urban Knowledge Research Network or the TURN research programme)
- Kolkata, February 3, 2020: Launch of three books published by Queer Ink, Mumbai: *Gulabi Baghi* edited by Varta volunteer Owais Khan, *The Scholar* written by Prof. Niladri R. Chatterjee of Kalyani University, and *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Re-imaginings of Urban Queer Spaces in India* edited by Pawan Dhall – Queer Ink and Varta Trust jointly organized the event at Deshaj Café in South Kolkata. Copies of Owais Khan and Pawan Dhall’s books were also made available at Dumdum Swikriti Society’s little magazines stall at “44th International Kolkata Book Fair 2020” from January 30 to February 9, 2020
- Kolkata, March 29, 2020: Webinar titled “Marriages under the Indian Rainbow” organized under the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project – key speaker Debjyoti Ghosh, human rights lawyer from Kolkata, Varta volunteer, and post-doctoral researcher with Future Africa Project, University of Pretoria, South Africa spoke about legality of queer marriages in India

d) Social research: Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall and Varta volunteer Sayan Bhattacharya continued Varta Trust’s oral history documentation 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 time India gained independence, particularly since the 1950s and 1960s. The archival research 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, and other similar groups in West Bengal. Records of Counsel Club’s activities can be found in the Counsel Club Archives, which include nearly 3,000 letters received by the group in the 1990s and early 2000s; media clippings; academic and activist articles, papers and journals (including copies of *Pravartak*, Counsel Club’s house journal); photographs; and various documents on Counsel Club’s work in the areas of community mobilization, health, counselling, legal aid, employment, and cultural programming.

While Pawan Dhall is the current custodian of the Counsel Club Archives, Varta Trust has been informally maintaining the archives since 2013-14. In the 5th Annual General Meeting of Varta Trust held in September 2019, it was resolved that Pawan Dhall will hand over the archives formally to Varta Trust on the basis of a registered gift deed listing out the nature and categories of the material, associated numbers and confidentiality measures required with regard to identity markers of the individuals who may figure in the material. Subsequently, Varta Trust will undertake systematic cataloguing, digitization and storage of the archival material; carry out research based on the material; and facilitate dissemination based on the research to sensitize the larger public about the concerns of gender and sexual minorities.

This work will be done in collaboration with other NGOs and educational institutions in India and abroad, and to some extent has already been happening. One such collaboration is with Qamra, Bangalore, which is guiding Varta Trust in terms of knowledge and skills in archival management

and research. Based on this guidance, a detailed inventory of the material included in the Counsel Club Archives is being prepared, which will be useful for the preparation of the gift deed. As reported in the earlier Annual Reports, some of the material has already been digitized and uploaded on the Varta Trust website, and several articles based on research into the archives have been published in the *Varta* webzine. Pawan Dhall’s book *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in ‘90s Eastern India* was also based significantly on the Counsel Club Archives.



In December 2019, Varta Trust also became engaged in a qualitative study titled *Cross-Border Queers: The Story of South Asian LGBTIQ Migrants*. This study aims to look at the histories of gender and sexual minorities migrating from India to the UK and other countries to escape social stigma and discrimination as well as for educational and livelihood opportunities. The study is led by Dr. Churnjeet Mahn of the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow and Dr. Rohit K. Dasgupta of the University of

Loughborough (both in the UK). Pawan Dhall, in his capacity as Varta Trustee and individual consultant to the University of Strathclyde, is facilitating data collection through in-depth interviews and archival research in India. He also helped the principal investigators organize the first roundtable conference and a launch event for the study in Kolkata on December 13, 2019 at the British Club, British Deputy High Commission, Kolkata (see poster on previous page).

e) Services referrals: As described in the Annual Report for 2018-19, our online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers was launched on June 28, 2018 and publicized through a multimedia campaign called “Reach OUT” (late June till December 2018). In 2019-20, the focus was on consolidation with the addition of data on new service providers, continued updating of older data, and an overhaul of the reader interface, search and feedback features of the locator. This overhaul was part of the Varta Trust website redevelopment described earlier, and was among the first features of the website to be upgraded. The new, easy to navigate and visually appealing reader interface of the locator has received positive feedback from the users, though some technical aspects of the feedback features need improvement.

