Remembered Sexual Futures Project: Study on Art and Cultural History of Gender and Sexual Minorities in West Bengal, India (1990s-2000s)
University of Sussex

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Project Report – Findings and Learning (March 2024)

"A movement has no value without its history. Acknowledging the sacrifices made by people before us strengthens us and makes us more hopeful about the challenges ahead" – quote from an in-depth interview respondent.

1. Context: The queer movements in West Bengal and India are now more than three decades old. In this span of time, queer individuals and collectives (queer support groups and networks) and their allies (including allied human rights movements) have deployed a variety of strategies, media, messages, and narratives to fight stigma, discrimination, and violence in different social spheres. In this context, the queer movements have relied heavily on the arts and cultural tools. In the earliest years of the movements (the late 1980s onwards, but primarily the 1990s and 2000s), there were numerous artistic and cultural innovations, even with limited resources at hand. Many of these initiatives were undertaken before the advent of the Internet in India. With the passage of time and increasing invisibilization of creations that have had little or no online presence, information about these initiatives is being lost. The thinking and efforts that went into the initiatives and the potential lessons therein for current or future advocacies are also being lost, thereby depriving the newer generations of a wealth of knowledge and resources. In the 2010s, the queer movements brought about several sociolegal developments like transgender rights legislation and decriminalization. Even as these have advanced queer visibility and rights, there has been social resistance to change, continued expressions of queerphobia (social and institutional), and a perceptible growth of majoritarian politics. These challenges pose an equal threat to the records of India's recent queer histories. This project was a pilot intervention to stem the tide, so to speak, through qualitative enquiry, multimedia documentation, and preservation through community engagement in remembering.

2. Project objectives (research questions): Broadly, the project involved research into the recent histories of queer communities in West Bengal to examine how queer people and their allies deployed the arts and cultural tools for community mobilization, awareness generation and public sensitization in the 1990s and 2000s. Further specific objectives could be elaborated as follows:

a) How was queer organizing undertaken through the arts and cultural tools?
   - What were the various art and cultural advocacy initiatives that were undertaken in the 1990s and 2000s? Are they still continuing?
   - How were these initiatives helpful in bringing queer people together?
   - How were they developed and implemented to generate dialogue on issues of sex, gender, sexuality, sexual health, human rights and self-esteem among queer people, their allies and other stakeholders?
   - How did these initiatives influence social attitudes and behaviours towards queer people and policies and programmes meant for queer communities?

b) How is such queer organizing remembered today and what are the implications for current and future organizing?
   - Do memories of the past organizing haunt or influence us in any way?

- What expectations did queer individuals and communities have in the 1990s and 2000s for the future, and today, have those expectations come true?
- What seems to have changed and what has not? What more needs to be done?

3. Project activities (methodology): The research methodology consisted of a mix of some of the commonly used methods of qualitative enquiry, community engagement in remembering the past as a less frequently used method of qualitative research, and multimedia documentation.

a) Literature review and archival research: The first step was a literature review of peer-reviewed published material, grey literature, resource books, programme and organizational reports, traditional media stories, and social media posts. This was accompanied by an examination of the archival records of queer support groups and networks active in West Bengal in the 1990s and 2000s. The primary purpose was to identify the art and cultural advocacy initiatives undertaken in West Bengal in the 1990s and 2000s, and assess their impact on queer community mobilization, awareness generation, and public sensitization. See **Annexure 1** for a listing of the literature and archival material reviewed; and **Annexure 2** for a chronological database of queer art and cultural advocacy initiatives undertaken in West Bengal in the 1990s and 2000s.

b) In-depth interviews: In addition to the literature review and archival research, five in-depth interviews were conducted with peer leaders and key informants (based on written consent), each with an engagement of at least two decades with gender, sexuality and queer activism in West Bengal (all five were in the age range 40-55). The interviewees included gay activist and Dumdum Swikriti Society founder member Susanta Pramanik (based in Gobardanga, North 24 Parganas district); gay activist, medical doctor, and amateur filmmaker Tirthankar Guha Thakurta (based in Kolkata); transgender activist and actor Sudeb Suvana (based in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas district); queer filmmaker and key Sappho for Equality member Debalina (based in Kolkata); and social worker Dr. Soma Roy engaged with transgender and sex worker rights (based in Kolkata). Apart from contributing information to the queer art and cultural advocacy database, the conversations with the interviewees examined questions around their engagement with queer art and cultural advocacy, comparison between the advocacies undertaken in the 1990s-2000s and current times, the immediate and long-term impact of the advocacies of the 1990s-2000s, and implications of the past advocacies and their remembrance for the queer communities today. See **Annexure 3** for interview guide.

c) Reenactment of past artistic performances: Beyond the usual qualitative research methods, the project attempted to use theatre as a means of research. A key component was the reenactment of artistic performances first created by queer support groups in the 1990s and 2000s, combined with community dialogues around remembering the past performances and their current relevance. On November 4, 2023, a tragicomic skit called *Koti Ki Atma (Revenge of the Koti's Spirit)* was reenacted at Café Adda Ghar, Kolkata. The skit was first developed and performed in 2001 by the members of two of West Bengal and India's earliest queer support groups – Integration Society (1999-2005) and Counsel Club

(1993-2002). It is a 20-minute, four-scene play in Bengali that delivers messages on the nature of HIV infection, HIV counselling and testing, safer sex, and sexual health. However, the deeper narrative of the skit relates to the importance of self-esteem, empowerment, and emanating from these, concern for one's own and one's sexual partner's health. It requires only three actors, a minimum of props, and is a cross between street and proscenium theatre. It works best when performed in intimate spaces with audiences of 25-30 people.

