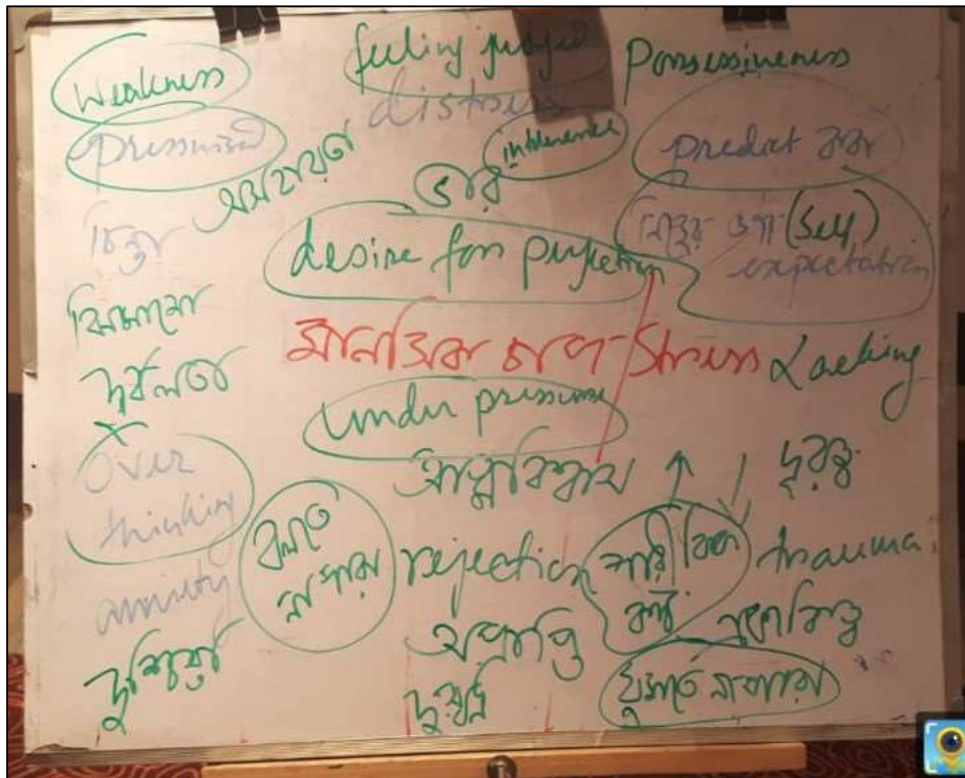


***Onward Journey for Social Justice and Inclusion through
Publishing, Archival Research, Citizen Journalism,
Mental Health Peer Counselling, and Legal Aid***



**Presented at the 10th Annual General Meeting of Varta Trust
October 7, 2024**

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 the Income Tax Department with unique registration no. AABTV9002AE20211 under Sections 12AB and 80G of Income Tax Act, 1961



Gender, Sexuality, Intimacy, Publishing

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Front cover illustration credit:

Photograph shows output of brainstorming exercise on issues related to stress management during the second round of Varta Trust Mental Health Peer Counselling Training Programme held on December 2-3 and 9-10, 2023 at Visitel Hotel, Kolkata. Photo credit: Swati Das

Founding Trustee's Note

The financial year 2023-24 will go down as one of the most important in the history of Varta Trust in terms of the milestones achieved. While in April 2022, we had completed 100 monthly issues of *Varta*, our flagship publication, on August 1, 2023, the webzine completed 10 years of operations! This is a rare feat for any gender, sexuality, and queer-themed publication in India. The occasion was marked with a special series of articles published in the webzine (tagged Varta 10 Years). While some of the articles looked at the history of the Indian gender and sexual minority movements to draw lessons for the future, others envisioned gender and sexuality movements and queer lives 10 years into the future. This series will remain a milestone in itself as it brought together a diverse set of new and old writers associated with Varta Trust's progress. We also organized a celebratory event on August 12, 2023 at Kalinath Angan, Kolkata – the event included a mini exhibition of archival material maintained by Varta Trust and the launch of mementos (a poster and greeting card based on *Varta* webzine material) to mark the occasion (*read more on page 4*).



