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# No Man's Land



*Memoir of a Gay Activist*

*Bindumadhav Khire*

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**Author Bindumadhav Khire**

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ISBN 978-93-5419-303-3

First Edition December 2020

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Printed At: Pratima Offset, Kothrud, Pune

## **Disclaimer by Author**

My memoir is a recollection of my professional experiences from 2000 till 2020. I have changed the names of a few people and specific characteristics to protect their identity. I have also summarised description of several events and paraphrased dialogues.

I am a Gay activist from Pune, working for the betterment of the sexual minority (LGBTIQA) communities of India. The reflections in this book are also an indicator of the plight of the said communities and I write with an expectation that these communities shall get rightful access to the "Public Good", and that the attitudes and behaviours of the common man and public authorities shall change in due course of time. My sincere hope is that it would result in attaining an accommodative society.

Lastly, the views and opinions expressed in the book are my own and do not reflect the views and opinions of my organization/s, colleagues, collaborators or anyone else.

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Price: ₹ 350.00



I dedicate this book to

the only woman I have ever loved-  
my Mom

and

Hon'ble Justices of  
The Delhi High Court-  
A.P. Shah,  
S. Murlidhar

and

The Supreme Court Justices of India-  
K. S. Radhakrishnan,  
A.K. Sikri

and

The Supreme Court Justices of India-  
CJI Deepak Misra,  
A. M. Khanwilkar,  
R. F. Nariman,  
Dr D.Y. Chandrachud,  
Indu Malhotra





## PREFACE

If you are looking for an esoteric volume on Queer Theory, this book is not for you. There have been times, where, as a speaker at sessions organised in colleges, a few students have thrown some academic jargon at me, and I for the life of me couldn't understand what they were saying. Curious about those weighty words and heavy sentences, I once decided to do some reading on these topics, but whichever book I picked up on the subject, it was impossible to stay awake beyond a couple of pages, and I wisely gave up. I have no regrets.

So what you have here are my experiences. No, not from the day I was born, but from the day of my rebirth and that day was when I rang the doorbell of Ashok Jethanandani and Arvind Kumar's house (founders of *Trikone* group and *Trikone* magazine (USA)); it makes sense to start then.

I was born in the city of Pune to educated parents, educated in English medium school, had exposure to the western world, financial stability, and a superlative supportive Mom. And innumerable people in Pune (most of them Straight) supporting me in my work has been like winning the lottery. I used the winnings the best I could. I am well aware that, there could be many others who could have utilised the winnings much better than me, but sadly they didn't get a chance at that lottery. So this book is a sort of document of the utilisation of my winnings.

As a Gay activist working on LGBTIQA issues in India, I have so far authored five books, edited three books, edited cultural magazines and have written several theatre and film manuscripts, for the Marathi speaking audience. Although I love my mother tongue and conduct most of my sessions in it, the language selection for writing these books was not my first choice. It was dictated by the need of the local Marathi populace to read of their Queer world, in their language, reflecting the cultural ethos of the state.

Yet, I wrote my memoir in English primarily because I visualised a

broader readership.

My initial outline for this book was for a series of three short books, sequentially: 'Shadowland', 'Twilight' and 'Shadows at Dawn.' I realised as I started writing that some of the themes crisscrossed across the three books, which meant I would have to work on all the books parallelly. So, the end product is this book containing a trilogy.

Book I: 'Shadowland' covers the years of my return to India from the USA in April 2000, till the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC.

Book II: 'Twilight' covers the period from 2009 to 2013, when the Supreme Court struck down the Delhi High Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC.

Book III: 'Shadows At Dawn' covers the period from 2013 to May 2020, when surviving COVID-19 became the all-consuming goal.

It is practically impossible to recollect or even if I did, to write about every event I organised or attended professionally. So there are a few which I have intentionally left out, some I left out to avoid lawsuits, some because I cannot recollect them well enough to write. I have left out countless events because I felt they were more or less repetitive.

Barring the prologues, the incidents narrated in the book are all true. Still, the reality is never tidy; matters related to an event usually develop intermittently and evolve on parallel tracks. I have taken the liberty to summarise and rearrange some circumstances of these events. For example, my bouts of depression and treks are a repeated occurrence. The Hadsar fort trek which I describe in Book I took place later, becoming representative of the many small treks I did over the years. The prologues are real too, but I have re-imagined them from stories I heard as anecdotes or read in newspapers.

I hope the book turns out to be a Gay window for the reader to see the world as I saw it on the multicoloured rollercoaster ride and sincerely hope that it entertains and challenges in equal measure.

**Note:** *I avoided revealing names of persons and institutions wherever I felt it was inappropriate to do so or expose my organisations or me to*

*legal proceedings. I have also avoided naming a few of my staff members, especially in cases when they were unavailable for consent or where they have refused me permission to use their real names.*

**DECEMBER 2020**

**BINDUMADHAV KHIRE**



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## NOTE OF THANKS

I offer my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has assisted me in writing this book. Some helped me obtain specific information (e.g. dates, locations, etc.) Some pointed out factual mistakes (e.g. names, name spellings, etc.) Some suggested edits so that I present facts accurately, primarily where the matter dealt with medical phrases and terms.

I would like to thank the following people for their encouragement, support and inputs: Arvind Kumar & Ashok Jethanandani (founders of *Trikone*), Ashok Row Kavi (Amma), Vivek Raj Anand (CEO, *The Humsafar Trust*), Dr Darshana Vyas (former Director Pathfinder International, Pune), former Commissioner of Police, Pune Dr Meeran Chadha Borwankar, former Assistant Commissioner of Police Bhanupratap Barge, Dr Kanchan Pawar (*Pathfinder International*, Pune), Dr Vijay Thakur, Dr Sunil Tolat, Dr Kaustubh Joag, Dr Bhooshan Shukla, Dr Arvind Panchanadikar, Dr. Jyoti Shetty (HOD Psychiatry, Bharati Hospital, Pune), Dr Manisha Gupte (Founder of *MASUM-Mahila Sarvangin Utkarsh Mandal*), Dr Hemant Apte, Dr Geetali V. M., Taysir Moonim (Diversity and Inclusion lead KEM Hospital, Pune), Tinesh Chopade (Director *Bindu Queer Rights Foundation* and Advocacy Officer at *The Humsafar Trust*), Adv. Arvind Narrain, Adv. Siddharth Narrain, Adv. Gandha Sahu, Adv. Santosh Lonkar, Radheshyam Jadhav (journalist), Anosh Malekar (journalist). And just as importantly Chandrashekhar Begampure for cover design and book layout, Camil Parkhe (journalist, writer and blogger) for proof reading the book, Saurabh Bondre for verifying the Marathi to English translation of certain words and sentences, Shobhna S. Kumar (*QueerInk Publishers*) for her guidance in editing the book and Adv. Ashish Sonawane for his legal guidance.

**Bindumadhav Khire**







## ABBREVIATIONS / DEFINITIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BAMS	Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery
BHMS	Bachelor of Homeopathic Medicine and Surgery
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CP	Commissioner of Police
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EGE	External Genital Examination
FSW	Female Sex Worker
GB	Gay Bombay
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HOD	Head of Department
Hot-Spot	An area which has a cluster of cruising sites
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
ICTC	Integrated Counselling and Testing Centre (for HIV)
IPC	Indian Penal Code
JMFC	Judicial Magistrate First Class
LGBTIQA	L-Lesbian, G-Gay, B-Bisexual, T- Transgender, I-Intersex, Q-Queer, A-Asexual
MDACS	Maharashtra District AIDS Control Society
MSACS	Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society
MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
NGO	Non-Government Organisation (Trust or Society)
ORW	Out Reach Worker- Person who supervises up to four Peers at a Hot-Spot
PCMC	Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation
PE/Peer	Peer Educator- Person who establishes contact with MSM and TGs at sites, distribute condoms, gives safe-sex and related information and arranges to get them tested for HIV and STIs
PLHIV	People/Person living with HIV
PMC	Pune Municipal Corporation

Site	A location/place which sees large scale sexual interactions/transactions
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TCA	Trichloroacetic acid
TG	Transgender
UD	Urethral Discharge
VDRL	Venereal Diseases Research Laboratory test



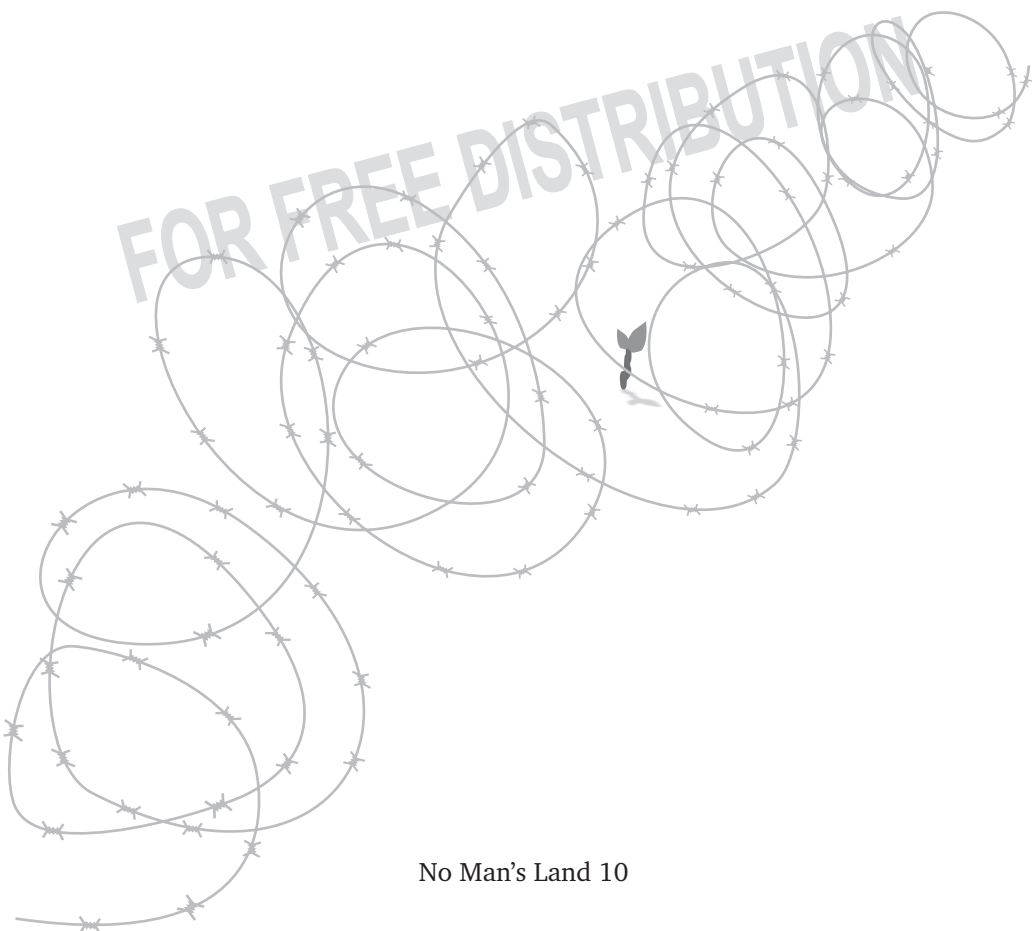
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# BOOK I