By the end of March 2020, data on around 135 qualified and accredited individual sexual health, mental health and legal aid service providers from across India was uploaded on the locator. These service providers were located in 22 states / Union Territories and 41 towns / cities of India. Data collection was relatively higher from the states of Assam, Haryana, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Uttar Pradesh, 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.

Based on the Varta website Google Analytics data, in the period 2019-20, the online locator was accessed by at least 4,100 new unique users from across metropolitan as well as small town India and abroad. From the date of the locator launch on June 28, 2018 till March 31, 2020, the locator had been accessed by at least 21,000 unique users. This helped in increased visibility of other features of the website, including visits to the *Varta* webzine and its subscription. Online and word of mouth feedback on the locator and service providers included in it also continued in 2019-20.

Pawan Dhall in his capacity as Varta Trustee and individual consultant to Grindr for Equality continued to lead the project in 2019-20 along with Varta volunteers Debjyoti Ghosh and Sudeb Sadhu, and Guwahati-based consultant Shivalal Gautam. The next round of updating the service provider data included in the locator will be undertaken in 2021. As mentioned earlier in this report, a Hindi version of the locator is also being prepared.

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: In 2019-20, this activity was mainly focussed on legal aid and media interaction activities, with a key milestone being achieved in the context of our legal aid support group work:

1) Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project: This project has been described in detail in the Annual Report for 2018-19. It is formally named as Project Varta: Expanding Queer Friendly Legal Aid in West Bengal, and has grown out of our Facebook awareness generation and discussion group called Queer Friendly Lawyers Network (QFLN) – West Bengal, which itself was created in December 2014. The project started in April 2018, and since October 2018 it has been a collaborative effort with different gender and sexual minority support groups located across West Bengal as well as CREA, Delhi and SAATHII, Chennai. Both the last mentioned 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.

The project aims 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 can protect themselves from human rights violations in relation to their gender and sexuality and claim their rights from the State through legal means. The project activities include provision of information and guidance through district-level monthly meetings organized in partnership with local community groups, legal literacy material development, legal aid / litigation support, and handholding support during crisis situations to gender and sexual minority community members in West Bengal.

In the period from April 2019 to March 2020, five monthly meetings were held in Bongaon, Cooch Behar, Kolkata and Ranaghat. The total attendance in these meetings was around 45 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 marriages or other queer marriages (for example, where one partner is transgender); dealing with family and intimate partner violence; property rights; denial of rented accommodation and government sector jobs; sexual violence; child sexual abuse; lack of inclusive sanitation; blackmail; cyber crime; and police harassment (including frequent denials of FIR registration). The discussions covered also the debates and disputes around the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019.

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, by the end of March 2020, the project had handled 19 cases in all. These involved issues around legal gender identity change, family violence, forced separation by family from queer partner, intimate partner violence, divorce from heterosexual partner in order to live with queer partner, extortion, defraudment, denial of rented accommodation, denial of property rights, denial of access to health services and hate speech on social media (cyber crime). Most of the complainants were transgender persons or women with different sexual orientations, and were residents of Kolkata, Purba

Medinipur, Purulia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Uttar Dinajpur districts. The project ensured that the complainants (and in some cases also their intimate partners) received free or partially free legal advice / legal aid from the lawyers associated with the project.

In 2019-20, the project undertook the following activities related to development of print, audio-visual and online communication material towards legal literacy:

- Completion of a short documentary film outlining key aspects of the Supreme Court verdict on Section 377 – *Dhara 377 Raye, September 6, 2018: Kichhu Joruri Katha* (work started in the previous financial year)
- English to Bengali translation of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 enacted in December 2019
- Bengali to English translation and transcription of interview with transgender activist Joyita Mondal to document her experience of rights violations – the interview has been published in three parts in the *Varta* webzine (*March, April and May 2020 issues – lead illustration on the right from the first part; photo courtesy Joyita Mondal*)
- One of the monthly meetings in Kolkata focussed on the issue of safer dating and prevention of blackmail of gender and sexual minority persons – meeting proceedings were transcribed and converted into an article for *Varta* webzine (September 2020 issue)
- Two articles based on legal aid issues handled by the project (example, queer marriages) were published under the legal advice column of the *Varta* webzine



On the 10th of January in 2010, I decided to form an organization called Dinajpur Natun Aalo but did not register it then. It was here in Islampur that I found my dear ones, heard their plight and how together we could work our way forward . . . Many organisations operated in West Bengal but Islampur or North Bengal was a region where much work had not been done with men who have sex with men (MSM) and trans women.