The skit was developed as part of a sexual health operations research among *kothis*, gay and bisexual men, and other males who have sex with males (MSM) in West Bengal. The study was conducted in 2000-01 and funded by the West Bengal Sexual Health Project and Department for International Development, UK. Though the skit was primarily meant for a queer audience, it was also deployed for larger public dialogue and sensitization. It was performed around half a dozen times in Kolkata during community events, conferences, and larger public events in 2001-02, and once in 2013.

Koti Ki Atma came about at a time when non-normative genders and sexualities were strongly stigmatized and criminalized (under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and other laws related to obscenity and vagrancy); MSM inclusion in the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) was new; and the West Bengal state health department was hesitant to fund an HIV intervention among MSM in spite of the need established by several national and state-level studies. Elsewhere in India, peer educators and outreach workers engaged in HIV interventions among MSM had to face police harassment and even arrest for abetment in relation to Section 377. The availability of ART was also at least three years away. Thus, the skit was not just a 'community affair' – it also called for public and government attention to the sexual health and social justice needs of MSM and the larger queer communities.

The reenactment of the skit had several elements of the past blending with the present. Two of the three actors (Madhuja Nandi and Susanta Pramanik) were among those who had first acted in the play; the third (Souvik Rakshit) was a first timer but someone who had worked in community outreach in West Bengal since the 2000s. The audience was by invitation and consisted of a mix of 40-45 older and younger queer activists, community members, and allies. Some of the older lot had witnessed the earliest performances of the skit and were in a unique position to compare the past with the present. The venue for the reenactment, a popular café in South Kolkata, is used by the Rainbow Room, a new queer support forum in town, for its 'physical' monthly meetings. This was a throwback to the years of Counsel Club, which used to have similar meetings at a venue called George Bhawan in Central Kolkata, a yesteryear counterpart of the café as a safe space.

The performance of the skit was followed by a community dialogue moderated by the Research Consultant, Pawan Dhall, who was a founder member of Counsel Club and Integration Society. Rafiquel Haque Dowjah, another key member of the two groups, was present as the director of the original skit and the reenactment. Both Pawan Dhall and Rafiquel Haque Dowjah had been part of the original team that had created the skit. The dialogue started with experience sharing by the skit actors and Rafiquel Haque Dowjah, and was thrown open to the audience through questions around remembrance, expectations that

the queer communities had in the past regarding the future (that is, the current times), and comparisons between the past and current scenarios around community organizing, social inclusion, the HIV epidemic, and mental health concerns.

The skit was performed twice. The first performance was exclusively for videography with necessary set, light, and sound arrangements – the video documentation presents all four scenes of the play like a short film. The second performance was a 'live' one before the invited audience. This performance was also video documented along with the community dialogue for a short film on the Remembered Sexual Futures Project. The reenactment was also documented through photographs and a short textual report. See **Annexure 2** for more details about the skit and **Annexure 4** for a short report on the reenactment of the skit and the associated community dialogue. **Annexure 5** shows a poster developed for the reenactment event. A sample of photographs at the end of the report provide glimpses of the reenactment and community dialogue (page 14).

d) Photo-documentation: Apart from the skit reenactment and community dialogue, the photo-documentation component of the project captured the entire process behind the reenactment of *Koti Ki Atma*. This included scenes of the rehearsals for the skit and other preparatory activities. Glimpses of the archival material related to Counsel Club and Integration Society (Counsel Club Archives maintained by Varta Trust, Kolkata) and other queer support organizations like Swikriti were also captured through the photo-documentation – sample of photographs provided at the end of the report (page 15). These photographs can be printed for display during queer community events or sensitization events in educational institutions and other public forums.

e) Video documentation: Besides recording the skit when it was performed only for videography in November 2023, the video documentation component of the project included the development of a short documentary film that highlights the different aspects of the Remembered Sexual Futures study. The first part of the film includes brief interviews with activists Sudeb Suvana, Susanta Pramanik, and Pawan Dhall (also the Research Consultant). The interviews are interspersed with shots of archival material from the Counsel Club Archives, Swikriti's collection, and Sudeb Suvana's personal collection of photographs from the 2000s. The film begins with an introduction to the project provided by Pawan Dhall, followed by all three interviewees narrating their experience of art and cultural advocacy in the 1990s and 2000s. The interviewees also explain the importance of queer archiving, researching queer histories recorded in various archives or available from other sources, and disseminating the findings among the newer generations of queer people and their allies. The second part of the film consists of glimpses of the skit when it was performed before an audience in November 2023, and a number of snippets from the community dialogue that followed the performance **(Annexure 4)**. Together the two parts of the film sum up the essence of the project. The film is bilingual in Bengali and English (with subtitles in English), approximately 36 minutes in length, and has been directed by Kolkata-based queer filmmaker Suchandra Das.

f) Mementos as memory holders: The final component of the project was the creation of a series of artistic memory holders or mementos that captured information, messages and visuals from the archival material researched for the study (primarily the Counsel Club Archives). The mementos consist of a bookmark, two picture postcards, an A3-sized poster, and a set of personalized postage stamps issued by India Post. Each of the mementos narrates a story – while the bookmark and one of the postcards illustrate how Counsel Club carried out community outreach and networking, the second postcard is based on personal classified advertisements published in *Pravartak*, Counsel Club's house journal. These advertisements were a means for queer people to find others for friendship, sex, and romance in the 1990s. The poster highlights the emotions and concerns reflected in the thousands of letters and emails received by Counsel Club and Integration Society from queer people through the 1990s and early 2000s. These letters and emails are one of the most important components of the Counsel Club Archives, and provide a rich insight into Indian queer lives in the 1990s-2000s. The postage stamps carry the logo of Counsel Club in rainbow colours along with a visual of Victoria Memorial, Kolkata (the monument being a symbol of the British colonization of India, including the criminalization of queer people, something which the Indian queer movements have fought against for more than three decades). The mementos have been conceptualized and designed by artist Souvik Rakshit and Pawan Dhall. The final artworks of all the mementos have been provided at the end of the report (pages 16-17).

