

Varta Economic Inclusion Mentoring Forum

Join us in mentoring queer people for economic inclusion

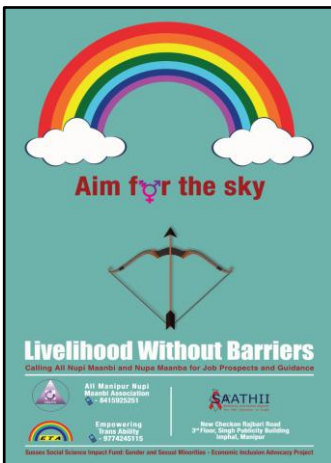
The Varta Economic Inclusion Mentoring Forum connects gender and sexual minority community members in eastern and north-eastern India seeking skills, jobs and self-employment with a team of experienced social workers, entrepreneurs, government officials and field experts for information and guidance.



Photo credit: Santa Khurai, All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association, Imphal, 2015

Context: There has always been a strong need for inclusive skills building and livelihood avenues for gender and sexual minorities as part of their daily struggle for self-reliance and survival. This need has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Concurrently, changing policy and legal environments offer new opportunities. In many ways, the Supreme Court of India set the ball rolling in 2014 with its well-known [NALSA verdict](#) on recognizing transgender identities and rights. In 2017, the United Nations released a [set of standards of conduct for businesses](#) to tackle discrimination against gender and sexual minorities in the workplace. In 2018, the Supreme Court [read down Section 377 IPC](#) and decriminalized all forms of adult consensual

sexual acts. The [Transgender Persons \(Protection of Rights\) Act, 2019](#), though not in keeping with the spirit of NALSA, provides some possibilities for addressing transgender livelihood concerns. Transgender inclusion has also seen a gradual uptick in skills building and livelihood programmes started by central government ministries, state governments and civil society organizations (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).



Genesis: Varta Trust's economic inclusion mentoring forum has been some years in the making. In 2014-15, we participated in a study titled [Livelihood, Exclusion and Opportunity: Socioeconomic Welfare among Gender and Sexuality Non-normative People in India](#), which was commissioned by the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. The study delved into how rigid gender norms permeate India's social welfare policies and programmes, and tend to exclude gender and sexual minorities. This study led to a training, research and advocacy project on economic inclusion in Manipur called [Sexual and Gender Diversity, Welfare and Precarity in India: Impact, Advocacy and Process](#) (2016-18). The project was implemented by two transgender collectives, All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association and Empowering Trans Ability, ally NGOs SAATHII and Varta, and the University of Sussex.

The learnings from this project on what factors may promote economic inclusion, especially in India's small-scale enterprises in the informal sector, was shared at a [national consultation on workplace inclusion](#) hosted by the British Deputy High Commission (BDHC) in Kolkata in January 2019. In a follow up, in September 2020, Varta and the BDHC co-organized an [online roundtable on strategies for economic inclusion](#) of gender and sexual minorities. The mentoring forum was envisioned at this roundtable conference. Subsequently, Varta mobilized people and preliminary resources for the forum. A formal start was made on June 3, 2021, Varta's ninth foundation day as a volunteer group.



Entrepreneur sensitization, Imphal, 2017



Kolkata consultation, 2019



Online roundtable, 2020

Our mentoring process: First, we assess what qualifications, skills, and experience the aspirants who approach us already have, and what they are looking for. Next, we guide them to create or improve an existing CV, which is circulated among the mentors for further inputs on the CV and guidance and references for relevant opportunities. We collate the inputs received from the mentors, share them with the aspirants, and facilitate one-on-one conversations between the aspirants and specific mentors as needed. We continue to guide them for the next steps in applying for a training programme or job, or setting up or upgrading an enterprise. We plan to provide follow-up support till around six months for the aspirants who manage to start off on a training, job or enterprise with our support.

We make the mentoring process holistic by also addressing the identity documentation, social welfare, legal aid, sexual health, and mental health concerns of the aspirants. We honour any confidentiality concerns they may have around their identity markers or personal circumstances.

We intend to supplement the mentoring process with:

- Training opportunities on CV development, interview preparation, and workplace skills for our aspirants as well as the larger gender and sexual minority community members.
- Gender and sexuality sensitizations for trainers, employers, financiers, government social welfare officials and policy makers among others.

You can contribute by:

- Joining us as a mentor and sharing your knowledge, skills and expertise with our aspirants.
- Conducting training workshops with our aspirants.
- Assisting us in sensitizing different stakeholders.
- Publicizing our efforts and reaching out to potential mentors and trainers.
- Joining us in documenting stories of economic inclusion/exclusion and researching economic inclusion barriers and facilitators.
- Donating monetary or non-monetary resources to Varta Trust.

Our current mentoring team:

- Ajitha Menon, Political Economy Adviser, British Deputy High Commission, Kolkata
- Amrita Roy Chowdhury, Founder and Secretary, Transcendent Knowledge Society, Kolkata
- Darshan Savalia, Co-Founder & CEO, Skinzy Software Solutions, Mumbai
- Koel Chatterji, Proprietor, Meow Baari, Kolkata
- Suchandra Das, Proprietor, Suchandragraphy and Touchstone Media, Kolkata
- Sujoy Das, Financial Analyst, NetApp, Bangalore
- Surajit Sikdar, Assistant Director of Skills Innovation, National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Hyderabad

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