A major milestone for the project was achieved with the participation of Trustees Kaushik Gupta and Pawan Dhall in an international conference held at the O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat on the human rights concerns of gender and sexual minorities. Kaushik Gupta made a detailed presentation on the experience of the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project. Details of the presentation and conference have been shared earlier in the **Awareness Generation** section of this report. In 2019-20, the project was engaged also in six awareness generation and sensitization events with legal stakeholders and community members on the social justice concerns of gender and sexual minorities. Details can be found in the **Awareness Generation** section.

The Varta Trust website was used to document project activities and acted as a repository of legal information useful for lay persons as well as 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.

Trustee Kaushik Gupta and Varta volunteer Debayan Sen (both advocates practising at the Calcutta High Court) continued with the responsibility of conducting monthly community meetings, legal aid provision, and sensitization of legal stakeholders. A third advocate, Aindreela Chakraborty, joined them in conducting some of the sensitization activities. Varta volunteer Sudeb Sadhu was engaged as a transgender activist in the project and she had the responsibility of mobilizing

community participation and organizing the logistics for the monthly community meetings in different districts. 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.

2) Gender and Sexual Minorities Economic Inclusion Advocacy Project: In January 2019, we co-organized a “Consultation on LGBTIQA Workplace Inclusion in India” in collaboration with Imphal-based gender and sexual minority collectives All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association (AMaNA) and Empowering Trans Ability (ETA); SAATHII, Chennai; University of Sussex, UK; and the British Deputy High Commission, Kolkata (details in the Annual Report for 2018-19). In 2019-20, Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall worked on preparing a detailed report on the consultation, in the form of a manual for facilitating workplace and larger economic inclusion of gender and sexual minorities. The consultation noted that emphasis should be laid on the livelihood concerns of gender and sexual minorities employed in the informal workforce, which engages more than 80% of India’s workforce. Chennai-based communications consultant Brindaalakshmi K. prepared the first draft of the consultation report, while Namrata Mukherjee of the Vidhi Center for Legal Policy, Delhi also volunteered on the report preparation. Both were consultation participants.

This consultation was in continuation of an earlier Manipur-based economic inclusion advocacy project in which Varta Trust was a collaborator along with AMaNA, ETA, SAATHII, University of Sussex and other civil society groups. In November-December 2019, Pawan Dhall assisted Dr. Paul Boyce, Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and International Development, University of Sussex in preparing an impact case study based on the experience of the project. This case study is expected to be published in a book in 2020-21.

3) Media interactions: In 2019-20, most of Varta Trust’s media interactions were related to the publishing of the book *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in ‘90s Eastern India*, and on issues around the history of the social movement for equality carried out by gender and sexual minorities in India since the 1980s and 1990s. In all, Varta Trust figured in 19 media stories (print, audio-visual and online media). These stories were in English and Bengali. Prominent among these were *I March, Therefore I Am* written by well known author and journalist Sandip Roy and published in *The Hindu* newspaper (December 28, 2019) and *The Way We Were* published in *The Hindustan Times* (February 1, 2020). Trustees Pawan Dhall and Kaushik Gupta were the representatives of Varta Trust in most media interactions.

g) Training activities: Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme continued to be the mainstay of our training activities. The programme primarily seeks to build communication, documentation and journalistic skills among social groups that are marginalized around gender, sexuality and other social parameters. The emphasis is on youth participation, though not limited to it. The programme 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 are available on the Varta Trust website). In the process, it aims to contribute to enhancing the employability of the participants.

We completed the second pilot of the programme during the period February to July 2019. The second pilot focussed on community monitoring of sexual health, mental health, legal aid and social welfare services in India, especially with regard to how sensitive and inclusive these services were towards the concerns of gender and sexual minorities.

This pilot had four participants (two gay men, one transgender man and one transgender woman) from the states of Assam, Manipur and West Bengal (see panel; graphic credit Prosenjit Pal). All the participants were engaged in gender and sexuality community development. While the training phase of the programme was completed by April 2019 (a total of 13 training sessions were conducted, all online or through phone conference calls), the content generation phase lasted from May to July 2019.



