

Varta Trust Annual Report 2024-25

Addressing the Mental Health, Sexual Health and Financial Inclusion Needs of Gender and Sexual Minorities in India



**Presented at the 11th Annual General Meeting of Varta Trust
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Varta Trust, DPS Corporate Club, 9A Sebak Baidya Street, Kolkata 700 029, India
vartablog@gmail.com; www.vartagensex.org

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Gender, Sexuality, Intimacy, Publishing

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Front cover photo credit: Participants on the final day of the third round of Varta Trust Mental Health Peer Counselling Training Programme with their participation certificates – the training workshop was held from December 6-8, 2024 at Kalinath Angan, Kolkata. Photo credit: Rohit

Founding Trustee's Note

In presenting the Annual Report for the financial year 2024-25, I am happy to say that Varta Trust continued on its trajectory of organizational and programmatic growth. We took important strides in follow up to the previous year's organizational and personal visioning exercise. On the organizational front, we developed a comprehensive organizational policy document with sections on organization structure, operations management, human resources, non-discrimination, prevention of sexual harassment, data protection and privacy, financial management and prevention of fraudulent acts. This policy improved upon and consolidated the existing conventions and good practices we have been following over the years. In relation to the policy, we also set up a Grievance Redressal Committee for prevention of sexual harassment (*read more on pages 3-4*).

On the programmatic front, we started emphasizing fundraising through submission of grants to Indian donor agencies. One such grant proposal was focused on setting up a resource centre for gender and sexual minorities in Greater Kolkata, which was submitted to Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore. The resource centre will focus on peer leadership development and provision of support around mental health, sexual health, legal aid, skilling and livelihood, financial inclusion, and elderly caregiving for gender and sexual minorities (*more details on page 4*). While this report provides information about the progress made on the proposal till the end of 2024-25, I am glad to say that in September 2025, our proposal was formally accepted for a three-year period September 1, 2025 to August 31, 2028. Progress on the project will be detailed in the Annual Report for the ongoing financial year. Finally, in 2024-25, Varta Trust was part of the historic observations of the 25th anniversary of 'Friendship Walk '99', which was the very first rainbow pride walk of India and South Asia organized in Kolkata on July 2, 1999 (*read more on page 5*). These developments are not just landmark events but also underscore our continued commitment towards better health and development for gender and sexual minorities in India.¹

Key activities and milestones in 2024-25

Organizational and financial matters: As of March 31, 2025, we were a team of 26, including a five-member Board of Trustees, two staff members, and 19 volunteers based in Kolkata / India and abroad. In 2024-25, our financial inflow (almost entirely individual donations) was Rs.580742.44/- (excluding cash and bank balances carried over from 2023-24) 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 and other parts of India.

Several important organizational developments took place in 2024-25. In November 2024, we obtained enrollment under the West Bengal State Tax on Professions, Trades, Callings and Employments Act, 1979 as an organizational entity, and became liable to submit our annual returns and pay profession tax every year by July 31 to the Directorate of Commercial Taxes, Government of West Bengal. We also registered as an employer under the same Act, which meant that we would

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).

have to deduct and pay profession tax monthly for each employee falling under the profession tax bracket. This was necessitated by the fact that the monthly salary of Swati Das, Administration Assistant crossed Rs.10000/- in October 2024 and entered the tax bracket.



On March 29, 2025, we organized a half-day organizational policy development workshop (see adjacent photograph), which resulted in the formulation of Varta Trust's first comprehensive organizational policy document (issued on May 1, 2025 in the current financial year). This document was envisaged in our personal and organizational visioning exercise held at the end of March 2024 (refer to the Annual Report of 2023-24). Among other components, the policy includes sections on organization structure, operations management, human resources, non-discrimination, prevention

of sexual harassment, data protection and privacy, financial management and prevention of fraudulent acts. Regarding prevention of sexual harassment, a three-member Grievance Redressal Committee was also set up to handle the processes for ensuring a fair and confidential redressal mechanism without any fear of retaliation. The workshop was conducted by consultant Mahua Seth, who worked with Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall to develop the document.