## SHADOWLAND

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## PROLOGUE

*He was handsome, tall and lanky with just a hint of Strabismus. One of the sharpest minds in the class and the heart and soul of a party. An outstanding mimic and comic, he could entertain his friends for hours. And at his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party, he outclassed himself by booking an extravagant party at the Rendezvous Resort.*

*After college, his friends had pooled some money and had bought him a set of books of his favourite authors, Jaywant Dalvi and Pu.La. Deshpande. Since there was a distinct possibility that he had already read all the books by these authors, his friends indirectly introduced the topic of books two weeks prior and subtly elicited the names of books he had yet to get his hands on.*

*Friends started trickling in after 7 pm. He, adorned in a brand new kurta and a shocking pink dupatta, stood at the entrance of the party hall to receive them. Many of them surprised at the formal reception commented, “Arre yaar, why are you being so formal?” as they wished him many happy returns; then the drinkers headed to the bar and the rest to the karaoke.*

*At 8.00 pm surrounded by about 50 of his friends and a few freeloaders, he started his stand-up comedy. His eyes twinkling, chipped upper incisor underlining his goofy smile, he enthralled the audience, lampooning politicians, education policies and his favourite- Indian culture. By 8.45 pm, he was exhausted and refreshed himself with a soft drink.*

*At 9.00 pm, he cut a lovely Chocolate cake studded with cherries while his friends sang a rousing chorus of happy birthdays. He shrieked with joy when they gave him birthday bumps (Common in countries the UK, Ireland, India, it involves friends and family of the person whose birthday it is taking him or her by the arms and legs and bumping him/her up into the air and down onto the floor.) On being presented the gift of books, tears had suddenly welled up in his eyes, and that was the only noticeable solemn moment of the event. Realising the uncomfortable quiet that had descended on the gathering he*

*instantly launched into his mimicry of college professors and friends bringing the house down again.*

*At 10.30 pm, the waiters were impatient to serve dinner. Twice the maître d' had discretely told him that dinner was ready; nodding wisely, he had simply ignored him.*

*At 11.00 pm, finally, dinner was served. The cuisine of Punjabi dishes-veg and non-veg with a desert of Gajar Halwa (a sweet dish made of carrots) was his favourite. Himself a teetotaller, the food expenses were taken care of by him, the drinks had to be paid by the invitees, which did give rise to a few grumpy comments but all in all, everyone had a gala time.*

*And finally at 00.45 am there were the final hugs as they said goodbyes to each other. It was clear that most of them were going to be absent from the first class today.*

*At 1.00 am he settled his bill, tipped the waiters lavishly and left the hotel for the room he had rented a month ago. Before then, he had stayed at the college hostel. But then, to the bewilderment of others, he had suddenly announced that he was shifting to a private room of his own.*

*At 9.20 pm, the same day, his classmates- Nakul and Sheila receiving no response to their calls and messages came to his room. With increasing panic, they rang the bell repeatedly, frantically banged the door, hollered his name. Finally, Nakul climbed a stool borrowed from the neighbour and with a stone broke the opaque glass on the hatch above the door. The body was hanging from the ceiling fan, the noose fashioned from the dupatta.*

*His parents would forever wonder, in ignorance: Why oh why? Despite their love and affection, their riches and presents, their son planned his end at the threshold of youth. They would remain ignorant forever; unaware that they too had played a part in this deed. His friends would for years narrate this story wide-eyed with horror, wondering what made him end it all, and would come up with all the wrong answers, failing to note that they too, had their share of the blame.*

*There had been no note; he didn't want to leave a message. What would he write? That no one should be held responsible for his death?- that would be a lie. Or should he simply state that everyone and everything- parents, friends, neighbours, relatives, strangers, culture, religion, doctors, police, journalists, sadhus, medical science, laws were responsible for his death? That would be the truth, but would they understand?*

*No, the whole objective of ending his young life was to take the shame of who he was to his grave. Lest they discover the awful truth that he deeply loved men. The truth would hurt his parents, humiliate them, alienate them and everyone else from him. He would, then, be all alone in this world, exposed, hated, reviled, forever on the run from the ridicule and laughter and the pain that would follow him to his grave.*

*And so, for centuries, death has been getting a good haul, strolling through Shadowland, going door to door peeking into souls and bedrooms looking for a chink in the armour to strike.*





## A QUANTUM OF SOLACE

*"Lagna nai zhala? Somjai la sakda ghala... jagrut devasthan ahe"*  
(You're still single? Pray to goddess Somjai, she will fulfil your wish.)  
Mom and I were at Shrivardhan, the second time and leaving the lodge in the evening for the seashore. The hotel manager, a kindly old man, had intercepted us and was earnestly advising us.

That was always the problem. An old mother and an unmarried son in his thirties vacationing in Konkan had to bear the brunt of unsolicited spiritual advice on marriage from the god-fearing populace. We were just back after visiting a temple, I forget the name, where we had stumbled upon a *devrushi* (a religious-spiritual guide) tapping a stone in a stone basin, uttering *mantras*, with the worried believers huddled around him as he wished the devils away. Such sightings were common.

On the previous trip, we had encountered an old man who did *hom-havans* (religious rituals) who guaranteed that I would get married within the year if we invited him to my house for performing the rituals. The naïve well-wishers didn't know that it was not the marriage but the night that was a nightmare.

When not on the beaches, Mom and I would go on long walks savouring the fresh smell of trees, the relaxed life in the villages, stopping by small stalls to drink *panha* (raw mango juice) or coconut water. If we were fortunate, we would get to hear *abhangs* (devotional songs) sung during festivals at temples or blaring from wedding pandals. We would then sit nearby or stand under the shade of a tree, savouring the distinct Konkani intonation and rhythm that I loved.

I especially remember *Hanuman Jayanti* at Malvan or Vengurla, where in the evening we had gone to a small Hanuman temple with a tiny Brahmandev temple at the back. The neighbourhood was there in full force, men and women well dressed for the occasion. We stood in the line, worshipped the Gods, and receiving a treat of the delicious *Shira* (sweet) as *prasad* we sat nearby hearing a series of lovely



*abhangs* in a Konkani intonation the likes of which I had never heard in Pune. We sat listening, content, wanting to stay there forever, at peace with ourselves and the world. Back in Pune, I asked some of my Gay friends who hailed from Konkani whether they could procure me recordings of such songs; philistines that they were, they didn't know what I was talking.

In the evenings, we had a ritual of visiting a nearby temple; experiencing the serenity, solitude and peace, never to be found in a temple in a city like Pune. Over time, sadly, some temples installed cassette players and speakers; the *mantras* blared on repeatedly, sullyng the stillness and solemnity of the sanctum sanctorum. I need to note that in addition to the solitude, it also helped in no small measure that, unlike most of Maharashtra, the temples in the small towns and villages on seashore Konkani were clean and, there were no beggars, pickpockets or footwear thieves.

While I loved the beauty of seaside Konkani, I was well aware that the entire Konkani region was markedly homophobic and transphobic. Although I did come across a few who could or could not have been from the Queer community, I did not, on a single occasion, come across a Hijra.

The Somjai goddess temple at Shrivardhan is one of my favourite spots. Every day we stayed at Shrivardhan, we would make it a point to visit the temple in the evening. Located in the centre of the small town, it had a big courtyard, its borders lined with cement benches. In the evening, especially during load-shedding (power cut), a *mashal* (flame torch) would reveal the broad steps leading into the courtyard of the temple.

As the shadows lengthened, the faithful from the neighbourhood came to pay obeisance. The bell rang intermittently; the children played within the courtyard. My Mom and I sat on the bench, taking it all in. During load-shedding hours (and in summer there were a lot of those), all we could see were shadows; the *mashal* at the steps, the light at the door of the inner sanctum and a dozen battery-operated torches brought by the faithful, were the only lights around. Holding on for as long as possible against the bloodthirsty mosquitoes, we

would finally, reluctantly get up to leave; the mosquito repellent we used to apply was absolutely ineffective against their monstrous invasion.

During both visits, as we contentedly sat there every day in the evening, I saw two women, visiting the temple, together. I knew that I had no 'Gaydar'; I don't believe there is any such thing anyway, and yet... the signs were evident for all to see, except of course the layperson.

Should I introduce myself to them? What would I say? That a common thread binds us; that they shouldn't feel alone; and what if they were not Queer? Or, even if they were members of the LGBT community, how would they react to be identified as such?

Each evening I saw them, I sought out signs of their sexuality. And, had I noticed anything, what could I have done? I wanted to desperately reach out, say a kind word, well aware of what life must be like for community members, and that too, women in particular, in a small conservative town. But wisely, I desisted. I had learnt from my experiences of being a victim of stereotypes. And the previous experience of coming across a probably Queer person at a beach, on the last trip to Konkan, was still fresh in my mind.

On that trip, Mom and I were sitting on the beach and, nearby a *tapriwala* (a person selling their wares from a shack or handcart) was selling *bhajis* (snacks) and wafers. A half a dozen dogs surrounded us, sniffing around, looking for food. I walked over to the *tapriwala* to buy *bhajis* for us and wafers for the dogs.

The *tapriwala* was a feminine man; I hadn't needed the fabled 'Gaydar' to guess that he was Queer. I made the mistake of subtly getting introduced to him, assuming that he would be happy on meeting a kindred soul (no, I was not making a pass, he was not my type.) But my approach had evoked a reaction that was stupefying. I saw panic, fear and alarm spring in his eyes. When I headed back to Mom with the snacks, handed the *bhajis* to her and turned around; I saw he had quickly shut shop and was rapidly walking, almost running away in the distance.

What had he experienced in the past that had him so petrified? Was he terrified of being recognised for who he was? Or was he alarmed to be mistaken for someone he was not? Ashamed of myself, I made it a point never to repeat this assumption.

And so for ten to fifteen years, Mom and I traversed seashore village after seashore village, beach after beach from Alibaug to northern Goa (the only interior part of Konkan we visited was Chiplun.) With Mom having eventually accepted my sexuality, these short three to four-day trips once every six months helped strengthen our bond. We took care to schedule all our vacations in the offseason. We planned our trips to avoid the *Ganpati*, *Holi*, and *Diwali* festivals, *Christmas*-New Year and the months of school vacation. We did not make any State Transport (ST) bus reservations, nor was any hotel room booked. On quite a few occasions, we didn't know where we were going other than that we were going to Konkan. We would land at Swargate ST station early in the morning and catch whichever bus we could get, going to Konkan to a destination we hadn't seen; with a book or two on Konkan our good, reliable guides.

In the evening I would call my Dad and inform him of the place we were staying the night. I had invited him a couple of times, but he always refused. And slowly as he became the loner in the family, obsessing over his diabetes and sundry ailments, Mom and I bonded, grateful for each other's love, company and support.

Staring at the old, kind-hearted hotel manager, I wondered whether I should give the straight, bent answer. I decided against it. I didn't want my vacation spent in trying to explain what being Gay meant, his typical 'unnatural' response and worse- the well-intentioned advice. As a Gay man, I had faced this innumerable times, and every time I met a new person, the dilemma of 'In or Out' played in my mind. Today I was in no mood for the same old, same old. Giving noncommittal smiles, Mom and I hastened past the reception desk and towards the seashore.