All the audio-visual, photographic and print-based creations developed under the project can be collectively used as an 'exhibition package' during sensitization dialogues and events with queer community members, college and university students, researchers, media and the larger public.

Note: A project logo that depicts the concept of 'remembered sexual futures' was also developed and can be seen in the mementos and some of the other communication material designed for the project.

4. Findings and learnings

Forms of advocacy: On the question of how queer organizing was undertaken through artistic and cultural tools during the period in question, the art and cultural advocacy database **(Annexure 2)** provides information about 45-50 initiatives. The database is by no means exhaustive, but it presents considerable diversity in terms of the forms of advocacy undertaken, and to a lesser extent, the geographical spread of the initiatives. The most popular forms included queer-themed publications (periodicals), literary contributions, different genres of theatre (including folk theatre like Gajan), traditional and contemporary dance performances, musical creations, films (primarily documentaries and docu-features), and television programmes. While queer-themed film screenings and festivals were popular, similar literary festivals did not make a mark in West Bengal till the 2010s. The state also saw initiatives that combined several art and cultural advocacy forms – rainbow pride walks and proscenium cultural events were prominent examples. The languages used for art and cultural advocacy through the two decades were primarily Bengali, English and Hindi.

Breaking new ground: Several firsts were achieved through the advocacies undertaken. For example, *Pravartak* (1991-92; 1993-2000)*, Abomanab* (1998 till date) and *Swakanthey – In Our Own Voice* (2004 till date) have been among the earliest or longest-lasting queer-themed periodicals in India that promoted critical dialogue on gender and sexuality, and brought progressive visibility for transgender and queer people. The literary writings of transgender activists Manobi Bandopadhyay and Tista Das in Bengali were among the first in any regional language in India. Similarly, social researchers Niloy Basu and Ajay Majumder wrote possibly the earliest accounts of queer lives in Bengali between 1997 and 2005. They wrote about issues that were then severely stigmatized and still are taboo to a great extent, like same-sex love and male sex work. In 1995-96, Kolkata-based social communication NGO Thoughtshop Foundation developed *AIDS, Sex, Knowledge – For Young People (ASK)*, an interactive column on sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual and reproductive health which was published in *The Statesman*, at that time a venerable name among daily newspapers. For its time, this 'sex education' initiative earned both praise and considerable flak, especially for being queer-inclusive.

In the world of dance, in 1996, Sapphire Creations Dance Workshop came out with *The Alien Flower*, India's first ballet on same-sex love that caught media attention and caused an upheaval in Kolkata's dance community. Less frequently heard of but equally important were the dance presentations of Komal Gandhar, the cultural wing of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), the internationally renowned community mobilization endeavour of sex workers. Komal Gandhar's performers included male and transgender sex workers. In the audio-visual sphere, many efforts were made that queered Bengali television programming – documentary *Satyer Araley (Veiled Reality)* in 2000-01, music video *Pokkhiraj (Pegasus)* in 2005, and *Out On TV* interview series in 2005-06 are prominent examples. Around the same time, queer filmmakers Debalina and Tirthankar Guha Thakurta made films like *Ki Katha Tahader Sathe* (2001) and *Piku Bhalo Aachhey* (2004), respectively. While Debalina was a trained filmmaker, Tirthankar Guha Thakurta was an enthusiast then just beginning to make home video style films. Their films contrasted in production values, but both were trendsetters in terms of generating tremendous interest among queer community members in West Bengal for viewing and making queer-themed films, especially in Bengali. It is pertinent to note that renowned filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh was yet to come out with any of his acclaimed queer-themed films as a director or actor. Debalina points out in her interview that making a film is one of the toughest art forms because it involves collaborating with a large number of people, all of whom must be sensitized and willing to work with a queer filmmaker. Thus, making queer-themed films in the 1990s-2000s was no mean feat and an advocacy success in itself.

Transformative changes: Art and cultural advocacy in West Bengal saw a fair share of huge leaps. For instance, in late 1991, Fun Club, one of the very first queer formations in Kolkata and India, struggled to organize two pink socials. Around eight years later, Counsel Club started organizing paid parties and fashion shows for fundraising in guest houses and wedding houses. Such events later became de rigour in hotels and night clubs. In 1999, Kolkata also hosted the very first rainbow pride walk in South Asia. There were only 15 participants, but when the walk was revived after a gap of four years in 2003, it continued to

grow in numbers and was organized every year till the COVID-19 pandemic forced a break in 2020-21. Over the years, the walk lost some of its inclusivity in terms of class and the participation of *hijras*, but began to attract thousands of walkers and became more inclusive in terms of the participation of queer women and persons with disabilities. At the same time, it inspired similar walks across dozens of urban centres in India (including at least half a dozen in West Bengal itself).