In January 2025, we submitted the concept note for a project tentatively titled Resource Centre to Equip Queer Peer Leaders in and around Kolkata with Life Skills for Greater Social Inclusion and Wellbeing to donor agency Azim Premji Foundation (APF), Bangalore. The proposed resource centre would function as a drop-in centre and safe space for gender and sexual minorities in Greater Kolkata. It would focus on preparing a certain number of individuals with peer leadership potential as first responders and peer counsellors, who would work with the project team in providing a range of mental health, sexual health, legal aid, skilling and livelihood, financial inclusion, and elderly caregiving services to gender and sexual minorities in the Greater Kolkata area. This project idea was discussed during the personal and organizational visioning exercise of March 2024, and the concept note was based on consultations held with the APF representatives earlier in 2024. By the end of 2024-25, a grant application, including a detailed budget for a three-year project, was in the making, and programme and financial management representatives of the APF were scheduled to visit Varta Trust in April and May 2025. If successful, this would be the first donor-funded project to be taken up by Varta Trust.

Publications: In 2024-25, 24 articles were published in the monthly *Varta* webzine with emphasis on women's and transgender rights; prevention of violence against women; issue of family diversity; and the family acceptance, mental health, and ageing concerns of gender and sexual minorities in India. An important issue covered in the articles was looking at the histories of the gender and sexual minority movements in India. Issues of disability and relief work being carried out in Manipur by youth and gender and sexual minority community groups were also covered.

The articles included *Embodying the Justice One Is Demanding* by Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall (on the public protests that took place in Kolkata and elsewhere after the rape and murder of a

trainee doctor at R. G. Kar Medical College & Hospital on August 9, 2024), *Queering the Family: Tamil Nadu Shows the Way* by advocate and Varta volunteer Namrata (on the issues of family diversity and queer relationships), *Crisis in Crisis Intervention Centres for Women* by disability rights activist Shampa Sengupta, and *Celebrating the Magic of Friendship* by students Pritha Bhattacharya and Sambrita Chakraborty on the events that were organized to mark the 25th anniversary of 'Friendship Walk '99' (South Asia's first rainbow pride walk organized in Kolkata in July 1999).

On August 1, 2024, *Varta* webzine completed 11 years. A small community event was organized at Kalinath Angan, Kolkata on August 4, 2024 to mark the occasion with the premiere of *Mon Bhalo Rakhar Thikana (Happy Mind, Happy Us)*, a short promotional film developed by Varta Trust Mental Health Peer Counsellors Support Group. This was in keeping with the special emphasis on mental health awareness generation in the webzine.

Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall continued as the lead editor of the webzine. Overall, the website performed extremely well as it attracted 79,040 page views (nearly 61% higher than in 2023-24) and 24,220 unique (new or first-time) users (a significant jump of 18%) from across India and abroad. Our YouTube channel had 27 educational videos uploaded by the end of 2024-25.

Awareness generation: In 2024-25, we organized and participated in 24 online and offline talks, panels discussions, interfaces, consultations, cultural presentations, and mass outreach events. Some of the most important events included a series of bridge-building events to mark the 25th anniversary of 'Friendship Walk '99' (the first rainbow pride walk of South Asia organized in Kolkata on July 2, 1999); a panel discussion on gender and sexual minority rights organized by District Legal Services



Authority, Kolkata, and Vidyasagar Metropolitan College, Kolkata; and participation in the '48th International Kolkata Book Fair' in collaboration with partner agency Dumdum Swikriti Society.

In November-December 2024, we also participated in the 'IPATHCON 2024', a national conference on gender affirmative care and other transgender healthcare and sociological issues, organized at K. P. C. Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata, and other venues. The main organizers of the conference were the Indian Professional Association for Transgender Health along with partner agencies like the National Network of Transgender Persons, Alliance India, and SAATHII. Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall and Varta volunteer Sudipa Chakraborty spoke about Varta Trust's experience of dealing with the medicolegal concerns of transgender persons during a satellite event called 'Samanvay' organized at LBD Resorts & Hotels, Kolkata.

The series of events to mark the 25th anniversary of 'Friendship Walk '99' included the 'Queer Kolkata Heritage Walk' on the morning of July 2, 2024 (same day, time and starting point as 'Friendship Walk '99') and a commemorative event in the evening to revisit gender and sexual

minority histories of Kolkata from the 1990s (see photograph on the previous page of the event held at Sujata Smriti Sadan in South Kolkata; photo credit Pawan Dhall). The events also included gender and sexuality-themed workshops with research fellows from the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata and students of Kalyani University; dialogues with disability rights activists and groups like Sruti Disability Rights Centre, Kolkata; and art workshops, exhibitions and cultural events involving writers, artists, publishers, teachers, media persons, and government officials. The events spanned several months from May to September 2025, and were organized collaboratively by several agencies and individual artists, activists, students, and volunteers in multiple venues across West Bengal, specifically Alipurduar, Kalyani, Konnagar, and Kolkata. The organizations involved were Anonym Collections, Asansol Udan, Café Opportunity, Dumdum Swikriti Society, Nadia Ranaghat Sampriti Society, Sruti Disability Rights Centre, The Rainbow Room, Uttorer Rangdhanu, and Zoom Tea-O-Graphy. All the events attempted to emphasize the value of friendship (fraternity) between different marginalized sections of society for collaboratively working towards a more just and equitable society.