The seashore was more or less deserted. We spent a while standing in the cold waters, the sand slowly, mischievously tickling and sliding

from under our feet as the waves receded.

After some time, I stepped back and sat down where we had taken off our footwear. Mom stood at the edge of the sea as the waves lapped around her feet, lost in a different world. She loved the ocean and watching her being one with it made me suddenly thank God. If he/she/they or whoever existed as God, I was eternally grateful for this experience; this one and innumerable others on the road less travelled from India to the USA to India to the seashore, albeit having encountered a few painful jolts along the way.



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## TRIKONE

"I need more sexy photos for the magazine" I was adamant. In 1998, I was the Associate Publisher of *Trikone* (a quarterly magazine for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual South Asians published in the Silicon Valley, California, USA.) Those who consider me a *sanskari fag* (traditional, conservative, stick-in-the-mud fag) will not believe that I could have said something like that. But I had.

It was early 1998— I was encouraged to take up the volunteer work of Associate Publisher, by some members of the *Trikone* coterie- namely founders Arvind Kumar, Ashok Jethanandani and friends Shrinand, Girish. I desired this work but accepted with hesitation as I had no confidence that I would be able to handle the job of doing the layout of the magazine, sending it for printing, getting the copies to Ashok-Arvind's house. Ashok had been doing this work for the longest time, but he had his hands full running his other magazine *India Currents* and wanted others to chip in.

Despite accepting the post, I had another cause of worry. I was not out and was petrified of having my name printed in an LGB magazine. I finally settled for 'Bindu Khire', fervently hoping that readers would naturally make the mistake of assuming that the Associate Publisher was female (my full name 'Bindumadhav' shortened by everyone to 'Bindu'- conventionally, a female name.) Well, they would have been partly right.

Despite my misgivings, it worked out well. I made mistakes, but Ashok was an outstanding teacher and patiently taught me the layout work. By then, *Trikone* had become my family, and from my side, I tried to work hard as I did not want to let down Ashok-Arvind and *Trikone*. Later on, in 1999, I went on to become Publisher, alas not for long; I soon took the call to return to India for good.

My continued insistence of sexy photos was at the magazine meeting at Shrinand's apartment in the Bay Area (California). I am almost sure, Sandip Roy then editor of *Trikone*, was present at the meeting, but when I asked him while writing this piece, he couldn't remember. I do

not remember whether my other friends- Ranjit, Srinivas and Sambhu were present.

Although the *Trikone* group was for South Asians, almost all of us were from India. I remember meeting only two Pakistanis and no one else from other South Asian countries at *Trikone* magazine meetings. That was probably because Ashok and Arvind were from India and hosted the *Trikone* monthly meetings at their home in San Jose; all the action was in San Francisco about fifty miles away.

One of the Pakistani men was doing his PhD. And I had no information about the other one. The only thing I remember about the second person was the shock of seeing him in a sari, attempting a dance of sorts at a *Trikone* anniversary party, in a bar in San Francisco, his inexperienced body at sea trying to balance his considerable bulk on high heel stilettos.

I remember that evening well for a different reason- the bartender-gym bulked muscles, 6 ft tall, innocent-looking face, shoulder-length black hair. One look at him had set my brains and loins on fire. And sissy that I was, all I wanted to do was to tell him that he was sooo beautiful, but I simply didn't have the confidence. He had fallen for Shrinand and had asked him whether he was interested. I was stunned when Shrinand declined. Was Shrinand playing hard to get? As queens are wont to do? Oh! I was jealous!

Still, that gave me one crucial information that the bartender was Gay and so finally mustering courage, I walked up to him, my legs shaking, chest hurting, mouth dry. I leaned over the bar counter. Was I going to order a drink? The hunk couldn't figure out. No. Puzzled, he leaned forward and I, blushing like a school girl bumping suddenly into her school crush, exclaimed, "You are very beautiful".

Judging by the look on his face, I could see that, that was the most unexpected and un-horny thing anyone had ever said to him. For a fraction of a second, his face bore a puzzled look, and then a big innocent smile spread his face. "Thank you". I knew if I stood there one more second, I would start crying. I quickly turned and hurried away. Yes! For the first time in my life, I dared tell a handsome young

man, to his face, that he was beautiful, though when I regaled my adventure to others, they were less than impressed.

Anyways, back to the meeting. The issue of discussion at the editorial meeting was falling sales of the *Trikone* magazine. We had reached a stage where sales were plummeting and although we didn't know it then, soon after, a well-known LGBT bookstore on San Francisco's famous Castro Street, where we stocked *Trikone* for sale, would communicate that they would not be able to do so anymore.

“When it comes to commerce it's the same everywhere”, Shrinand was serene; I livid. “How dare they be so commercial? How could a shop on Castro Street do this to an LGB group?” My stand was naïve; Shrinand's perception was bang on target on the commercial aspect. I would later remember this comment, time and again in the coming two decades in India, when I would see quite a few LGBT community members and 'activists' caring for nothing but money, the movement just a commercial means to achieve this glittering end.

There we were arguing about how to improve the *Trikone* magazine sales. I bitched that the *Trikone* covers were very dull, which meant un-sexy. I was, at that time, heavily influenced by the glossy Gay magazines which flooded the market. Gay men bought them for the hot pictures; I doubt whether anybody bothered to check the content, let alone read it. I would avidly go shopping on Castro Street and buy them. The glossy magazines were my first exposure to Gay 'literature'; their role strictly limited to dutifully playing their part as a pleasure aid at night.

It would be a bit later that, on the recommendation of Arvind, the novel *City and the Pillar* by Gore Vidal would become the first novel I would read on homosexuality. Soon after that, the novel *Faggots* by Larry Kramer would forever change my life and the way I looked at things.

On my return to India, after I started *Samapathik* Trust, I made an effort to elicit Larry's email address. It wasn't easy. In the end, I was lucky to meet an American Gay tourist visiting Pune who knew someone who knew someone who knew Larry. A couple of weeks

later, surprise, surprise, lo and behold, he sent me Larry's email address; with the strict warning that I was not to share it with anyone, as Larry received a lot of hate-email. It was hardly surprising and hence the precaution. Of course, I didn't share Larry's email address with anyone.

I wrote Larry an email telling him that I loved his novel *Faggots* and considered it to be one of the best novels ever written on homosexuality. I also informed him that I had established *Samapathik* Trust. I eagerly waited for a reply and was not disappointed. Larry replied that he was particularly pleased that after so many years, *Faggots* was still appreciated. I wish I had the email so I could reprint it here... but sadly till the time of going to press I have hunted for the email in vain.

But I digress. And so at the end of the meeting, it was decided that, 'OK! Do you want skin? You will get skin.' And skin we got— Devesh's skin.

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## REBIRTH

During those days Devesh was the hottest looking guy in the *Trikone* group. I used to ogle him shamelessly, but he had high standards, or if not high, whatever standard he had, I for sure didn't match up. Sandip must have talked to Devesh and then came the next issue of *Trikone*. That was the hottest cover *Trikone* ever had until my return to India.

The cover had a picture of Devesh and a Malaysian-Chinese guy. Devesh bare-chested, the other guy wearing a gown of sorts... and inside an entire page of Devesh and the guy their *heinie* bare as newborn babes. I don't remember whether the sales rose after this edition of *Trikone* hit the stands, but I do remember that I was bowled over! Sandip had shut me up for good!

Devesh was the first Gay man I ever connected with, and I first came out to him. At that time, I was going through a painful divorce (yes, I admit, to my eternal shame, that I was briefly married to a woman) and terrified of coming out. I had procrastinated on seeking help from an LGB group for a long time. Finally, when no one was looking, I had got the nerve to browse the internet seeking Gay resources. I was in my cubicle at Informix Corporation (Menlo Park, California), where I was working as an IT professional, having come to the USA on an H1B visa (work permit) in April 1996.

Coming across the *Trikone* website and noting down the contact number, I had, after much dilly-dallying mustered the courage to dial it. It was Devesh who had picked up the phone. My shoulders clenched, I had told him *sotto voce* that I was Gay and currently undergoing a divorce. He told me to attend the next meeting at Ashok-Arvind's house and provided me with the date, time and address. The entire call didn't last for more than a couple of minutes. I had so much to say and... he ended the call! Oh well! My hunt for a shoulder to cry on would have to wait! And so, I spent the next week or so alternately excited and dreading the dawn of that fateful day, my pusillanimous mind playing dirty games with me. It ruminated on the petrifying, now sounding ridiculous, scenes of my going to the place

and getting raped by a dozen men. If that happened, what could I do? Finally, the day dawned and after work, butterflies in my stomach, I drove to San Jose looking for 'The' place.

Outside 'The' place, I did not see a soul; the street deserted. I drove past it, turned around and parked my car. Picking up the parcel laying on the adjacent seat that I had got for Potluck dinner, I got out of the car, and I walked to the door, my legs jelly. My heart thudding, mouth dry, I paused at the door. Finally, I decided to go for it, pressed the buzzer and with that I was reborn, Arvind the first one to see this new-born babe.



(From left) Ashok Jethanandani and Arvind Kumar  
Founders of *Trikone*.





## MY FIRST PRIDE MARCH

Walking the first San Francisco Pride March (I think this was 1998), with the *Trikone* banner, had been an out-of-this-world experience for me. I had taken the early morning Caltrain (Local train in Indian parlance) to San Francisco and getting down at the final station, Fourth Street, walked up to Market Street early in the morning to the place we were to meet. I had never imagined that Market Street would be so crowded, people lined on both sides of the street. It took me a while to find the *Trikone* team of Ashok, Arvind, Sandip, Girish and Shrinand who was wearing a Nehru shirt. (There were others too, but I don't remember their names or faces.)

My attention was distracted by too many people and things. Significantly, two teams in the Pride March were total eye-candy and had me hot and bothered. The first group of men were from the San Francisco Fire Department; were they Gay? Or was the fire brigade at the Pride March just a precaution? I remember one over six feet tall with arms like *The Hulk*. I tried to imagine myself being intimate with him, but simply couldn't, he was just too huge.

The other team was from the San Francisco Police Department. There were about half a dozen policemen and policewomen in uniform and one or two patrol cars. I was instantly captivated by two Policemen; their bright blue eyes, blond hair and starched dark blue uniforms were so alluring. Initially, I was not sure whether they were allies or from the community. One of *Trikone* team members said they were Gay. Stunned, I kept staring at them, wishing that I had the courage to walk up and congratulate the team for their bravery (I don't remember seeing any Black Gay policemen though.) I couldn't imagine openly Gay Indian police personnel in uniform walking in a Pride March in India.

The Pride March started with 'Dykes On Bikes', which I missed as we were busy trying to locate our position in the Pride March lineup. But in the melee, to my amazement, I saw Gay guys, all waxed, hunky and wearing nothing but black jockstraps, waving and walking along with

their float. I kept on hungrily staring at them, till they were out of sight. The following float had Transgenders dressed as nurses waving and blowing kisses.

We didn't have a float; *Trikone* team had decided that we would stand in a line holding the *Trikone* banner in front of us, which was, I guess around 8 to 10 feet wide and walk together. I don't remember giving any slogans, the roar of the crowd was so overwhelming that no one would have heard them anyway.