While the webzine starting off on its 11th year looked at the vision of gender and sexual minority lives, in March 2024, we organized a different kind of visioning exercise. On March 30-31, 2024, we organized our first ever personal and organizational visioning exercise (at Visitel Hotel, Kolkata). Four of the Trustees, one staff member, three volunteers, and two of our mental health peer counsellors participated in an interactive workshop led by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall that guided the participants in articulating their personal life and career pathways, formulating a pathway for Varta Trust's growth and development in the next five years (including *Varta* webzine's progress), and locating a match between the personal and organizational visions. This workshop was organized in preparation for our organizational expansion, and resulted in an updated vision for the organization (development as a gender, sexuality, and health resource centre), a revised activity dashboard, and detailed activity plans for 2024-25 and 2025-26. Three of the fundamental activities to be carried out in 2024-25 would be to develop a full-fledged organizational policy for Varta Trust, prepare budgets for the activity plans, and carry out fundraising through grant applications and donation campaigns. With these developments, I am confident that Varta Trust is entering a new chapter in its work on the health and development concerns of gender and sexual minorities in India.¹

Key activities and milestones in 2023-24

Organizational and financial matters: As of March 31, 2024, we were a team of 26, including a five-member Board of Trustees, one staff member, and 20 volunteers based in Kolkata / India and abroad. In 2023-24, our financial inflow (almost entirely individual donations) was Rs.4,19,616.90/- (excluding cash and bank balances carried over from 2022-23) as per the Audit Report prepared by Sonali Dey Bandopadhyay, Partner, Add & Associates, Chartered Accountants. Among others, our donors included philanthropists and Varta volunteers who supported our work around mental health, sexual health, economic inclusion, and legal aid for gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal

¹ The expression 'queer' is also understood as 'gender and sexual minorities' or more popularly as 'LGBTIQA+' (short for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning or queer, asexual, and other people with non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics).

and other parts of India. In February-March 2024, a second supplementary trust deed was registered to record the change in our registered address, addition of new Trustees Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Susanta Pramanik, and a change in one of the bank account signatories from Madhuj Nandi to Dr. Srabasti Majumdar.



Publications: In 2023-24, 33 articles were published in the monthly *Varta* webzine with emphasis on family acceptance and legal rights of gender and sexual minorities in India, marriage equality, suicide among queer youth, HIV prevention, disability, violence against women, cinema, queer archiving, and the relief work being carried out in Manipur by youth and queer community groups. On August 1, 2023, *Varta* webzine achieved the milestone of completing 10 years. A celebratory event was organized to mark the occasion (see accompanying photograph –

photo credit Mahua Seth), and a special series of 11 articles were carried in the webzine from July to November 2023. Renowned academics, gender and sexual minority activists, artists, and teachers contributed articles for the series. Among others, the articles included *In Loving Memory of Discourse* by disabled and queer feminist activist Rituparna Borah, *For That Sliver of Hope* by professor of sociology Zaid Al Baset, and *How My Tomorrow Should Look Like* by transgender activist Amrita Sarkar. Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall penned an editorial titled *Tensions of the Past and Future*, which recounted the important developments that *Varta* witnessed and reported on through the decade of its existence. The webzine editorial team consisting of Trustees Pawan Dhall, Kaushik Gupta, and Dr. Srabasti Majumdar along with volunteers Arkadeepra Purkayastha, Debjoyoti Ghosh, Diksha Sanyal, Namrata Mukherjee, and Sudipa Chakraborty continued its work on monthly issue planning, soliciting of contributions, editing and proofreading, translations, alt text writing for images, website uploading, and strategic dissemination / amplification of articles. Pawan Dhall continued as the lead editor of the webzine. Overall, the website attracted 49,246 page views (7% higher than in 2022-23) and 20,456 unique (new or first-time) users (8% higher) from across India and abroad. Our YouTube channel continued to grow with 24 educational videos uploaded by the end of 2023-24.

Awareness generation: In 2023-24, we organized / participated in 19 online and offline talks, panel discussions, interfaces, consultations, cultural presentations, and mass outreach events (including the '47th International Kolkata Book Fair'). Some of the most important events included a talk given by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall on the history of the gender and sexual minority movements in West Bengal at the Monthly Research Colloquium of the Department of Sociology, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata; a gender and LGBTIQ+ sensitization panel discussion at Sister Nivedita University, Kolkata with students of sociology; and an event titled 'Together Day Dialogue on Gender, Sexuality and Mental Health Issues', a storytelling and interactive session between the employee volunteers of GlaxoSmithKline, Kolkata office and the mental health peer counsellors associated with Varta Trust. We also participated in a hybrid consultation on diversity, equity, and inclusion in corporate agencies in India organized by the Kolkata and other offices of well-known financial services company KPMG. We reached out to 1,200-1,300 college / university students, teachers, writers, artists, corporate employers and employees, healthcare and legal aid service

providers, social workers, researchers, media persons, gender and sexual minority community members, and the larger public with dialogue and information on the health, socioeconomic inclusion, cultural, and human rights concerns of gender and sexual minorities in India.