Queer film screenings also saw a transformative change. In 1995, Counsel Club just about managed to organize a mini film festival at a member's residence. Barring networking and human rights events organized by queer support groups and friendly organizations like the British Council Division, it was not until 2003 that queer-themed film screenings became a regular affair. In that year, the Kolkata office of SAATHII teamed up with several queer support forums to organize the first edition of 'Siddhartha Gautam Film Festival', which over the next decade grew into a multi-site event in two states (West Bengal and Odisha), across several towns and cities, and in both traditional settings like auditoriums or theatres and unorthodox ones like block and district level hospitals, government offices, NGO offices and drop-in centres, and open grounds. The festival reached a wide audience well beyond metropolitan cities with films on diverse issues around gender, sexuality, HIV and human rights, and served as a public sensitization forum. In 2007, Sappho for Equality and Pratyay Gender Trust started 'Dialogues – Calcutta International LGBTQIA+ Film and Video Festival' in collaboration with Max Mueller Bhawan. This festival is now the oldest surviving queer-themed film festival in India. These film festivals were sites for many micro sensitizations that led to much bigger developments. For example, the films screened in the earliest editions of the 'Siddhartha Gautam Film Festival' (like Aparna Sanyal's *Tedhi Lakeer*) played a crucial role in interview respondent Tirthankar Guha Thakurta coming out to his mother and in her journey of accepting him – she later signed a petition filed by parents of queer persons in the Supreme Court of India to support decriminalization.

Geographical spread and concentration: Rainbow pride walks and 'Siddhartha Gautam Film Festival' were not the only initiatives that operated beyond Kolkata. In the 2000s, queer support groups like Prantik Bongaon in North 24 Parganas and Astitva Dakshin in South 24 Parganas developed dance dramas like *Line er Chhele* (based on a poem of the same name written by a queer poet) on the concerns of *hijra, kothi* and other trans feminine communities. In Nadia district, transgender activist and artist Shyamoli Kundu recorded a collection of songs on the joys, sorrows and aspirations of the transgender communities in an audio CD along with her *chelas* and partner. However, overall, a majority of the initiatives were Kolkata-based and within Kolkata, there was a preponderance of events and venues in South Kolkata. This was also the area where several of the queer support forums were located and operational. This can be seen as indicative of a bias in access to resources and safe spaces.

Messages and narratives: The most common themes for messaging were related to self-acceptance or self-esteem, tackling isolation, collectivization and community building, and social acceptance through decriminalization of queerness in sexual behaviours, gender expressions, relationships, and family diversity. HIV prevention and later HIV care, support

and treatment took up considerable messaging space. Gradually, there was an emphasis on gaining social acceptance (social inclusion) through non-discrimination in access to education, livelihood, housing, health services, freedom of speech and movement, legal rights, and policy changes. Alarm bells were raised about whether social acceptance would be gained by giving in to the pressures of social assimilation (or invisibilization). Today, explicit court verdicts and legislation on queer rights may seem reassuring that social assimilation did not quite prevail, but the recent post-decriminalization emphasis on marriage equality instead of first rooting for stronger anti-discrimination measures seems to show an uncritical inclination towards assimilation among certain sections of the queer communities. Even the rainbow pride walks have become a site of contention between the 'good queers' who dress appropriately and focus on LGBTIQA+ issues as against the intersectional 'bad queers' who do not shy away from raising larger political concerns.

In the late 1990s, the 'emergence' of queer communities from a relative state of 'being submerged' threw up another debate in West Bengal. The formation of queer identity politics and queer support groups was critiqued within the larger gender and sexuality movements as potentially strengthening the otherization of queer people. This issue seems related to the impact of the messaging in the 1990s-2000s on the deeper social narratives. For example, the messaging would often highlight the stand taken by global agencies like the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and World Health Organization (WHO) on depathologizing homosexuality. Similarly, in many of the films made during the period, the issue of family violence faced by queer people was presented as an injustice that should stop. But was such messaging effective in changing the deep-seated social narrative that stigmatizes both queerness and mental (ill) health and otherizes queer people by conflating the two, irrespective of what the APA or WHO may have to say about homosexuality? Did it compel families to stop being violent against their queer members, whether children or adults?

For the better part of the 1990s, the traditional media played an important role in providing a degree of progressive visibility to the queer communities. Much of this was an outcome of the advocacy carried out by queer activists and queer support forums. Later, with the swift spread of newspapers with multiple editions, a big jump in the number of television channels, and the advent of social media – most of it fuelled by the neoliberal economic policies that India began pursuing – the quality of coverage suffered. The number of reports increased, but as a sign of diminishing returns, nuanced analysis was lost to inaccurate, biased, and most significantly, sensational reporting. This may have contributed to the otherization of queer people combined with the stigma around HIV, and is perhaps manifested even today in the social and institutional discrimination faced by HIV positive MSM and transgender women. According to interview respondent Tirthankar Guha Thakurta, while there may have been some strategic gains in the queer and HIV movements becoming intertwined (for instance, availability of HIV funding facilitated MSM and transgender community mobilization to an extent), the government's emphasis on treating HIV as a medical problem that mostly affected 'high risk (and already criminalized) groups' like MSM or transgender women also pathologized and otherized queer people.

While a certain degree of otherization may be a necessary price to pay for unapologetic visibility and resistance to social assimilation, the queer movements in West Bengal have also been debating the politics of identity versus the politics of positionality. The latter relates more closely to intersectionality and has the potential to generate stronger bonds between the queer and other social movements, leading to wider social change. The messaging in the 1990s and 2000s was yet to tackle this issue comprehensively. Even the national HIV response, in which queer support groups have been regular participants, in the earlier years, focused on reducing risk behaviours among MSM and transgender women without quite addressing their vulnerability to HIV exposure because of poor mental health outcomes arising from stigma, discrimination (criminalization), and violence around non-normative genders and sexualities. In essence, the earlier national HIV response failed to engage with the intersectionality between the oppressions around gender, sexuality, mental health and HIV (though later the response became more sensitive to the need for decriminalization and other structural changes).[1]

Going back to the issue of depathologization of gender and sexuality non-normativity, a deeper engagement between the queer and mental health movements began only in the 2010s, when a number of mental health professionals filed a petition in the Supreme Court to support the reading down of Section 377 by the Delhi High Court in 2009 (the apex court was hearing a batch of petitions that had challenged the decriminalization of queer people by the Delhi High Court). This led to greater dialogue between queer activists, women's groups, and mental health professional bodies in the 2010s and recent years on the need to tackle the stigma around mental health, women's sexualities, and queerness together. This is not to say that the art and cultural advocacies of the 1990s and 2000s did not present the full humanity of queer people, but they may not have been consistently effective in addressing the intersectionality involved and in changing the deeper narratives around gender and sexuality.