As we started the walk, none of us wearing masks, the crowd cheered us on and I in seventh heaven finally understood the meaning of the word PRIDE. For all those, Straight or Gay, who keep on questioning why do Gays have 'Pride Marches' ₹ all I can say is- the feeling of exhilaration when walking in a Pride March, must be experienced. Words cannot describe what any Gay person who has hated himself all his life, who has lived a double life ingratiating himself to the Straight world, twisted himself in grotesque shapes to fit into an alien framework, feels, as he walks, head held high. At peace with himself, for that moment.

I was in a daze for the rest of the day. The only moment of irritation was when I encountered reality in the milieu, in the form of a few men walking by holding placards informing us that we were sinners. I experienced this nuisance again at the subsequent San Francisco Pride March and the San Jose Pride March I attended.

At the San Jose Pride March there was an additional irritant. Seeing my brown skin, a pastor or priest of some Church approached me. He spent quite some time, unsuccessfully enticing me, to attend his Church and convert as it was tolerant and inclusive of LGBT (though not tolerant of my Hindu religion.) I was too interested in indulging in the festivities to respond that Hinduism and its off-shoot Indian religions were a million times more tolerant of LGBT than the mid-eastern proselytising faiths of Christianity and, in its treatment of Gay and Transgenders, the most brutal of all religions- Islam.

The first experience of walking in the Pride March at San Francisco was unforgettable, and when I subsequently went back to my office,

next week, I was still in a daze. Everybody else, oblivious to where I had been, went about their work as usual, but I couldn't focus on my work. I kept fidgeting, wanting to stand up in my cubicle and scream "I AM GAY". But no. I did no such thing and slowly quietened down. I went back to being Straight, a stranger in a strange land. Worse, scared that my Mom, who was coming to the USA for a month or so, would stumble on the photographs of Pride March, I tore them to bits and consigned them to the dustbin. It hurts as I write this.

  
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## FINDING MY FEET IN INDIA

My first visit to The *Humsafar* Trust (HST), sometime in April or May 2000, was my first exposure to the Mumbai Gay world. The HST office was then housed, on Nehru Road, Vakola, in an old, dilapidated building which had at one time functioned as a Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) office that stored birth and death records. Inside, on the ground floor, chest-high white tiles lined the walls, the upper walls coloured a gaudy yellow, peeling in places and damp at the corners. Other than a few HIV/AIDS, STI related posters/calendars, there was nothing else on the ground floor. Later on, posters of film stars like Akshay Kumar would adorn the passage. At the far end, next to the staircase, on the right was a damp urinal. The floor above, housed, on one side, an orphanage and on the other side, HST in a five-room office.

It was around mid-1999 that I had taken a call to return to India for good. Many ask me why I made that decision, and there is no easy answer to that question. I had to take care of my parents. They would never want to leave India and settle in the USA for good; I had an unmarried sister, I was not out and was itching (and dreading) to be out so that I could continue to work for the community in Pune, on the lines of *Trikone*. And, frankly, although I loved the USA with its vibrant Gay rights movement and would owe my activism to it, somehow I wasn't able to blend in there. Had I found a boyfriend, perhaps things would have been different, though I doubt.

My friends at *Trikone* were unhappy with my decision to return to India. But, one of my Straight acquaintances, whose son settled in the USA, was perversely ecstatic at my leaving. She made a point of telling me, on at least three different occasions that, "*Kahi loka Ameriket yashasvi hot nahit*" (Some people don't succeed in the USA.) I instructed Informix Corporation to cancel my Green Card application they had initiated. Finally bidding adieu to *Trikone* and the USA, I arrived in India on April 2, 2000, for good.

During the next two years, I saw the pathetic desperation of many

LGBT community members in India clamouring to participate in conferences abroad; their preferred destinations being USA, Canada, Europe, Australia; not many takers for conferences in poor Asian countries. I realised that I too, might get tempted by such trips and start confusing my attendances at international conferences with activism. And so after a week's vacation in August 2002 (just before my Trust registration came through) with my parents in Sri Lanka, I vowed never to step out of India again; I decided to burn my bridges by, eventually allowing my passport to expire.

So here I was, back in India. I had got myself transferred to the Mumbai (old name of the city- Bombay) branch of Informix Corporation (in Santacruz Electronic Export Processing Zone (SEEPZ), Andheri (East)), and gone searching for HST office one Friday or Saturday.

It was late afternoon, the place was quiet, and as I stepped in, I was invited into the first room on the right by a Hijra sitting on a cot. Hesitantly I stepped in and sat down on the cot keeping some distance from her. Being cloistered with a Hijra in a private space was a first-time experience for me. "Is this your first time here?" she asked, her voice low, soft. I replied in the affirmative.

Even though I had volunteered in *Trikone* for two years or so, I hadn't ever met or interacted with Transwomen in the USA. *Trikone*, as far as I remember, was mostly Gay men and a few Lesbians. A few of my experiences with Hijras in India had been unpleasant and so, afraid of them, I had taken efforts to avoid them, crossing the street at the sight of them collectively accosting strangers, arm-twisting them to part with cash.

I stared at the walls of the gloomy room, painted (I think) a gaudy yellow. These walls too, like the ground floor had HIV/AIDS, STI calendars issued by the regional AIDS Control Society, who had royally botched up the job. One showed how HIV was not transmitted and in doing so, it depicted a picture liable to be misread, of two people shaking hands with a red cross across it. Another partly torn calendar depicted a sketch of an HIV negative pregnant woman in a traditional nine-yard sari and *bindi* (a red dot on the forehead) and in contrast,

showed an illustration of an HIV positive modern woman in nightgown without a *bindi*. One wall had a calendar with photos of genitalia showing penile and vaginal discharge, warts and wounds due to various STIs. Not a single image depicted STIs in the anal region.

A chart had some notations about MSMs. I was sitting too far off to read the small print. In the context of HIV/AIDS and STIs, the term MSM epidemiologically made sense. But, while we would all continue to work on the common objective of reducing HIV transmission, the acronym MSM was about same sex intercourse and not about sexual identity. You could say, that sexual identity not NACO's concern, but for a Gay activist, it definitely was and I had a tough time making space for my identity as a Gay man when MSM was used to represent 'all such people.' It made me one of the faceless persons who had uninterrupted *masti* (fun)- an accusation regularly levelled against people of my ilk. I think the seeds of my insistence to be labled with my sexual identity- 'flaunting my Gay tag' lie somewhere here (opposed by some new generation community members who insist that I should be 'tagless'. Refer Book III- Shadows At Dawn. Chapter: Hir! Hur!.)

"Have some water" the Hijra said and getting up, she went to the earthen pot and got me some cold water. As I thanked her, for the first time, I looked at her. Adorned in a black Punjabi dress (or was it a black sari— my memory plays tricks in these minor matters), she was in her twenties, dusky. "My name is Vasanthi".

For some reason, from that point on, I suddenly felt comfortable with her. The awkwardness was gone, and I felt at home. Why did this happen— And that too, all of a sudden— Was it her simple kindness of giving me a glass of water— Was it that she sensed my awkwardness and with this casual gesture addressed it knowingly— Was it that I was subconsciously seeking a way of breaking that silence— And having found the opportunity, I grabbed it with both hands— I can't say. But what I can say is that afternoon as we talked and talked, and as I listened to her, my fear of Hijras, Transgenders evaporated, and I felt at home. I remember nothing else of that meeting except one other



thing- my saying desolately, "I don't think 377 will go away in my lifetime". She had questioningly looked at me, "*Aisa kyu kehete ho? Dheere, dheere sab theek ho jayega*" (Why do you say so? Gradually, everything shall be fine.) I almost laughed at her. As a Hijra, facing a thousand defeats and insults every day, all she could hold onto was hope, she had nothing else, and so she had the optimism that I regretfully lacked. We didn't know it then, that within the decade the Delhi High Court would give a landmark judgment on Sec 377 IPC, neither, that tragically, she wouldn't be around to celebrate it.

That evening, as the shadows lengthened, Transgenders started arriving for a session on 'Makeup'. As they waited for the session to start, barring a couple of references to cooking all they discussed was cross-dressing. I again started feeling like an outsider, as all the three topics- makeup, cross-dressing and cooking were anathemas to me. As they went to another room for the session, I too was encouraged to attend, which I resisted. Still, not wanting to offend anyone, I allowed them to shepherd me into a room. A noticeably effeminate, older man was in that room. He was holding court with eight to ten Transgender persons and effeminate Gay young adults; he was busy providing tips on the use of Cucumbers for a facial. A couple of Transgenders were busy taking notes in small notebooks. Reluctantly I sat for a while and then unable to take it anymore I quickly got up and left the room.

In the other room, Ashok Row Kavi (Amma) sat at a gigantic desk. Back then, he had no company of a fish tank. That would come later. I introduced myself. Amma was in a happy+bitchy mood. "*Kai re tumhi Punyache? Kahi karat nahi?*" (Why are you Pune guys not doing any work on LGBT issues?) Later on, as I came to know him, I realised that he had only two states of dispositions: happy+bitchy or angry+bitchy.

In response, I grandly told him that I had recently come from the USA and was planning to work on LGBT issues in Pune. Amma's expression told me that he was less than impressed. I was just one of the many in a long line of grandstanders passing by, loftily talking about 'doing something'.

Amma admitted as much in his speech when *Samapathik* Trust

felicitated him by giving him a Lifetime Achievement Award in, 2014.[1][2] He said: "I had never thought that a middle-class Pune Brahmin would give up his career and work for LGBT in Pune."



From the left: Ashok Row Kavi (Amma), Vivek Raj Anand (CEO of HST) and Dr Raman Gangakhedkar who presented the Lifetime Achievement award to Ashok Row Kavi (Amma)

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Award under his hat, Ashok Row Kavi recalls his fight for LGBT rights. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 6. October 11, 2014.

[2] *Utsav 'tyanacha' bhavatalacha*. (Celebration of 'their' life) By Swapnil Jogi. *Sakal*. Pune. October 12, 2014.





## STEPPING OUT

My stay in Mumbai lasted only for a few months. Unable to adjust to the company's Indian environment, I resigned and left for Pune. But these few months turned out to be very productive and painful. Productive because, I frequented HST whenever I could, interacting with Amma, Vivek Raj Anand (CEO of HST) and Girish Kumar (Program Manager) seeking their support for the work I planned to do in Pune.

Whenever I stayed in Mumbai for the weekends, I would travel by local trains from one end of the city to the other, visiting and seeing anything and everything that came my way. I vividly remember Vasai fort because the rickshaw driver whom I asked to take me to the fort was genuinely puzzled. Why would anybody want to go there? *"Kahi nahie tithe"* (There is nothing there.) I loved visiting forts and was adamant on seeing 'nothing'; he was reluctant, unsure. But not wanting to let go of fare, he finally relented. I spent some time in the ruins. There was no one else there (I heard that, later on, it was used for a while as a den by drug users.)

Since I was also on the GayBombay (GB) Yahoo group list, I attended a GB meet at a restaurant at Bandra. I had a tough time locating the group as there was no pre-arranged sign or symbol to mark the group. I don't remember how I found them. No, there were no mobile phones then.

