

## MEDIA RELEASE

### **Pan-Indian online locator on queer-friendly COVID-19 services launched**

**Kolkata, June 4, 2022:** Varta Trust, Kolkata, in collaboration with Grindr for Equality, Los Angeles and SAATHII, Chennai today launched a unique queer-friendly COVID-19 services locator at a community event at Deshaj Café and Store in South Kolkata. The locator, bilingual in English and Bengali, is an addition to Varta's existing online finder on queer-friendly sexual health, mental health and legal aid service providers across India, which was launched four years ago in June 2018. Both the locators can be accessed here: <https://resources.vartagensex.org/>.



Presenting the highlights of the locator with his colleagues, Pawan Dhall, Founding Trustee, Varta Trust said, “The COVID-19 pandemic has only seemingly ended, and even if it’s dormant at this stage, its devastating socio-economic and health impact on transgender and queer lives is still being felt and will continue to be felt. Hence such an online help finder was badly needed. What if there’s a fourth wave of the pandemic? Queer people need to be smarter next time around and be prepared with information on where to access help.”

Earlier, through an email communique, Jack Harrison-Quintana, Director, Grindr for Equality said, “Grindr for Equality has supported this vital project from the beginning and are pleased to continue supporting it in the new phase. This is important for Grindr users and all LGBTIQ+ people in the country.”

Queer activist Susanta Pramanik, who has worked on the locator with Varta as a researcher, pointed out, “The locator presents easily searchable information on queer community groups and NGOs across India that provide a variety of services related to COVID-19. These include not just COVID-19 testing and vaccination support, but also access to quarantine centres, dry rations, community kitchens, emergency shelter, legal aid, and even livelihood guidance, STI/HIV treatment and mobile phone recharges. These are all challenges that queer people have experienced because of the pandemic and lockdowns, and we wanted to make sure our research tools captured information on as many of them as possible.”

Swati Das, another researcher who is part of the locator initiative, added, “As of now, the locator has information about 44 service providers located in more than 25 towns and cities in 15 states and Union Territories of India. This number will increase as the database is continually being updated based on fresh data collection, validation and feedback from users. Currently the biggest concentration of service providers is in West Bengal, followed by Karnataka, Manipur and Tamil Nadu.”

The locator has features that allow searching for services by state, city / town, nature of service as well as the different queer community sub-sections served by the service providers. For example, a user will be able to locate service providers that specifically serve, say, transgender men or Hijras or gay men living with HIV, and so on.



The launch of the locator was combined with celebrations for the completion of the 100<sup>th</sup> monthly issue of *Varta webzine*, the flagship publication of Varta Trust, in April 2022; completion of 10 years of Varta's functioning as a gender and sexuality advocacy group yesterday (June 3); and as part of observing the Pride Month in June, as is the practice in several countries.

The launch was preceded by an online panel involving several writers who contribute frequently to *Varta* on May 28, 2022 to mark the webzine's 100 issues milestone. The panel focussed on the role played by *Varta* in bridging the gap between academia and activism on issues concerning queer people. In early July, Varta will also organize a gender and sexuality-themed art workshop for the youth and queer communities of Kolkata.

Both the webzine and locator are examples of Varta's consistent emphasis on inclusiveness. Thus, they serve not just the queer communities but also other marginalized and often overlapping communities, whether they be youth, women, persons with disabilities, or people living with HIV.

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#### ***About Varta Trust***

Varta Trust is a Kolkata-based non-profit organization that promotes dialogue on gender and sexuality in India through publishing, public events, research, advocacy, training and services referrals.

#### ***About Grindr for Equality***

Grindr for Equality, based in Los Angeles, USA, is the Grindr dating app's programme to promote LGBTIQ+ health and human rights around the world.

#### ***About SAATHII***

Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) is a Chennai-headquartered non-profit organization that promotes universal access to health and social justice.

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