Representation of queer spectrum: For most of the 1990s, gay men and trans feminine communities had greater visibility in the art and cultural advocacy initiatives, and in the popular media. After the controversy around Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* broke out in 1998-99, the discourse around the issues of queer women increased substantially, also led by the formation of support groups like Sappho in 1999, the first such group in West Bengal that worked exclusively with lesbians and bisexual women. In contrast, trans masculine people and intersex persons were almost entirely absent in the advocacies during the 1990s and 2000s. Bisexual men had to deal with considerable biphobia within the queer communities and in larger society, and were less politically articulate compared to bisexual women.

Creation of safe spaces: The art and cultural advocacy initiatives were instrumental in creating safe spaces, not just physical but also emotional and creative ones where queer

[1] Though the sexual health concerns of queer women were addressed by the queer support groups in journals like *Pravartak* and through workshops, they were ignored by the NACP. This was another form of the silencing of women's sexualities, and queer women were in large part denied access to the resources that MSM and transgender women were able to access.

people could gather; felt protected; find friendship, affection, sex and romance; and connect for an exchange of experience and ideas. Interview respondent Tirthankar Guha Thakurta terms these spaces as a product of 'multiple love affairs of different kinds', including arguing and debating, creating handicrafts together, or sharing food over love stories at a variety of food joints across the city (some of these eateries no longer exist). While the film festivals are an example of physical creative spaces, ventures such as the *ASK* column in *The Statesman* created an interactive and safe space in the realm of learning and knowledge. Through the two decades, these initiatives helped the queer movements in West Bengal clearly 'emerge from the shadows' (an expression popular in media stories in the 1990s). Visibility of queer literature and writers in spaces like the 'International Kolkata Book Fair' and popular bookstores, and of queer community faces in media stories and on the streets during the rainbow pride walks stand testimony to this emergence. Interview respondent Dr. Soma Roy talks about the annual public fair organized by DMSC in Kolkata in the 1990s and 2000s. Key social justice figures participated in the fair, which included theatre, music, panel discussions and numerous stalls selling products made by sex workers from across India. This was another forum with significant transgender and queer visibility. At the same time, there were setbacks like vandalism faced by the organizers of *The Alien Flower* ballet. In 1998, their posters titled "Celebrating Sexuality" put up in the Nandan cultural complex in Kolkata were torn up and their team members were roughed up by a group of miscreants possibly affiliated to a political party.

Another example of the creation of safe spaces would be Swikriti group's success in winning over the local communities in the Dumdum area of Greater Kolkata through their frequently organized cultural activities and health camps. According to interview respondent Susanta Pramanik, over the decades, Swikriti has developed a strong social network in the area with different stakeholders. One outcome has been that finding rental accommodation is now easier for queer individuals and couples in Dumdum, compared to other parts of Kolkata.

Solidarity and overlaps with sex workers' movements: While the queer movements of West Bengal were yet to engage with the issue of intersectionality fully in the 1990s-2000s, the intense debates in those years around decriminalization versus legalization of sex work were also discussed in queer support forums. In some queer circles, male and transgender sex workers were well integrated with the milieu, and some segments of queer movements displayed solidarity around decriminalization through writings in journals, documentary films on the lives of sex workers, and participation in DMSC's annual fairs. However, the opinion was divided on the issue of legalization. In return, members of DMSC participated in several editions of the 'Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk' (this included the participation of female sex workers as well as transgender and male sex workers). Researchers Niloy Basu and Ajay Majumder wrote about male and transgender sex workers in *Purush Jokhon Jounokormi* (Deep Prakashan, 1999). However, not everyone in the queer movements was interested or comfortable with the issue of sex work. In many ways, male and transgender sex workers occupied (and possibly still do) a twilight zone in queer circles. The criminality experienced by queer sex workers was and remains far more intense than that experienced by queer people in general.

On (past) expectations being met or unmet: The community dialogue that followed the reenactment of *Koti Ki Atma* skit in November 2023 provided significant insight into the 'vexed' question of unmet expectations, though it also revealed a fair share of happier developments **(Annexure 4)**. The in-depth interviews corroborated some of the issues discussed during the community dialogue. For example, the national and sub-national (state level) HIV responses, after nearly four decades of the epidemic, have come a long way. The NACP is in its fifth phase. The HIV interventions, including those for the most vulnerable communities, though not always adequately funded, have been streamlined and better integrated with other public health and social security programmes. After a hard-fought campaign that started in 2003, the HIV and AIDS (Prevention and Control) Act became a reality in 2017, and has been playing an important role in tackling discrimination faced by people living with HIV. While privatisation has not spared the national HIV programme, the public sector continues to play the most important role in delivering HIV prevention and treatment services of reasonable quality and at minimal cost. However, what remains unchanged is the centrality of HIV in many queer lives. Stigma, discrimination and violence around HIV status, though more subtle than before, continues to haunt the lives of queer people assigned male at birth, often intersecting with the stigma around their genders and sexualities. Queer individuals in Kolkata / West Bengal still encounter queerphobic and transphobic behaviour from healthcare personnel in both private and public sector institutions. In corporate workplaces, being out about one's gender or sexual identity may have become a tad easier than being out about one's HIV status. On a positive note, though, as someone quipped during the community dialogue, Jui, the central character in *Koti Ki Atma*, would not have died because of HIV today, given the much stronger community support systems and easier access to HIV treatment today in West Bengal and India!