I remember meeting Vikram Doctor, Bala Ramaiyah, Sopan Muller and Jay. There were a few other men too, but no women. At my introduction, a few titters followed at my name 'Bindu' (a girl's name.) Later on, we trooped to Bala's house and sitting around in a circle did some experience sharing, a catharsis that would become a ritual for me, that willy nilly I had to perform at every meeting or interview with a reporter. I enjoyed the GB meet very much, but that was the only meet I could attend before I was back to Pune for good.

I also remember going to the nightclub *Voodoo* near Gate Way of India on a couple of Saturday nights; ecstatically dancing and sweating profusely (as I am prone to do) with Bala, Vikram and others.

At the same time keeping one eye on the clock so that I wouldn't miss the last local train back to Andheri, where I stayed in a rented apartment. I was reminded of my days in the USA, when a couple of times, I had taken the evening Caltrain to San Francisco and danced the whole night away; the Gay nightclub not very far off from Fourth Street closed at 6 am (was it Kings? I don't remember); I returned to Santa Clara, where I was living, by the early morning Caltrain.

Ah! Those were the days! It was tough leaving the USA for good. For many months after I came back to India, I would catch myself with the blues; staring blankly at something, my mind loitering at my favourite Townsend Theatre. The theatre was in San Jose, and screened experimental and Queer films; later on, I heard that it started playing Hindi commercial films, so it's good I am not there to see that defilement.

Next door to the theatre, another favourite of mine, was a Café frequented by the LGBT crowd. I think the café may have been a bank before, with its marble counter and a vault. Here, I idled many hours, reading Queer tabloids, soaking in the atmosphere, idly wondering whether I would ever be able to own and operate such a place in Pune. The blues would come on as a dull throbbing ache in my heart, of having lost something very precious, which over some time, slowly lost its ability to hurt me, but for the initial few months, I really had it bad.

As if the blues weren't bad enough, I couldn't stand the humid heat of Mumbai and, during the rains, the filth of the overflowing gutters and scurrying rats in East Andheri. I fell ill. Taking leave from office, I came to Pune to recuperate (Being a typical Puneri, I trusted only Pune doctors.) There was no way I could make Mumbai my home; I wouldn't survive. But then Pune too had become painful in a different way.

Every time I came home, there were arguments with Mom about my sexuality. I had come out to my family within the first week of landing in India. Mom had been shocked. She said she knew something was fishy when on her only trip to the USA, I had borrowed the films *Philadelphia* and *The Birdcage* from a video library so that she could

watch them when I was at the office. She hadn't said anything then, but now she voiced her suspicions. Had I fallen in 'bad' American company because my marriage hadn't worked out? Well, the American company wasn't bad at all, but I had been bad at my marriage. With my coming out and having an unmarried sister on her hands, my Mom was traumatised. Had I been in her place, I would have been too.

Dad, at his religious best, proclaimed that I was a punishment for his past lives' sins. And that was it. My father was not in the mindset to think of going with me to a Psychiatrist; that would have been too humiliating for him. But I am not sure that's the only reason. His nature is simply to be left alone; his only ambition is to be considered an average joe by neighbours and friends. He will shun anything that does not fit into his middle-class perspective, especially something as 'deviant' as this.

Not so, Mom. She took it upon herself to straighten me up. She was a teacher, but ironically the direction of her initial efforts was to seek out a couple of Sadhus and Maharajs to rectify me. One told her to perform some weird ritual which she, even in her desperation, realised to be bunkum. I had, against my will, accompanied her to the next one, and she explained the problem to him in deep embarrassment, other disciples of the Maharaj being in attendance. He sent Mom out and asked me directly, why did I come back to India where such things are not accepted? I should go back to the USA. Nifty Maharaj. As I stepped out, I told Mom that Maharaj was on my side; she was furious at his betrayal.

Our heated arguments became a ritual every weekend I was in Pune, so I started avoiding the visits. In the end, frustrated, I told her that we might as well go to a Psychiatrist and get his opinion that being Gay is not a disorder. Hoping for a 'cure', she was well disposed, but not knowing which Psychiatrist was Gay friendly, I took her to the only one I had heard of (one, whom one of my relatives was seeing) fervently hoping he was not homophobic.

He first spoke to me, then spoke to my Mom and then addressed us together. He did tentatively ask me whether I wanted to make efforts

to change. I told him, “No, am quite happy as I am” and also told him of my volunteer work in *Trikone* in the USA. Quickly realising that I was a 'lost cause', he told my Mom that doctors had tried various experiments to convert Gay men and nothing had worked, so there was nothing to be done. He said to her that he sympathised with her, seeing her cultural difficulty of having a Gay son in India but for that, she would need counselling, not her son. As we stepped out, Mom fumed, the medical solution to the 'problem' had turned out to be an illusion.

With an unmarried daughter on her hands, Mom was worried that my sexuality would undoubtedly be a huge liability. In one of our heated arguments, I told her that I was willing to move out for good and try to seek a job as far off from Pune as possible. Our relationship had reached an all-time low, and all that remained was a breakdown. But she was firm about that; I was not going anywhere. But since my sister was unmarried, I was firmly told not to come out to relatives or anyone else.

Mom's stand was simple and straight. It was enough that I had told my parents and sister; there was no need for the world to know. For me, that was significant progress, but it also hampered my plans of screaming to the world that 'I AM GAYYY'. Whenever I voiced my desperation to be out, she would look at me as if I was a retard, unable to comprehend why anyone would want to say something like that aloud. I agreed to her condition but countered it with my own. I had just started monthly support group meetings in Pune on the lines of GB. My condition was that I would continue to organise those, as they were conducted in secret. With deep reluctance, she agreed. Yahoo!

Soon afterwards, I had another occasion to say Yahoo! as my sister got married, and Mom heaved a sigh of relief. My Mom being from a middle-class background, her only ambition had been to see her two children married off. Shortly before my marriage, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, undergone a left-side Mastectomy and during chemotherapy sessions, she had continued distributing my marriage invitations to our relatives. Her wish then was to see at least her elder child married off and settled before she passed away.

Tragically for her, my marriage quickly ended in a messy divorce[1][2]; she couldn't fathom the reason as I hadn't disclosed the reason, but happily, she recovered from her illness and cancer didn't show up again.

After my sister's marriage, Mom spent time reading books, articles and whatever other LGBT related material came her way. Whenever a Hindi film was released which had even a whisper of a Gay character or a dialogue, I would drag my parents, yes even my Dad, to see the movie. Dev Benegal's *Split Wide Open* comes to my mind. And resignedly they would follow me. As my parents realised that I wouldn't change, things started to settle down, and I got busy organising support group meetings in Pune.

The last time Mom and I had a showdown was in 2002 when at the age of thirty-five, I decided to retire so I could dedicate myself fulltime to my work. I was then financially well off, a Quality Assurance Manager at a software company in Pune, earning a gross of ₹67,000.00 per month.

Chucking it all for social work was a rude shock for my parents. Mom used the Marathi phrase: *Lashkaracha bhakrya bhajne* (social work that doesn't pay); my parents' life-long ambition was typically Maharashtrian- getting a job and sticking with it until retirement, come hell or high water.

Mom had been a teacher for twenty years, and my dad had happily worked in R&D Engrs (Dighi), a central government military establishment for more than thirty years and missed his office even after retirement. How anyone could stick to any one job for more than four to five years was and continues to be an enigma to me. In my ten years of IT career, I resigned or was fired from seven jobs. Informix Corporation (USA) would be the only place I would last almost four years, and even that would not have been possible without an outstanding manager Radha Ratnaparkhi and supportive colleagues-Rathi, Jaya and Kevin.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] In 1997, a police complaint was filed against me under Sec 498A IPC within a few days of my marriage. In 1998, the Hon'ble court acquitted me of the charge. You can well imagine the trauma my parents went thru. For me, it was a double trauma, as deep, deep down; I was carrying my Gay secret.

[2] In 1998, the Hon'ble court granted a 'Divorce by mutual consent' U/s. 13(B) of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.

  
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## SUPPORT GROUP

The cap was the agreed-upon sign, which I would either wear or place it on the table if we were in a restaurant. The only place I could advertise the support group meetings was Yahoo Groups- mainly GB (Pune Gay guys would invariably be in the group) and, I think, 'gaypune' or 'gay\_pune' Yahoo Groups.

It was around mid-2000 when I started organising support group meetings in Pune. The first place I selected for the meet was *Good Luck* restaurant on F.C. Road. A lousy selection on my part as the place was always crowded and making ourselves heard was a bit of a problem considering that the group members, nervous of meeting in a public place, spoke *sotto voce*. There were about five of us (not a single Lesbian or Transgender person), all middle to upper-class English speaking lot, somewhat similar to the GB group.

I had no agenda for the meetings. I organised the sessions to build rapport with Gay men and to get an insight into community knowledge on safe sex practices. My learnings from the first few meetings were: a) condom use was near zero; b) participants didn't perceive themselves to be at risk, and c) their questions on fellatio made it amply clear that their understanding of reproductive anatomy and functioning was sorely wanting.

The other issue that struck me was their self-perception. A few participants were clear about their identity, but some were inconsistent in their use of terms indicating a lack of understanding of definitions or confusion between Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI.) That meant I needed to work on educating my community on terminology and meaning.

Quite a few times, I came across an extremely irritating term (to this day, I continue to hear the line)- "*To tasa nahie, to khup Straight ahe pan mi tyala convert kela*" (He is not 'like that', he is VERY Straight, but I converted him.) In response to the sharp retort from me questioning the sexuality of the participant's lover, I was invariably castigated for my line of questioning, anger flashing in their eyes.

I always wondered if the queen's ego is satiated, by the affirmation that the queen must be 'the genuine *Rambha*' (a beautiful dancer in the court of God Indra), to have had a 'straight as an arrow man' fall for him (or her?) I do not know. Or, is it that these 'verrry Straight men' are playing their cards too well? Making it amply clear that they are not one of us, all this roll in the hay is just a brief fling till they get their hands on the 'real thing'? Curiously, the queens continued to stick to their guns even after knowing that the men, while intermittently continuing to enjoy carnal pleasures with them were also getting it on with other women- "Oh! That just proves he is a REAL man".

Most married Gay men came for two reasons only: a) as predators seeking young adult men or, b) befriending an unmarried newbie and in my absence, boasting about their 'successful' marriage ("I have two children"), "*Jamta arey, yevdha avghad nasta*" (You can do 'it', it's not that difficult), convincing the newbie why it was in his interest to get married. So, I had to take a stand that married Gay/Bisexual men would not be allowed at the meetings.

Later, I would face this 'married Gay men' problem in befriending sessions too. Their start of the session with archetypal sentences, foretelling the direction the conversation would take- "*Mala kahi problem nahie, ti sukhat ahe*" (I have no problem, the wife is content) or "*Tasa kahi problem nahie... pan ata mulanchi lagna zhaliet, tar...*" (There isn't a problem as such... but with my children married, I now...) ended with only one, "*Tumhi ya karyat ahat, ekhadyachi olakh karun dya... khup ghusmat hotie.*" (You work with LGBT, introduce me to someone... I am feeling quite suffocated) supplementing the request with a rider for a guarantee that the guy I would provide should be discrete, wouldn't blackmail them and didn't carry HIV/AIDS, STIs. I could understand their desperation and the living hell that life had become for them, but dealing with problems of married Gay men (or married Lesbians) was not the focus of my work unless they were seeking a divorce or were victims of extortion.[1] My focus was on assisting young adults to become comfortable with their sexuality, come out and play safe. The more of us who were out, the better the world would become for everyone.