Overall, we reached out to an estimated 1,300 college and university students, teachers, writers, artists, publishers, healthcare and legal aid service providers, social workers, researchers, media persons, gender and sexual minority community members, government officials, 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 2024-25, work on the study titled *Remembered Sexual Futures: Study on Art and Cultural History of Gender and Sexual Minorities in West Bengal, India (1990s-2000s)* was completed with the preparation of the final report, associated database, and uploading of the documentary film showcasing different aspects of the study (*Koti Ki Atma – Queer Stories of Art and Cultural Activism in West Bengal, India – 1990s-2000s*) on our YouTube channel. Work on sorting, cataloguing, filing, digitizing, and disseminating the correspondence and other components of the Counsel Club Archives continued. Three post-graduate social sciences students from Jadavpur University were provided access to the archival material for their studies. Copies of some of the archival materials were also put up on display during exhibitions and other community events in Kolkata, including an exhibition that was part of the series of events to mark the 25th anniversary of 'Friendship Walk '99'. In October 2024, Founding Trustee Pawan Dhall spoke on his experience as an archivist in a webinar organized by Zubaan, Delhi on feminist archiving practices.

Services referrals: Our online locators – the first one on queer-friendly sexual health, mental health, and legal aid service providers (started in 2018), and the second one on COVID-19 services (started 2022) – continued to attract some of the largest numbers of website visitors. In 2024-25, the first locator attracted at least 4,300 unique users. New additions were made to this locator from Delhi NCT and West Bengal, and for the first time from Chandigarh and Sikkim. By the end of the year, the number of entries in the locator had reached 158 from 50 cities and towns located in 23 states and Union Territories. Work on the development of a Hindi version of this locator continued.

Policy, legal, media sensitization: By the end of 2024-25, the total number of legal aid cases handled since 2016-17 as part of the Queer Friendly Lawyers Network – West Bengal's work (including the Varta Trust Legal Aid Support Group Project since 2018) went up to 56 (these included nine legal petitions in different courts and tribunals advocating for the protection of the rights of

gender and sexual minority individuals and their access to public services in West Bengal). In 2024-25, support was provided to gender and sexual minority individuals from West Bengal, Haryana and other places facing blackmail or extortion, family violence, and intimate partner violence. One of the individuals advised was living with HIV, while a queer couple sought advice on cohabitation rights.

On the media interaction front, Varta Trust's work was reported through five stories in different formats (print, online and audiovisual). The highlight among these was an academic paper titled *Beyond the Bench: LGBTQ+ Health Equity after India's "No Same-sex Marriage" Verdict* published in the renowned public health journal *The Lancet*. The article mentioned our legal aid work as a model community intervention for gender and sexual minorities.

Training activities:

- In 2024-25, the Varta Economic Inclusion Mentoring Forum (VEIMF) collaborated with financial advisory firm Wishlist Capital, Kolkata to initiate a new activity focussed on financial planning and financial inclusion for disadvantaged gender and sexual minority community members in and around Kolkata. Through three workshops held in September and October 2024 and March 2025, 23 individuals were provided guidance on different aspects of saving and investment towards financial security, particularly investments in micro-SIP mutual funds (*photograph below shows participants at the workshop held on October 18, 2024 at the office of Wishlist Capital; photo credit Pawan Dhall*). Eight of these individuals began investments and another four were planning to do the same. In addition, by the end of the financial year, the VEIMF had mentored 33 gender and sexual minority individuals (mostly from West Bengal) on higher education, skilling, and livelihood issues, of which at least six were placed in educational courses, training programmes, and jobs.



- From December 6-8, 2024, we successfully conducted the third round of the Varta Trust Mental Health Peer Counselling Training Programme for gender and sexual minority community members in West Bengal at Kalinath Angan in South Kolkata. The number of participants went up to 16 (from 12 in the previous round), and for the first time, there were two individuals from North Bengal. Four of the participants were repeat participants. The key facilitators were Varta

Trustees Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Pawan Dhall, clinical psychologist and doctoral researcher Aritra Chatterjee associated with the University of Calcutta and her co-facilitator Dr. Megha Sharda, a neuroscientist and researcher. In this round, apart from the basic concepts of mental health, wellbeing, peer counselling and self-care, the training covered queer-affirmative counselling practices, caregiving for elderly gender and sexual minority individuals, and basics of sexual health. The training pedagogy, as usual, 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 would need more engagement in terms of peer counselling practice. Towards this end, two follow-up sessions were organized in January 2025, and more were planned later in the year.