Social research: In 2023-24, Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall and Dr. Paul Boyce of the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK co-developed a study titled *Remembered Sexual Futures: Study on Art and Cultural History of Gender and Sexual Minorities in West Bengal, India (1990s-2000s)*. The study delved into the art and cultural advocacies undertaken by gender and sexual minority community groups in West Bengal during the 1990s and 2000s. The objective was to ensure that lessons from the past can inform present and future strategies for community mobilization and sensitizing government and non-government stakeholders to the public health and social justice concerns of gender and sexual minorities. Apart from a study report, the project resulted in the reenactment of *Koti Ki Atma*, an HIV awareness skit developed in 2001 by Counsel Club and Integration Society, two of India's earliest gender and sexual minority support forums. The reenactment (on November 4, 2023) was followed by a memory work-based community dialogue on looking at the history of the gender and sexual minority movements in India and learning from the past for current and future strategies on community development. The other outputs of the study included photo-documentation of the skit and material from the Counsel Club Archives maintained by Varta Trust; a short documentary film showcasing different aspects of the study (*Koti Ki Atma - Queer Stories of Art and Cultural Activism in West Bengal, India - 1990s-2000s*); and a series of mementos encapsulating some of the study findings. The study was implemented in collaboration with gender and sexual minority activists, artists and Kolkata-based support forums like Dumdum Swikriti Society and The Rainbow Room. Varta Trust facilitated some of the research activities around qualitative enquiry, multimedia documentation, and community engagement. Part of the study continued into 2024-25.

Regarding Counsel Club archival material, we continued to make progress in sorting, digitizing, cataloguing, filing and disseminating the correspondence and other components of the archives. Work on the study titled *Qualitative Study on Sociocultural Exchanges between Gender and Sexual Minorities in Canada and India (1970s-1990s)* continued in 2023-24.

Services referrals: Both our online locators – the first one on queer-friendly sexual health, mental health and legal aid service providers, and the second one on COVID-19 services – continued to attract the largest number of website visitors. In 2023-24, new additions were made in the first locator from Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal. Work on the development of a Hindi version of this locator continued, with the focus on English to Hindi translations of the more than 150 entries in the locator.

Policy, legal, media sensitization: By the end of 2023-24, the total number of legal aid cases handled as part of the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project went up to 41. Support was provided in more cases of queer individuals from West Bengal and Jharkhand facing blackmail or extortion, family violence, police harassment, and denial of livelihood opportunities. We also assisted one of our legal aid clients, a transgender woman from the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, in acquiring a scholarship from IDIA Charitable Trust, Bangalore to pursue higher education in law. In addition, Varta Trust provided legal advice to the Kolkata-based TISAR network of trans masculine persons regarding import of stand-to-pee devices (a personal hygiene necessity for trans masculine persons), name and gender change in school and college certificates of transgender persons who

undergo legal gender identity change after graduating from their school or college, and medico-legal processes to be followed by transgender men seeking a transgender identity certificate reflecting their gender as male or man. In collaboration with SAATHII, Chennai, Varta Trust conducted three gender and sexual minority community consultations (including one online) on the issues of equal rights and social justice for gender and sexual minorities. A needs assessment for planning a training workshop on peer counselling for parents of queer individuals who have accepted their children and are willing to help other parents do the same was also carried out. This was done in collaboration with The Rainbow Room, Kolkata. These activities were part of a community development initiative called Project EAGER (Expanding Gender and Sexual Minority Equity and Rights), which was conceived of jointly by SAATHII and Varta Trust.

On the media interaction front, Varta Trust's work was reported through 12 stories in different formats (print, online and audiovisual). This included a feature article *A Trans Rights Milestone* written by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall for *The Hindustan Times* and published on April 15, 2023 – for the ninth anniversary of the Honourable Supreme Court's NALSA verdict on transgender rights.