During this period, I met very few Transgender members of the community. I especially remember one whom I met at one of the restaurants lining the road, opposite Pune Railway station. She came with one of her friends, who didn't mention his sexuality and was quiet as a mouse throughout the meeting. The Transgender person wore a shirt and trousers, carried a large bag and had dyed stringy hair.

I don't remember how I got her contact and as I started talking to her, I realised that she was trying to help me get in touch with the Transgender community but, alas, without much success. She would quickly lose focus and return to her favourite topic. Her looks. "*Baghana, ya vayat he ase vait kes, kasa mala navra milnar?*" (See, with this bad hair at a young age, how will I find a husband?) On that track, she went on to describe her ideal husband and pointing to her nail-painted little finger said, "If the man has even one fingernail painted or has even a smudge of *mehendi* (hand painting) on his hand, I don't allow him near me, eeks, he is no man, he is a *nimgandu*" (half a fag.) She emphasised that she was very meticulous about the men she slept with and if they made the slightest attempt to touch her (male) privates, armageddon would follow this betrayal.

This declaration was followed with sage advice, "Absolutely Straight men were available too (of course as Tops) if plied with non-veg food and a *khamba* (country liquor.)" I asked her whether she used condoms. "I know many who don't, but I never have sex without a condom. I have to take care of myself if I am to have a husband." And with that lofty signoff, she swished away with her friend. I should have asked her whether she carried condoms with her, but I didn't; that would have been too intrusive, and she could have misinterpreted my intention.

All these meetings gave me an insight that I had a more challenging task chalked out for me than I had thought. If educated guys did not perceive themselves at risk, those who were not on Yahoo Group lists, or whom I could not reach, were doomed. So imparting information on HIV/AIDS, STIs and starting condom distribution to Gay and Bisexual youths was imperative. I would need to explain the spectrum

of sexuality and gender to the community so that they could identify where they fit in and thirdly, I would also need to impart Sex Education to anyone and everyone Gay or Straight willing to listen.

For the next few months as I kept on arranging these meetings at different places, the group members kept on changing and the numbers declining. The last couple of sessions ended with me sitting at the appointed place drinking teacup after teacup waiting for someone to show up. Eventually, I stopped the meetings, and it would be a long, long time before I had another go at it. The next time I gave it another try was around eighteen years later when I started organising *QueerKatta* (Queer Social Public Gatherings.)

On reflection, the problem as I see it is that I had no agenda. After getting people together, it was my job to keep them interested. There had to be some takeaway than just meeting and getting introduced to each other. There was, of course, one plan of interest for many who attended, of seeking casual alliances wherever possible, but that was not the objective of the meeting, and they didn't need these meetings for that. It may seem a no brainer, but in the beginning, the excitement was more about doing something, rather than focusing on planning and chalking out the means of taking it forward.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Over subsequent years, with the increasing number of married, closeted Gay men seeking advice from me on divorce or seeking consultation with Counsellors at the Pune Family Court, *Samapathik* Trust arranged a session on LGBT issues for Counsellors, Lawyers and Magistrates at the *Pune Family Court* on December 12, 2012, with the assistance of Family Court Counsellor Smita Joshi, Adv. K. Dandavate, President of *Pune Family Court Lawyers Association* Adv. Sunil Kotlikar and Registrar Adv. S.S. Kulkarni. Hon'ble Principal Judge Shahapurkar Sir presided over the event. From *Samapathik* Trust, I, Tinesh, Parikshit (Gay representatives) and Santi (Transgender representative) did experience sharing and presented issues related to LGBT.

**LGBTIQ session at Pune Family Court. December 12, 2012.**



Hon'ble Principal Judge Shahapurkar Sir addressing the audience.



President of *Pune Family Court Lawyers Association* Adv. Sunil Kotlikar addressing the audience. On the left seated on the bench - Tinesh, Santi and Parikshit.





## MINEFIELD

Naïve that I was, the first idea I had, was to collaborate with groups and NGOs in Pune, already working with LGBT community. It made sense to me that you would start working with those who were already working with the community, paving the way for others. Little did I know then, that I was stepping into a minefield.

The first explosion occurred when I contacted a group that worked with Lesbians and Bisexual women from Pune; a group formed before I came back to India for good. I asked around for their communication address and sent them a greeting with a congratulatory note. I received no reply. A couple of months down the line, I met someone who knew them, and I communicated my desire to collaborate with them on Gay rights issues. A few weeks later, I got a reply. I paraphrase- 'Our group is only for Lesbians and Bisexual women, if we need to contact you, we will get in touch with you. Do not contact us.' The arrogance was breath-taking and became my initiation to the LGBT political circus in India. Happily, the group didn't last long, and I took perverse delight at the group's demise.

The second explosion came in reply to emails I had sent to heads of two NGOs working for MSM & TG communities in Pune. My email stated my intention of working in Pune with support from Amma. The gist of both the replies was: With Amma involved, they wanted to have nothing to do with me. Although I was taken aback at their animosity towards Amma, their reactions turned out to be a godsend. Over the next decade, as I established myself in Pune and came to better to understand their style of work in the field, I thanked my stars they hadn't accepted my offer. I kept away from them as far as I could and we continued to remain bitter rivals.

Simultaneously, I reached out to Gay men in Pune who could be potential trustees for *Samapathik* Trust. The primary condition I had was that the Trust had to be a Community Based Organisation (CBO), which meant every trustee had to be from the LGBT community, and the other condition was that they had to be out. I couldn't afford a

trustee who was a potential target of an extortionist.

Over time, I had a series of meetings with potential trustees; out community members, the numbers of which during those days were very, very few. One guy from Nagpur (then working in Pune) told me outright that unless he was able to hustle some money on the side, he was not interested. Dalip Daswani, Sunil Ganu, Ramprasad and I had several meetings to explore the possibility of forming the Trust, but before I could finalise things, I backed out; something else had blown up in my face.

While my hunt for trustees was going on, an unexpected explosion occurred, before Amma formally took a call to support me. I had gone with a PLHIV to Delhi to get introduced to various funding agencies (Refer Book II- Twilight. Chapter: Back To Square One.) I had ended up talking to multiple agencies for exploring funding opportunities. It was during this exposure visit of sorts that I had met and spoken to someone who I didn't know then was a bitter enemy of Amma; the person too, despite my mentioning Amma's name had given nothing away.

On my next visit to HST after I came back from Delhi, I casually mentioned the name. Amma, eyes popping out, raged, "How dare you take my help and at the same time, go behind my back and seek his assistance?" I sat there, stunned. Amma ranted on for a while, Vivek commiserated. They had several experiences of chicanery by this Delhi guy.

Finally, Amma calmed down and stated that HST would only support me on the condition that, he would prepare a list of persons and NGOs who were *persona non grata* and I was to promise that I would never collaborate with any of them. I agreed. I have the list engraved in my heart and have kept my word. That day, I decided to work with HST. From then Amma, Vivek and HST became my sturdiest support; nurturing me, collaborating with me and standing by me through thick and thin. I had a lot of respect for Amma's work (and continue to do so), but after this outburst, I was wary of his anger.

As I started collaborating with HST, I came to know Amma better and

quickly learned to value his insights and respect his razor-sharp acumen. His anger, political comments were at times downright offensive. And at times, I too became a target of his caustic remarks. Still, I did not allow that to distract me from the fact that he is India's first Gay activist, the father of the Queer movement in India and one who had taken me under his wing when I was struggling to start work in Pune. I am deeply grateful to him.

It was Amma's trademark impatience that galvanised the formation of my Trust. On one of my visits to HST, Amma got irritated, “*Are kiti diwas chalai re tuzha NGO register karna*” (Why is it taking so long to get your NGO registered?) I explained the difficulty I was facing in finding trustees. Impatiently, he called Administrator Abhina and asked her, whether she would like to become a trustee. Without batting an eyelid, Abhina agreed.

Amma then picked up the phone and called Nitin Karani. Nitin had done his journalism, was working in a publishing house and in his spare time, volunteered as an editorial contributor to the LGBT magazine *Bombay Dost*. Even before we had met in person, Nitin too assented.

To date, I find it very surprising that without any reservations both, Abhina and Nitin agreed. I suspect this was partly because both were committed to LGBT activism and partly because Amma's request was not something one could turn down.

And so with two potential trustees from Mumbai and me in Pune, it was decided to form *Samapathik* Trust (Amma actually wanted the name to be *Sarathi*, but I had already finalised the name *Samapathik* similar to *Humsafar*.)

Then came the tricky part of preparing a Trust deed and registering the Trust. I had first to study an existing Trust deed which listed services to the LGBT community. I was well aware that the application for registration could face obstacles or even be rejected if there was an explicit mention of LGBT communities. So I asked around for a template, and Dalip Daswani provided me with a sample deed of some other Trust. After studying that deed, I prepared my list of



objectives: the first related to the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and STIs, followed by other objectives. While drafting the deed, I used the words- 'sexual minorities', 'people of all sexual orientations' without a single direct reference to LGBT.

The next step was finding a lawyer to get it registered. They were a dime a dozen, spread across the field opposite the Charity Commissioner's office, but would anyone be sensitive on matters related to LGBT? Assuming none would be, I wisely approached an intermediary who charged me ₹3,000.00 for finding a legal resource, handling the administrative part and did the whole thing without once asking me the pertinent query- "What does 'sexual minority' and 'sexual orientation' mean?" The Trust got registered on September 11, 2002; Reg. No. E3662, Pune.

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## BUT YOU HAVE A MOUSTACHE...?

Desiring an HIV/AIDS Targeted Intervention (TI) project, I sought an appointment with an officer at MSACS and made a trip to Mumbai to meet him. Someone ushered me into his office.

As I sat down and introduced myself, I had no idea that I was in for a sermon- (paraphrased) "I see that there are a lot of NGOs blossoming whose sole objective is to make money. So if you have come here with that objective, you are wasting your time. We only give projects to NGOs which are scrupulously honest and dedicated to the service of the community." (I couldn't resist a laugh as I wrote this paragraph.) Other than punctuating the sermon with a "Yes, sir", "Absolutely sir" I didn't have much to add, and neither was I expected to.

He then proceeded to complain about another NGO from Budhwar Peth (Pune) which had been nagging him for the next instalment of the grant as they had been operating without funds for the past few months. "I keep telling them that, if they want funds, they have to be patient, they have to learn the art of working with the government. They just don't get it. Anyways, even if they don't get funds for a full year, their Peers are Sex Workers so the women will hardly starve". My heart sank. (I am happy to state that, over a period of time, his attitude improved significantly.)

The sermon cum litany of complaints lasted longer, but I don't remember much else. It ended with his telling me that, the government does not fund an NGO till it had worked on its own for at least three years and had documentary evidence of that work, something he could very well have told me on the phone and saved me a trip to Mumbai when I had sought an appointment with him.

On the way back, I resigned myself to working on my own; working with the government did not seem to be my cup of tea. But to work on my own, I needed to set up my linkages and referral systems, and the first thing I needed to do was find a way of procuring government condoms for free distribution.