The training curriculum was similar to the first pilot, but the curricula for human rights, social security, mental health, storytelling and writing tips were enhanced. A new addition was basics of photography. A total of nine assignments were given to the participants, and each of them attempted at least 70% of the assignments. The resource persons were Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall, Varta volunteer and advocate Debjyoti Ghosh, Kolkata-based disability rights activist Shampa Sengupta, Imphal-based journalist Thingnam Anjulika Samom and Mumbai-based photography enthusiast Rafiquel Haque Dowjah.

The content generation phase included writing of news reports and feature articles for publishing in *Varta* webzine and other publications. Mentoring and handholding support was provided to the trainees in researching and writing articles. Out of a total of six story ideas, four were finally published in *Varta* under a new column called VCR Diary. Off the four trainees, three continued till the end of the second pilot.

Among the stories published were the following: *Multi-layered Exclusions for Trans Persons in Assam NRC Process* by Shivalal Gautam, *Queer Lives Matter!* (on the quantity and quality of mental health services available to gender and sexual minorities in Manipur) by Sadam Hanjabam, and *Trans Participation in Manipur for Lok Sabha Polls – Some Hits, Many Misses* by Bonita Pebam (who had also participated in the first pilot of the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme in 2018).

In a significant development, Shivalal Gautam's story was picked up and amplified by Jhatkaa.org for an online campaign called "Assam NRC Must Be Trans-Inclusive". Subsequently, the story was republished in an online publication called *Time8* and also highlighted in a news story (*Plea to NRC Officials on Transgenders*) in the Guwahati edition of *The Telegraph* newspaper. The same story was modified and republished in an anthology *Criminal No More* brought out by The YP Foundation, Delhi in September 2019.

In an even bigger and long-term impact of the programme, it was an extremely proud moment for Varta Trust when Bonita Pebam, our two-time citizen journalism trainee from Manipur, was selected in August this year for the Zubaan-Sasakawa Peace Foundation Grants for Young Researchers from the Northeast 2020-21. As part of this grant, she is expected to conduct a short study on the specific health and well-being concerns of transgender persons with disabilities in Manipur. The findings from the study will be published in a book to be brought out by Zubaan Books, Delhi. Bonita Pebam shared that her research idea is based on her learning from the Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme, and her participation in the programme strengthened her application for the grant.

The second pilot was carried out as part of our project on the development of an online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers in different parts of India.



Other training activities: In 2019-20, our collaborations on gender and sexuality workshops for youth groups continued with TDH Germany – Eastern India Office. This time we organized a comprehensive four-day workshop on gender issues with peer leaders of the West Bengal Youth Network of Campaign on Ecological Rights. These youth were around 20 in number, in the age group 15-25, with half of them boys. They belonged to different groups supported by Lake Gardens Women and Child Development Centre, Kolkata, the hosts of the workshop (*photo shows*

Varta volunteer Sayan Bhattacharya conducting the workshop; photo credit Pawan Dhall).

Beginning with the issue of how gender is socially constructed, the workshop went on to discuss the difference between biological sex and gender, fluidity of both biological sex and gender, gender and sexual diversities, issues of masculinities and femininities, importance of gender equity (resisting restrictive gender norms), and how gender intersects with other social issues. The workshop also dwelt on the specific concerns of gender and sexual minorities. In relation to gender and one's well-being, the workshop also discussed several issues of self-care: Adolescent health and development, understanding and preventing child sexual abuse, HIV prevention and treatment, significance of mental health (including debunking mental health myths), and understanding and preventing the phenomena of fake news on social media.

The sessions included group discussions, debates, film screenings, drawing exercises and games. Basic strategies on field dissemination of the learning from the workshop by the peer leaders were

also discussed. The sessions were conducted by Varta volunteers Sayan Bhattacharya and Sudha Jha and Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall; Soma Roy Karmakar from RAHI, Kolkata office; and independent mental health professional Srabasti Majumdar. The first two days of the workshop were on September 7-8, 2019, with a follow-up on December 21-22, 2019.