After the first round of the mental health peer counselling training in early 2023, we had facilitated the formation of a support group of the peer counsellors who had completed the training, the objective being to foster a community of practice. In 2024-25, the group strength went up to around 24 and it organized eight monthly meetings / activities throughout the year. These included the follow-up sessions mentioned above, an online training session on sexual health in September 2024, and a community interactive event in January 2025 on the issue of tackling the challenge of illegal conversion therapy practices in India. This event involved two resource persons, Meera Dhebar, a Canada-based therapist and post-doctoral researcher, and clinical psychologist Aritra Chatterjee. It was chaired by Varta peer counsellor Meghjit Sengupta. A report on the event *Queer Worldmaking as a Form of Resilience* was published in the *Varta* webzine in February 2025 – the report was written by Meghjit Sengupta and another peer counsellor Surjo Pramanik. In February 2025, peer counsellor Souvik Rakshit and Trustee Pawan Dhall attended the ‘National Conference on Suicide Prevention’ organized by Anjali Mental Health Research Organization in Kolkata, and shared the extensive notes and learning gained from the conference with the support group.

As in 2024, the peer counsellors also carried out outreach during the ‘International Kolkata Book Fair 2025’ using Varta Trust bookmarks providing information about our activities. As mentioned earlier in the report, in August 2024, work on a short promotional film *Mon Bhalo Rakhar Thikana (Happy Mind, Happy Us)* was completed and the film was premiered during an event to mark the 11th birthday of *Varta* webzine. The film provides information about the basics of mental health and how to contact Varta Trust’s peer counsellors for support. By the end of 2024-25, four peer counsellors had started peer counselling and handled eight clients till March 2025 (including follow-up sessions). The peer counsellors were guided in the process by Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Pawan Dhall.

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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.



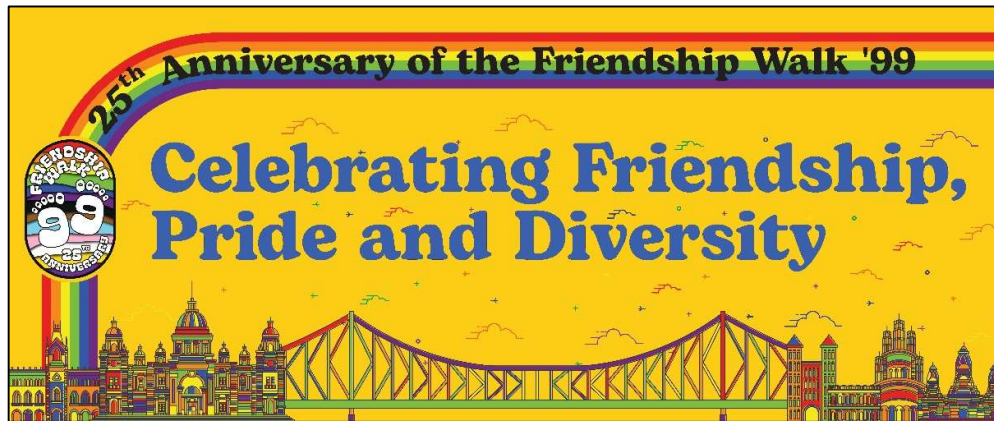
A scene from the second day of the third edition of Varta Trust Mental Health Peer Counselling Training for queer community members in West Bengal. Photo credit: Pawan Dhall

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 11 years on August 1, 2024.
- 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, 2025: Pawan Dhall (Founding Trustee), Kaushik Gupta, Madhuja Nandi, Dr. Srabasti Majumdar and Susanta Pramanik.
- Larger volunteer team (including BoT members) as of March 31, 2025: Anupam Hazra (*gender, sexuality and HIV activist*); Anwasha 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*); 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; Souvik Rakshit, Programme 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 Section 12A of Income Tax Act, 1961 since March 22, 2022 (with effect from financial year 2021-22). Registered with Directorate of Commercial Taxes, Government of West Bengal with enrolment no. 192183445208 and registration no. 191011321458 since November 2024.
- 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.

Contact Information

- 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/vartatrust
- Instagram account: www.instagram.com/vartatrust



Banner and logo created for the observation of the 'Friendship Walk '99' 25th anniversary events held from May to September 2024 across multiple cities and venues in West Bengal. Artwork credit: Tabish Shakil

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