The queer movements themselves have changed significantly from being largely medico-sexual in pockets to more focused on civil rights in general, and this has gone hand in hand with increased visibility of queer people assigned female at birth. For many queer individuals of an earlier generation who attended the reenactment of *Koti Ki Atma*, decriminalization (irreversible reading down of Section 377) was not something they had expected in their lifetimes; neither the breakthrough and progress made on transgender rights judicial verdicts and legislation (however controversial these may have been). However, one of the issues that has not received adequate attention is that of mental health of queer people. According to some participants in the community dialogue, though HIV is credited with having brought sex and sexuality out of the closet and propelled much of the initial queer mobilizations, mental health challenges were also playing this role in the past and it is possible that even in the absence of HIV, they would have motivated the queer movements to flourish. Today, what needs to be done is to acknowledge the role that poor mental health plays in increasing the vulnerability of queer people to not just HIV infection but other health and development concerns as well, and to act on destigmatizing mental (ill) health itself.

Interview respondents Debalina and Tirthankar Guha Thakurta spoke about technological changes and the emergence of digital media – making and disseminating advocacy material has become much easier, and conducting campaigns and organizing events through social media have also become easier. This may be a dream come true for activists who were

struggling to produce and disseminate material at scale in the 1990s. However, as Susanta Pramanik and Sudeb Suvana pointed out, the number of people who attend community events today has not grown significantly (barring perhaps rainbow parties). Earlier, it was tougher to share information about the events with the community members, but today's milieu, though better and faster informed, are not necessarily more motivated to act. In the earlier years, the few people who attended the events were more appreciative because the opportunities offered by the events were rarer. Excess may have reduced people's ability to appreciate and motivations to strive.

Note: On February 24, 2024, *Koti Ki Atma* was performed at St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata as part of a gender sensitization programme, along with the screening of a draft version of the documentary film on the Remembered Sexual Futures study. Mementos developed under the project were also put on display for the audience which included students and teachers from several social sciences departments of the college. The event worked as a trial run for the 'exhibition package' mentioned earlier. St. Xavier's College itself has special significance. Pawan Dhall, the Research Consultant, began his personal coming out and articulation of gender and sexual identity while studying in the college in 1990-91, a decade before *Koti Ki Atma* was scripted.

4. Recommendations

a) Emotional concerns like loneliness, isolation and poor self-esteem, and mental health challenges around stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and death by suicide have been 'silent motivators' of the queer movements – they should have been recognized not just as one of the primary reasons for queer people to get together but also as the main outcome of stigma and discrimination, in turn leading to HIV vulnerability. Perhaps mental health as a concern lacked the 'sexiness' that HIV had (though both have links with sex, gender and sexuality). Today, there is a semblance of a medical response to HIV, whereas the mental health concerns of queer people are still poorly understood. The future focus of the queer movements should be on mental health and the pathways to poor mental health. Example: Stigma and discrimination around non-normative genders and sexualities leading to family violence, denial of education and employment, and poor access to general health and social security services, further leading on to poor mental health. The reverse or cyclical impact of poor mental health on its causative factors should also be addressed.

b) Queer histories need not be seen as just a special interest area. They can be linked to day-to-day health and development challenges as described in the previous point. In the Indian context, there is inadequate documentation and analysis of the histories of how queer people have dealt with the challenges around mental health, HIV, denial of educational and livelihood opportunities, as well as their struggles in accessing social security and larger civil rights. In-depth documentation based on qualitative research (including archival research and memory work) may help work out more effective current and future strategies to ensure the wellbeing of queer communities.

c) This pilot initiative has shown that it is possible to bring back to life queer histories which are being lost as queer support groups close down, records get destroyed, and individuals involved in community building in the 1990s-2000s pass away. For example, the late transgender activist Shyamoli Kundu's audio collection of songs recorded in 2006, a rare initiative for its time, is now likely lost, though efforts are being made to trace it and digitize its content. Numerous other such endeavours need to be traced and preserved. This will require more financial resources and queer community members trained in archival research and management. The best persons to undertake such research and preservation should be queer community members themselves.

Moreover, just as this pilot was a collaboration between several queer activists and artists, and agencies like Dumdum Swikriti Society, Varta Trust, Rainbow Room and the University of Sussex (a mix of newer and older agencies with different strengths that were brought to the table), future initiatives should also be multi-stakeholder partnerships.

d) Audiovisual and other documentation is needed to show how people negotiated their gender and sexual identities in the 1990s and earlier decades. For instance, Varta Trust runs an initiative called Qatha – Queer Kolkata Oral History Project, which documents the stories of queer individuals in and around Kolkata who were in their adolescence or early adulthood during the 1950s-1980s. Edited versions of their interviews are published in *Varta* webzine. Such initiatives need to be urgently scaled up with the engagement of trained queer community members to prevent the further loss of invaluable stories.

e) Preservation, cataloguing and dissemination of archival material should be multi-lingual to attract the interest of a wider cross-section of people, and the process should be consciously democratic. For example, the works of artists from all social classes / segments should be documented, rather than just those of individuals from the middle or upper classes. Archiving means preserving reference points for our histories, and these reference points should not be cherry picked. These references can remind us that if something was possible for a marginalized community in the past, it should also be possible now and in the future.

Note: Expressions like 'gender and sexual minorities' and 'queer' were used interchangeably in the project. However, wherever possible, as in the art and cultural advocacy database **(Annexure 2)**, terms that were contemporary to the advocacy concerned were used.