I decided to visit the local (Pune) AIDS Control office and came to know that the office had temporarily re-located to some address near Shastri Road. After locating the office with some difficulty, I was directed to meet someone. I introduced myself and stated the purpose of my visit. After hearing me out, the first question he asked was, "So what (*sexual*) role do you take?" I was visibly embarrassed and could see the delight on his face at this direct question. I evaded the answer. Why was I not comfortable in stating, as a matter-of-fact, that I am a bottom? Internalised homophobia? No, definitely not. Fear of ridicule? Yes.

Writing this now makes me painfully realise that, then, I had not become hardened to the way the world saw Gay men. There is an argument which goes: 'you need not answer such questions, and he had no right to ask private details.' But that defence implies that I am ashamed of my sexual role. I would have loved to answer that: I love being a bottom with the men I desire.

But I did not. Rhetorically I wanted to ask him, whether he would mind discussing with me the nitty-gritty of the way he and his wife (presumably a woman) had 'carnal intercourse' (presumably in the 'order of nature'.) But I did not. That would have satiated me for a brief moment and alienated him forever. I refrained from giving my off-the-cuff response. Having hardly anyone on my side, I was desperate enough, nay, if need be, I would be sufficiently servile, to get ahead in this work.

I was relieved when there was no further interrogation on the lines one of my Gay clients had faced, who, having stated that he was a bottom to a doctor at Sassoon Hospital during a rectal STI examination was asked, "*Pan tumhala tar misha ahet. Mag bai cha role kasa kai gheta?*" (But you have a moustache! So how come you take the woman's role (in sex)?)

I requested 500 condoms, and the person agreed to give me 100. He asked me to keep a record of the date, number of condoms issued, name of the client and signature. I nodded, adding a caveat that almost all the names-on-record would turn out to be fictitious as clients weren't likely to give their real names. At this blatant honesty,

he lost his temper, “Don't tell me. I want the complete record as stated, you understand. Otherwise, I am not going to give you condoms.” He knew that the records would not reflect the real names but, like many government employees I would come across, he was loath to carry the burden of truth. For a second, I thought I had blown it, but surprisingly he relented, and with those precious 100 condoms I started my outreach work which turned out to be one of the biggest challenges I would face.

As I sat beside Gay men, chatting and building a rapport, resisting these beautiful temptations, with many willing to use the offered condom with me, was not easy, as you can well imagine. My rejection of their proposal was always taken as a personal rejection which took down their self-esteem, poor to begin, another notch or two. Assuring them that they were very desirable was futile, they considered it a lie, and I couldn't very well submit the readily available evidence, the bulge in my trousers hidden under my rucksack judiciously placed on my knees.

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## PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST

“Wait here for a few minutes. I will be back” Dr Raman Gangakhedkar said, as he got up and left the clinic. I waited and waited and then waited some more. I was at the *National AIDS Research Institute (NARI)* branch located in *Dr Kotnis Arogya Kendra* (a PMC clinic) (old name *Gadikhana*) at Mandai, the heart of the old Pune city and hence conveniently accessible to all.

When I told Amma that I needed to build linkages with LGBT-friendly doctors who were working on HIV/AIDS and STIs, he had asked me to get in touch with Dr Gangakhedkar, who was then the Assistant Director at NARI. He would generally be at the *Gadikhana* branch from around 10.30 am to about 1.00 pm every Saturday when the clinic was open for half day.

The last time I was at *Gadikhana* clinic was when I was in fourth or fifth standard when I accidentally stepped on the tail of our landlord's dog Moti, and he, generally a very docile creature, had jumped up and bit me in the arm. Fearing my Dad's reaction, I did not disclose the incident to him.

The same evening when we had gone to attend a function, I had used that lovely time of gaiety and happiness to take my Mom and Grandma aside and made them miserable by confiding in them the unfortunate encounter. Those days I spent a lot of time with grandma, who doted on me and so the very next day my Mom, Grandma and I trouped to *Gadikhana* to get the first of three injections, once a day, around my navel.

The patient before me, a boy more or less my age, was screaming his head off as the assistants held him down, whilst the nurse injected him. That image petrified me. When my turn came, surprisingly, there was very little pain, and I wondered why the boy was such a sissy. I took my injection docilely and happy at receiving praise from the nurse and assistants that I was a brave boy, *Gadikhana* clinic did not have any negative associations.

I parked my bike in the courtyard and inquired with the security guard, the location of the NARI clinic; he didn't get the question. I rephrased the query instead, asking him for 'AIDS' clinic. He stared at me; then looking at me up and down, pointed to the third floor. Steep, narrow staircases, clean but with the dried splattered marks of pigeon stools and stains of fallen fruit, the fallout of a tree in the courtyard, led to the third floor.

And so here I was, waiting for the doctor to be back, looking around the clinic, swivelling around on the revolving steel stool. There was not much there— a few desks, a couple of filing cabinets and a corner lined with the HIV test setup. I would later come to know that on the other side of the stairs on the same floor was a Pathology Laboratory. A lady sat at a desk doing administrative work; there was no one else. There was not a single patient in the clinic. But then those were the days of ignorance about HIV/AIDS and the resulting stigma; horror stories of discrimination of HIV positive patients made regular rounds and so coming to a government HIV/AIDS clinic was avoided at all costs.

People passing thru the outside passage warily peeked in, looked at me 'knowingly' and moved on. It was about half an hour later that the doctor sauntered and sat down behind his desk. "I see you are still here".

Surprised, I looked at him. "I wanted to test you, whether you are willing to sit in an HIV testing clinic without panicking. Good!" he said, his booming patent laugh echoing in the clinic. I did not know I had appeared for a test, but, it seems, I had passed with flying colours.

Dr Gangakhedkar said, "Now what I want you to do is first go through the book I have written and come back next Saturday with any doubts you have." Turning to the lady, he said, "Aparna madam, please give him one copy of *Yauvanacha Umbarthyavar* in Marathi" adding, "give him one copy of the English version too" (Authors: Dr. Raman Gangakhedkar and Dr Prakash Bhatlavande. Publisher UNICEF, 2001.) It transpired that Aparna was the Counsellor.

I was back the next Saturday with various queries and satisfied at my

sincerity and commitment he said, “For the next four Saturdays I will teach you pre and post-test HIV counselling.” Raising his voice, he called out to Aparna, “Madam you can also join these training sessions I am planning for him. Also, ask Panchal whether he is interested. I will conduct the sessions at 1.00 pm after the clinic timings.” Panchal was the other Counsellor.

And so from the next Saturday onwards, after clinic timings, he would settle down, and with the staff sitting around his table, he would start teaching. I quickly learned why he was considered one of the best doctors, Counsellor and teacher all rolled into one.

At the end of the fourth session, Dr Gangakhedkar said, “After consulting other doctors at NARI, I have prepared a one week schedule for you. You are to visit NARI Headquarters at Bhosari and meet Dr Mehendale, Dr Tripathi, Dr Mawar, Dr Sahai. You will be taken around the HIV testing lab and shown how HIV testing is done in batches (They had a machine which did the tests in bulk.) Now go to the Pathology Laboratory next door and the laboratory technician will show you STI causing organisms like Gonorrhoea under the microscope.” And so I had the honour and privilege of being a student of Dr Raman Gangakhedkar who would go on to become head of Epidemiology, ICMR and in January 2020 would be honoured with the *Padmashri* award.

Just as I came to *Gadikhana* to report the completion of my exposure visit to NARI (Bhosari), a client came in and approached Aparna for testing. But before she could start pre-test counselling, Dr Gangakhedkar, pointing at me, said, “Madam, this time he will do the pre-test”. Despite the training, I had no confidence and was nervous. My protest was met with, “*Ka tension gheta? Me ahe na!*” (Don't worry, I am there) from Dr Gangakhedkar.

As the client came and sat in front of me, Dr Gangakhedkar explained to him that I was a newbie learning the ropes. The client was cooperative and, I hesitantly did the pre-test. After the pre-test, Dr Gangakhedkar asked us to join him, and he again did the pre-test, thanking the client for his patience. After the client left, he asked me to compare my pre-test with his pre-test and explain to him where I

thought I could have done better. As I shamefacedly listed my long list of cockups, he patiently corrected me with not a hint of anger. To the best of my knowledge, the only time he got furious with me was a few months down the road when I confused my role of a Counsellor with that of an activist.



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## EXPOSURE VISIT

Vivek Raj Anand was upset, and as he waved me to sit down, I could see he was trying to control himself from hollering down the phone. He clutched the landline receiver as if he wanted to squeeze the life out of it. “I can’t understand..., all I am saying is that we sell *Khush-pudis* at ₹5.00 a piece. Why can't you buy them and issue them at the party? Is ₹5.00 too much to ask for?” As the response came down the line, creases deepened on his forehead. “What? You don't know what happens at parties?” more heated interaction followed and finally Vicky banged down the receiver.

Vivek exclaimed: “Can you believe this? The party organisers don't want to shell out ₹5.00 for a *Khush-pudi*?” *Khush-pudi*, loosely translated as a 'Pleasure Packet', contained two condoms, one sachet of jelly, tissue paper and one small booklet on how to use condoms. “Oh! So even after charging ₹100.00 as entry fee, they don't have ₹5.00 to buy *Khush-pudi* and give them to the party-goers?” I asked naively. “Which world are you living in?” Vicky furiously rounded on me, “It's now ₹300.00 per person. No, the issue is not so much about the cost, he is telling me that by issuing *Khush-pudis* it will be seen as if they are promoting Gay sex; as if the world doesn't know what happens at and after those parties”.

To be told by our community members, that they don't want to make condoms available, lest there be a perception of promoting Gay sex while making a pot of money off Gay parties had got Vicky's goat. And I fully sympathised with him (I would face the same experience in Pune a while later.) Philosophically I stated that we would continue to be our biggest enemies. “Oh, that we will” was his firm rejoinder. As tea came in, Vicky sipped it and calmed down.

“I don't have a place in Mumbai to stay” I complained. He dismissed the problem away, “Oh! Don't worry. We will make your stay arrangement with other participants.” I had asked HST to train me in outreach work, distributing condoms at cruising places, etc. Sometime in 2002-2003, HST had planned three day training for Peers

and ORWs (Out Reach Workers) and had generously accommodated me in the training sessions.

The training was held for 15-20 participants on the premises of MDACS at Wadala. Of all the sessions, it was Ammas' session that turned out to be the most enlightening for me. He took us out to one of the tarred roads on MDACS premises. He drew a starting line and then made us all stand on the line, each of us a few feet apart- out Gay men, closeted Gay men, married (to women) Gay men, out Hijras, closeted and married (to women) Hijras, in short, the entire 'in-the-closet/semi-in/semi-out/out' spectrum.

Amma then narrated various crisis scenarios like extortion, sexual harassment, etc., one at a time. Our task was to step forward if we were sure of being able to stand our ground, stay where we were if we were unable to formulate an action plan or step back if we caved into the situation. We were to close our eyes so as not to look at each other during the exercise. At the end of the activity, Amma asked us to check where we were standing; relative to the starting line and each other. It came as a huge shock to me that the out Hijra community, was the furthest from the starting point. In comparison the Gay and married participants turned out to be far more vulnerable and had ended up way behind the starting line.