In early 2019, we had conducted a refresher training needs assessment with the service providers listed on our online locator from Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal. We addressed some of these needs through online sharing of reading and audio-visual learning material. Information was shared on issues of:

- Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics (through research papers, graphics and glossaries)
- Importance of using appropriate pronouns for different people (avoiding misgendering people)
- Adopting counselling practices and mental health position statements that are affirmative of gender and sexual minorities (discarding outdated ideas that consider gender and sexuality variations as pathological or as an illness)
- Newer HIV prevention and treatment strategies including PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), and Undetectable = Untransmittable (U = U)
- Policies, laws and court verdicts on issues concerning gender and sexual minorities in India

The information was shared through a series of structured email messages from July to November 2019 (and then revived earlier in 2020).

Fundraising Update

We continued to depend on donations (monthly and one-off) from our Trustees, volunteers and other well-wishers as well as website sponsorship related donations for fundraising. 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). 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 2020-21

On the organizational development front, the following activities will be prioritized:

- Registration of Varta Trust under Section 12AB of the Income Tax Act, 1961 within March 31, 2021 and subsequent re-registration under Section 80G of the same Act – as per amendments announced by the central government in the Union Budget for financial year 2020-21. According to these amendments, the registrations acquired from the Income Tax Department under Sections 12AA and 80G will now be redundant and fresh registration under Sections 12AB and 80G will be needed. The registrations will have to be renewed every five years. After both registrations have been completed successfully, application for registration under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act may be considered.

- Registered address change to be recorded in our PAN card documentation. Change in bank account records with Kotak Mahindra Bank was completed at the time of this report being written (in November 2020).
- Renewed attempts to raise funds for investment in a fixed deposit account with our bank (Kotak Mahindra Bank). This will help generate a long-term corpus fund for Varta Trust.
- Setting up an online donation payment channel for Varta Trust on the website (with appropriate measures to collect the relevant details of bona fide donors).

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

- Completion of Varta Trust website redevelopment work and development of Hindi version of online locator on queer-friendly health and legal aid service providers.
- Publication of articles on health concerns of gender and sexual minorities and general public around coronavirus pandemic (examples of articles already published – *COVID-19, Quarantine and Coping: A Mental Health Perspective* by Srabasti Majumdar and Nilanjan Majumdar, June 2020 issue, and *Sexual Intimacy and Risk of Coronavirus Infection* by Dr. Sathish A. Kumar and Rafiquel Haque Dowjah, April 2020 issue).
- Discussions and seminars / webinars around the books published in late 2019 - *Queer Potli: Memories, Imaginations and Re-Imaginations of Urban Queer Spaces in India* and *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Mobilizations in '90s Eastern India*.
- Continuation of queer archival management and research activities, and study titled *Cross-Border Queers: The Story of South Asian LGBTIQM Migrants*.
- Completion of Project Varta: Expanding Queer Friendly Legal Aid in West Bengal, which is a collaboration with partner agencies CREA, Delhi and SAATHII, Chennai. Eighteen months of the project were completed in March 2020, with an extension agreed upon till December 2020. A renewal of the collaboration for another year may be discussed with CREA and SAATHII, but even if this does not happen, the larger Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project will continue as one of our key activities. Emphasis will be put on assisting transgender individuals seeking gender affirmative care and legal gender identity change in light of the rules and regulations formulated under the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019.
- **Apart from the activities mentioned above, new grant writing and donation drives in 2020-21 for fundraising will be focussed on:**
 - Collaborations with educational institutions and NGOs on gender, sexuality, sexual health, mental health and human rights sensitization workshops in West Bengal and other states.
 - Third pilot of Varta Community Reporters Training and Citizen Journalism Programme focused on the impact of coronavirus pandemic and lockdown on gender and sexual minorities in eastern and north-eastern India (possibly in collaboration with NGO CREA). Efforts also to be made to move programme beyond 'pilot phase'.
 - Setting up of an economic inclusion mentoring forum for gender and sexual minorities living in eastern and north-eastern India (as part of our economic inclusion advocacy work). The forum will function as a livelihood guidance resource for individuals looking for jobs, skills building or



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support to set up or upgrade an enterprise. This activity assumes importance in the context of the coronavirus lockdown and Amphan cyclone, both of which have severely impacted the livelihoods of gender and sexual minorities. We may also support initiatives like community kitchens set up by transgender community groups in West Bengal.

- Activities related to provision of relief during and after the coronavirus lockdown to gender and sexual minorities and other vulnerable communities (as resolved in our Board of Trustees meeting held in April 2020).

Contact Information

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