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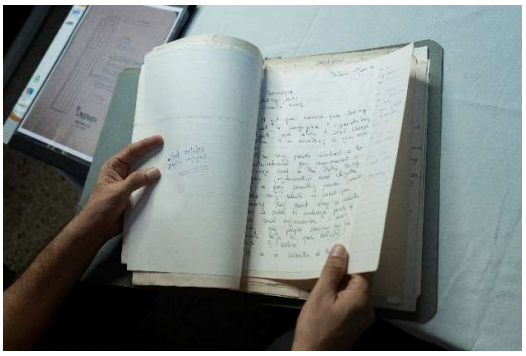
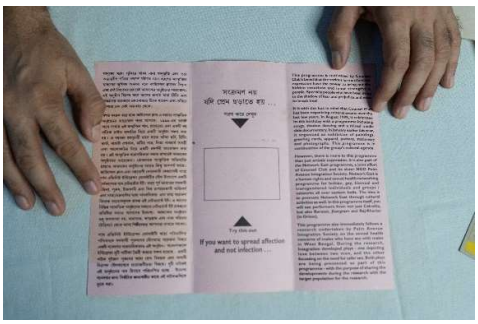
Photographs of rehearsals and reenactment of *Koti Ki Atma*

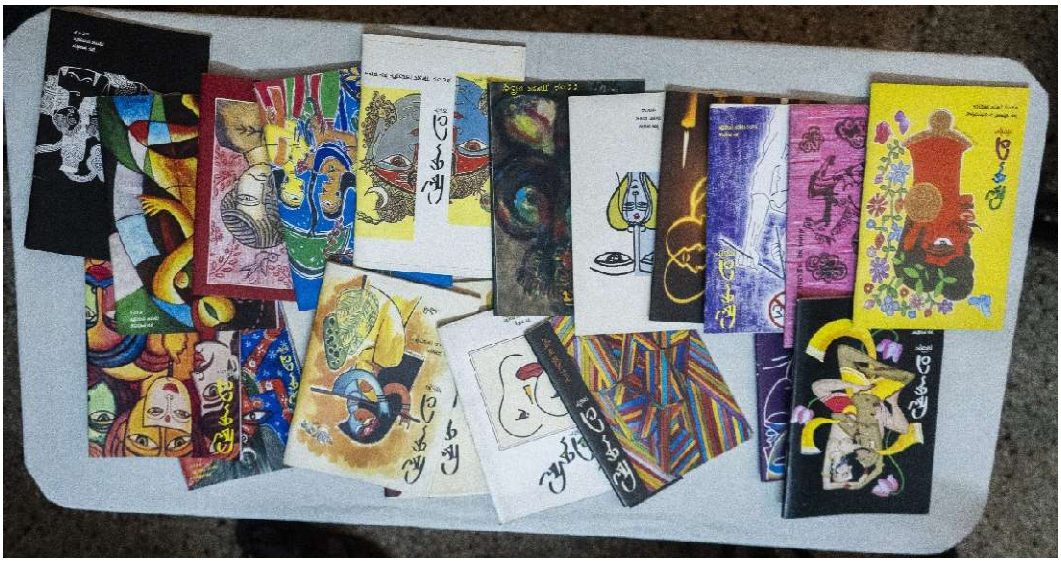
Remembered Sexual Futures Project: Study on Art and Cultural History of Gender and Sexual Minorities in West Bengal, India (1990s-2000s)
University of Sussex