Training activities: As usual, this was one of the busiest components of our work:

- By the end of 2023-24, Varta Economic Inclusion Mentoring Forum (EIMF) had mentored 32 queer individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (mostly from West Bengal) on career planning issues. At least six of these individuals were successfully placed in jobs and training programmes. We also organized a pilot entrepreneurship development training workshop, the extensive research and other preparatory work for which was reported in the previous annual report. Of the 11 queer individuals who appeared for an entrepreneurship aptitude assessment,



nine were short listed for the training and eight completed the training (*see graphic above*) – all were either small entrepreneurs or planning to be one. The participants were from Kolkata and neighbourhood, Baruaipur, and Malda; five were transgender women, two were transgender men, and two were gay men. The training included interactive lectures and activity sessions spread over four weekends (mid-June to mid-July). In the period between the weekend sessions, the participants had to undertake field work and other practical learning. Weekly review meetings (online) were also held to guide the participants in their field work. The topics covered by the training included understanding entrepreneurship, business idea development and market understanding, business finance, fiscal responsibility, business plan development, business operations, pricing and market strategy, credit sourcing, customer management, social media management, and motivation skills.

At the end of the training period, three of the participants came up with business plans related to handicrafts and selling home-baked goods. Nobody reached the stage of running a pilot business



and needing support in accessing credit (these aspects were part of the training programme). However, the weekly review meetings were continued till early August 2023 to provide post-training mentoring to the participants. Eight of the participants who completed the course to varying degrees were presented participation certificates. Participants who attended at least 80% of the training sessions were given stipends of Rs.5,000/- each. The resource persons for the training were all drawn from among Varta Trust's well-wishers and provided their services pro bono (including the development of training curriculum) – *see adjoining graphic*. The training was organized in a hall space at

the residence of Varta volunteer Debjyoti Ghosh, and financial resources (around Rs.45,000/-) for the entire training programme were raised through a dedicated fundraising campaign. As a pilot training programme, it was reasonably successful and provided important learning for planning similar programmes in the future.

- In December 2023, we successfully conducted the second round of the Varta Trust Mental Health Peer Counselling Training Programme with 12 participants, including four individuals from the first round of training conducted in February 2023. All the participants in the four-day training workshop held in Kolkata were gender and sexual minority community members from Kolkata and its neighbourhood. The key facilitator was Varta Trustee Dr. Srabasti Majumdar, with psychologist Pompi Banerjee joining in as a resource person on one of the days of the training. The initial sessions of the workshop on the first day were led by peer counsellors Sudipa Chakraborty and Debarati Mukherjee who had participated in the first round – they were assisted by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall. In the second round, apart from the basic concepts of mental health, wellbeing, peer counselling and self-care, the training covered anger management and stress management. The training pedagogy was highly interactive and based on case studies and activity-based learning, including practice sessions on peer counselling. The pre- and post-training evaluation showed that the participants improved their understanding of empathy and peer counselling, while their grasp of stress management and queer affirmative counselling practices would need further emphasis. This round of the training workshop was conducted with support from Project EAGER. *See photograph on the next page.*

After the first round of the training in early 2023, we had facilitated the formation of a support group of the peer counsellors who had completed the training. The objective was to foster a community of practice. The group, around a dozen members strong, started meeting monthly from March 2023 at the residences of Varta volunteers or cafes, and during 2023-24, carried out activities around experience sharing, discussions, and follow-up training and counselling practice

sessions with guidance from Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Pawan Dhall. In May 2023, a daylong mid-term orientation was organized where a few new peer counsellors were welcomed into the group. The meeting in September 2023 was dedicated to the formulation of an activity plan for the support group in 2023-24. In the January 2024 meeting, the support group was guided to



develop a support group management plan (which included an elaboration of the group objectives; group membership, leadership, and coordination processes; decision making and conflict resolution processes; and ethical considerations). In the next month (February 2024), a learning evaluation was carried out to understand how far the peer counsellors had managed to absorb the principles of mental health and peer counselling. The support group also organized gender, sexuality, and mental health sensitization events (for example, the 'Together Day' event with

employee volunteers of GlaxoSmithKline, Kolkata office in November 2023), and started community outreach through the monthly meetings of The Rainbow Room and at the little magazine stall of Dumdum Swikriti Society at the 'International Kolkata Book Fair 2024'. Towards the end of the year, work also started on the development of a short promotional film to publicize the support group's activities. The most important outcome was that towards the end of 2023, four peer counsellors started peer counselling and handled five clients till March 2024. The peer counsellors were guided in the process by Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Pawan Dhall.