April to December 2023

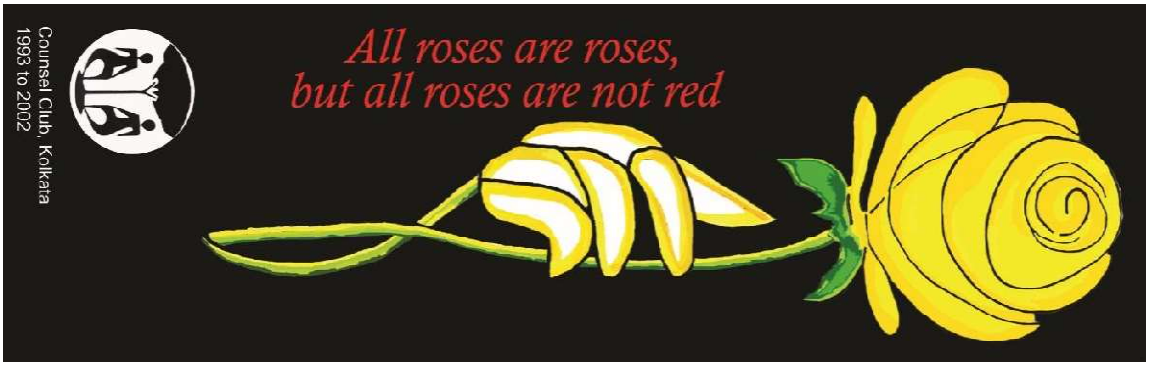
Photographs of archival material

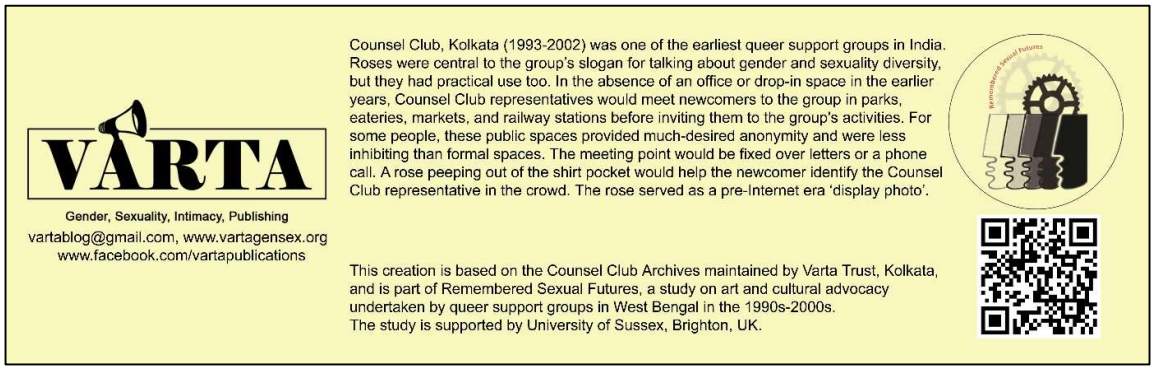


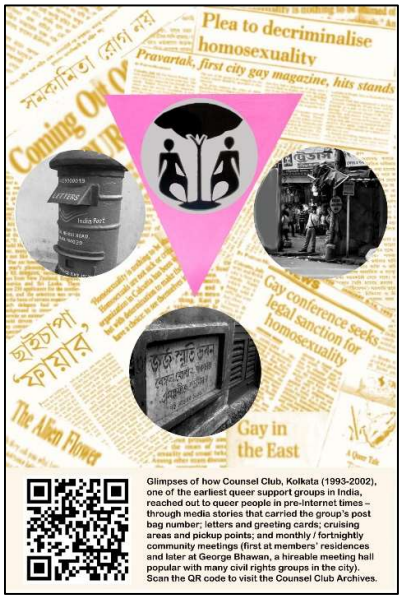




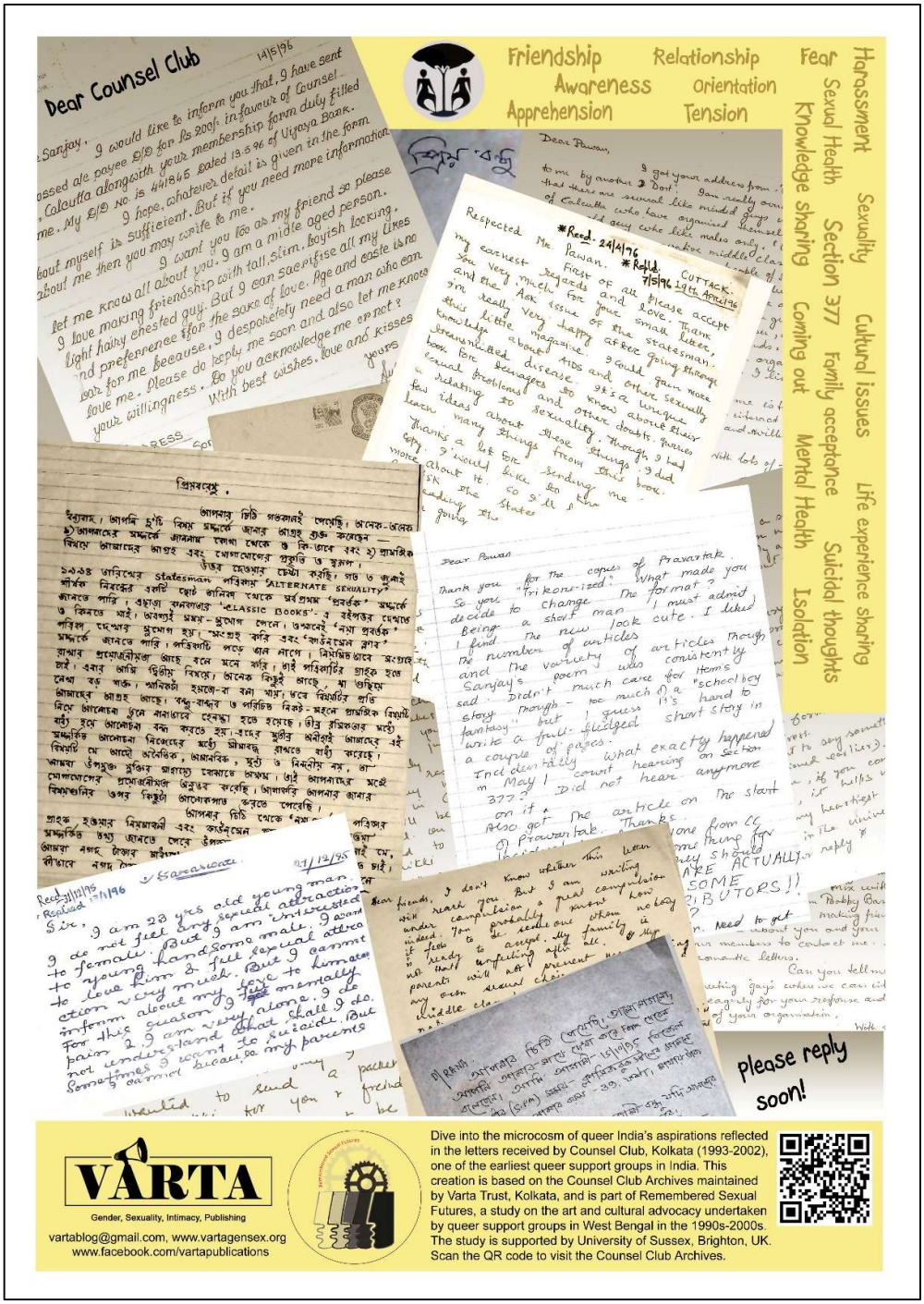
Artworks of mementos







Top of the panel: Front and reverse sides of the bookmark. Below (left, centre and first illustration on the right-hand side): Front side of two postcards and common reverse side of the postcards. Bottom right: Personalized postage stamps with Counsel Club logo issued by India Post.



Poster highlighting the emotions and concerns reflected in the letters received by Counsel Club and Integration Society through the 1990s and early 2000s.

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