- Among other training activities, Swati Das, Administration Assistant and Varta volunteer Souvik Rakshit successfully completed a six-month information technology application training course at Hazra Youth Computer Training Centre, Kolkata (under the Department of Youth Services, Government of West Bengal). Their course fee was sponsored by Varta Trust as part of their on-the-job learning and as an activity of the Varta Economic Inclusion Mentoring Forum.

* * *

A heartfelt thank you again to our Trustees, staff, volunteers, resource persons, webzine readers and contributors, donors, and well-wishers. Your generous sharing of information, knowledge, ideas, time, funds, and other resources remains invaluable for Varta Trust's work.

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 public events; referrals to mental health, sexual health, legal aid, and social security services; facilitating training and livelihood opportunities; social research; and policy, legal and media advocacy 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 to mark the completion of 10 years of Varta webzine in August 2023. Artwork credit: Arkadeepa Purkayastha

Organizational Details

- Started as a voluntary group: June 3, 2012 (first volunteer team meeting); *Varta* monthly blog started: August 1, 2013, evolved into a full-fledged website (inclusive of a monthly webzine) from August 2016, completed 10 years on August 1, 2023.
- 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: DPS Corporate Club, 9A Sebak Baidya Street, Kolkata 700 029.
- Board of Trustees (BoT) as of March 31, 2024: Pawan Dhall (Founding Trustee), Kaushik Gupta, Madhuja Nandi, Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Susanta Pramanik.
- Larger volunteer team (including BoT members) as of March 31, 2024: Anupam Hazra (*gender, sexuality and HIV activist*); Anwesha Chatterjee (*gender rights social worker*); Arkadeepa Purkayastha (*development sector professional*); Debjyoti Ghosh (*advocate, gender and sexuality researcher and activist*); Diksha Sanyal (*gender and sexuality academic*); Dr. Srabasti Majumdar (*mental health professional*); Kaushik Gupta (*advocate and sexual rights activist*); Madhuja Nandi (*transgender and anti-trafficking activist*); Mohammad Gulrez (*development sector professional*); Namrata Mukherjee (*advocate, gender and sexuality researcher*); Owais Khan (*computer professional, poet, gender and sexuality activist*); Pawan Dhall (*gender, sexuality and HIV activist, archivist, researcher and writer*); Prosenjit Pal (*neurosciences researcher*); Rudra Kishore Mandal (*artist, gender and sexuality activist*); Santanu Pyne (*organizational administration and financial management specialist*); Sayan Bhattacharya (*journalist, gender and sexuality researcher and activist*); Souvik Rakshit (*artist, gender and sexuality activist*); Srimoyee Mukherjee (*advocate and gender and sexuality rights activist*); Sudeb Suvana (*gender and sexuality activist*); Sudha Jha (*HIV activist*); Sudipa Chakraborty (*transgender social worker*); Sukhdeep Singh (*IT professional, gender and sexuality activist*); Susanta Pramanik (*gender, sexuality and HIV activist*); Vahista Dastoor (*communication specialist*); and Yashita Kandhari (*gender and sexuality researcher*). **Note:** For most current volunteer names, please visit www.vartagensex.org/about-varta/.
- Staff members: Swati Das, Administration Assistant.
- Varta Trust bank account (institutional current account): Kotak Mahindra, Ballygunge Branch, Kolkata.
- Current Auditor: Sonali Dey Bandopadhyay, Partner, Add & Associates, Chartered Accountants, P-168, Sector B, Metropolitan Cooperative Housing Society Limited, Canal South Road, Kolkata 700 105, with ICAI FR number 308064E and membership number 064055.
- Varta Trust PAN number: AABTV9002A. Income tax registration: Registered with Income Tax Department with unique registration no. AABTV9002AE20211 under Sections 12AB and 80G of Income Tax Act, 1961 since March 22, 2022 (with effect from financial year 2021-22).
- 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. Meetings may be organized offline or online.

- Pawan Dhall, Founding Trustee
- Email: vartablog@gmail.com
- Website: www.vartagensex.org (earlier www.varta2013.blogspot.in)
- Facebook page: www.facebook.com/vartapublications
- YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/channel/UCY9yIYbnO9efZ7DLhfaVPMg
- Telegram channel: t.me/vartatruster
- Instagram account: www.instagram.com/vartatruster



Artwork of the memento created on occasion of Varta webzine completing 10 years of operations on August 1, 2023. Artwork credit: Souvik Rakshit, Swati Das, Pawan Dhall

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