That night, after an exposure visit to local train stations where we saw demonstrations of condom distribution by Peers to the community, I wasn't able to get a wink of sleep. My roommate was going to marry a Transgender, and a couple of Transgender community members spent the entire evening and late-night fussing with his makeup in our room. The marriage had no legal sanction, but the sombreness with which they all went about their roles, I knew they really took the occasion seriously and imitated the Straight marriage traditions exactly.

I witnessed later, the extent to which the LGBT community imitated heteronormative roles and traditions when I attended a Transgender person's wedding (with a man, whose sexuality I never did figure out) in Pune. The Transgender invitees from the groom's side took on the mantle of domination, the likes of which was seen in Straight

marriages and bitched about the substandard arrangements on the bride's side, “*He kai baya, amtit meeth kami ahe, asa kuthe jevan asta ka?*” (The curry has less salt, what kind of food is this₹.) They played the roles laughingly, but the ill-concealed desire to dominate and subjugate was evident. They had observed, imbibed and had started imitating the worst qualities of Straight marriage traditions.

In my shared room, as the groom was fussed over, others helped the Transgender bride put on a white dress, a first for her as the groom was Christian. The dress was stunning; she must have paid a bomb for it. They married at midnight followed by cake cutting, and the revelry lasted for a couple more hours. Mercifully the honeymoon did not take place in my room— that celebration had happened many times before the climax of marriage. Alas, like the orgasm, the marriage too, lasted a short time. I later learned, on my next visit to HST that they had 'divorced' a week later and had gone their separate happy philandering ways.

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## FORCED DISCHARGE

It was around 8 pm, when, with the aid of a torch, I was escorted by Kailash (one of my colleagues) to Ajit. Ajit was one of the many young adults who worked at various Chinese food stalls that littered the pavements near Swargate bus station, in front of a defunct swimming pool which was now just a mass of darkness with a smattering of wild weeds in it. He lay in a makeshift tent made of tarpaulins and discarded banners, next to the pool.

A week ago, he had paid a Transgender sex worker for a carnal interlude, and now his manhood was grossly swollen and painful. The mere touch of his underwear caused him to groan in pain. So he was now without a stitch below his waist.

The next morning, we decided to take him to Dr Gangakhedkar at the NARI *Gadikhana* clinic. Groaning painfully, he put on his tight jeans, and painfully splaying his feet, walked to the auto-rickshaw. Climbing the steep *Gadikhana* stairs was torture, his face wincing in agony at every step. One look and Dr Gangakhedkar told me that the patient would have to be admitted to a hospital. I undertook the process of admitting him to a government hospital and I got my first horrifying experience of the callousness of some of the staff working there in treating STI or HIV positive patients.

After waiting for hours, the doctor finally saw the patient, his attitude openly contemptuous of the patient. He asked what I was doing with 'this' person. The doctor's attitude mellowed after I told him that I was from an NGO. He admitted the patient stating that the patient will have to undergo surgery. Despite asking for the diagnosis, the doctor did not give one; he simply replied, "just admit him" and dismissed us.

After the ordeal of admitting the patient to the general ward, which lasted hours, I wrongly assumed that the surgery would take place the next day after the relevant tests were done. The hospital did not provide us with the schedule of the surgery and I began the daily chore of trying to meet the doctor to get the details. I visited the

doctor's Out Patient Department (OPD) but was not entertained there. I could meet the doctor only when he came for the round of the wards. The problem was, he arrived at any time of the day for the ward rounds or sometimes skipped the visit entirely.

On the first day, I gave an advance of ₹500.00 to Ajit's friend, to take care of Ajit's food, medications and HIV test. The HIV test had to be done from a private laboratory nearby, and, they charged the patient directly. The laboratory would hand over the reports to the nurse who while pushing the medication cart and dispensing medications around the general ward would give the test reports stating loudly, for all to hear, "*Changla report*", "*Vait report*" (good report, bad report.)

The next day, I found out that the previous night, other patients from the ward had shared their dinner with 'my' patient. Ajit's friend had vanished with the money I had given him, and I could not find him anywhere. From then on, other than one visit by Kailash during which he reprimanded me for trusting Ajit's friend with the money, I was all alone. I gave a small amount to Ajit, in case an urgent need for medications or tests arose while I was not around as I could hardly be expected to stay there 24x7.

As I sat there, patients in the general ward perfunctorily asked me about my NGO before launching into narrating their tales of horror. One person, who was to undergo an orthopaedic surgery of the foot, had been waitlisted for seven days, and still, there was no sign of when that was going to happen. Again and again, they would circle to the same question, "You are from an NGO, you should have known better, why have you brought your patient to this god awful place?" And so, days dragged on.

It was after 3-4 days of mounting despair, expenses for bringing breakfast, lunch, dinner, that the doctor decided to take up the case for surgery. The 'surgery' was quick; the patient was out within 15 minutes; apparently, the surgery was simply cleaning up the organ under local anaesthesia. For the past days, the patient had been on anti-inflammatory and antibacterial drugs and was much better. Relieved that the ordeal was near an end, I asked the doctor, "Sir, when can the patient get discharged?" Furious, he snarled, "Don't

expect discharge any time soon, I will need to take him to surgery one more time in a couple of days” and away he stomped. At a loss for words, I numbly followed the patient as the ward boy wheeled him to the ward. I didn't know then that the next day I would blow my fuse.

The next day, as I came to the general ward with breakfast, the bed was empty. I assumed that Ajit must be visiting the washroom. But as time went by I wondered whether he had been shifted to another ward or had taken a turn for the worse. The patients around provided no clue, except that he had been in the ward till about an hour ago. Frantic I went to the washrooms and through various wards to locate him and failing to do so came back to his bed and sat down. Had he run away? I wondered.

What was I to do next? I had given in writing to the hospital that I would be responsible for the patient. As I sat there, Ajit ambled in, bright as sunshine. “Where were you?” I rounded on him. His mouth full, he casually replied that getting bored he had left the hospital and gone to a *paan* shop for *gutkha* and spent some happy time hanging around.

My patience never much to begin with, snapped and I responded angrily, “if you are good enough to go out on your own to eat *gutkha* and that too with my money then you are good enough to be discharged”. I immediately packed the steel plate, spoon and other assortments I had brought from my house and ordered him to follow me. We went to the administration wing, and I asked them to settle the bill as I wanted a forced discharge. The person warned me that I would have to give an application accepting the responsibility of the patient for the consequences of an AMA (Against Medical Advice) discharge. I was way past caring; I did so, settled the meagre bill and with the patient riding pillion on my bike dropped him off at Swargate bus station.

As I parted, I told him that if he still has problems, he should take a loan from his friends and get himself admitted to a private hospital. As I drove home, passers-by looked at me curiously as I happily sang aloud tunelessly.

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Ajit used in the chapter is a pseudonym.



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## KITH AND KIN!

Sheila escorted me to the dark hut wherein lay the patient- Amba. The small hut had a bed, a gas stove, cylinder and a cupboard. The roof of corrugated tin sheets made the room stuffy and hot. Amba was not on the bed but, lay on the floor on a few jute sacks. She had deteriorated rapidly and now was just a bag of bones, delirious and blind with unstoppable diarrhoea looking like rice water, seeping thru the jute sacks every couple of minutes.

Sheila was a Hijra I had known for years, and she had always looked the same age. Concerned about Amba's wellbeing, Sheila had approached me a month before. Amba was a 25-year-old HIV positive Hijra who had started ART but had soon defaulted.

Despite the counselling, having no understanding of how medications worked and more importantly having no predefined daily schedule, Hijras were most likely to miss out on taking the medicines. Those days, amongst the Hijra community, the stigma of having *bilpan* (a term used by Hijras, meaning 'disease') was unbearable; this meant, sharing the news with anyone even from the Hijra community was strictly avoided. In this case, Amba hadn't trusted even her guru. That she had confided in Sheila was entirely due to Sheila's rapport building skills.

The first time Amba came to *Samapathik* Trust office, Sheila had accompanied her. Amba had dark skin, long unkempt hair, ugly chipped nail polish on her nails and a thin gold chain around her neck. Her CD4 was in double digits (her immune system was severely compromised); she could hardly walk and could barely swallow due to some obstruction in her throat.

It was clear that Amba would have to be admitted to the hospital immediately. We took her to *Sassoon* Hospital but could not get the patient admitted, not due to discrimination but due to some ongoing strike which meant that they couldn't take on any new cases. We then took her to a private hospital, where she stayed in the general ward for four days. I sought the intervention of a very LGBT friendly lady



Doctor (sadly, I have forgotten her name) and placed the patient under her charge.

Sheila and I were the only ones to look after Amba; fearing that they would have to foot the bill, the patient's mother, brother and sister-in-law stayed away. And all day, lying in the general ward, Amba cribbed about how she was not receiving the VIP treatment she felt she deserved. When Sheila brought tiffin from the patient's mother, Amba started cribbing that her mother should have made some nutritious *laddoos* (sweets) instead of the usual *roti* (Indian leavened bread) and curry. She warned Sheila that she would refuse to eat the next day if her demands were not met. Her insouciance was short-lived. She was discharged the same day, with a bag full of medications, after undergoing a painful biopsy of the growth in her throat. All we could do now was wait for the biopsy report.

It was a couple of days after her discharge that Amba came to visit me with her brother in tow. The lift was not working, and it had taken her 10 minutes to climb four flights of stairs. Angry, I wanted to know why she had left her house in this condition. Sensing that I had money, she had been badgered by her family to wheedle at least a sack full of grain from me and hence the visit. I screamed at her brother, who remained unmoved, and threw them out.

As I looked at Amba lying almost motionless in the dark hut, the family anxiously kept asking me "What is wrong with him?" but I had been warned by the patient not to disclose the reason. So I kept pacifying them that since 'he' has a growth in 'his' throat 'he' is unable to eat and has become weak. *Narova kunjaroova*. (A line from *Mahabharat*: I hadn't lied and had not told the complete truth.) And all the while they knew. That simmering unspoken anger of knowing the truth and the look of hatred they gave you for not making it official can't be mistaken.

The biopsy report confirmed the worst, and soon after the patient had gone blind. There was nothing to be done; she would be gone in a day or two. As the mother sat crying silently, cradling her child's head in her arms, there was silence broken only by the murmuring sound of loose motions.

As I turned around to leave the darkness, I saw the gleam of Amba's thin gold chain now worn by her brother.

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

To protect the identity of the individuals, the names Sheila and Amba used in the chapter are pseudonyms.

  
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**RIP!**

It was a few days later after Amba's demise that I heard the perfunctory, "May I come in?" by Sheila. She was generally courteous, but today the lilt in the delivery was missing. I was working and was brusque with her. "What is it?" I asked peevishly. "Sir, I have to talk to you, it's urgent" she was insistent. I relented. She removed her sandals inside the door and approached me.

"Sir, here is Amba's photo, we will have to do her *pooja* (prayers) and immerse her photo in the *Mula-mutha* (river)". I stared at her blankly. "*Tuzha doka phirlai ka?*" (Have you lost your mind?) I growled.

In the morning, Sheila had visited Amba's house, and as she enquired after the mother who was grieving, the mother had suddenly moaned, "Look... look do you see him? There he is next to the gas cylinder". Sheila, highly superstitious, had looked around terrified but had seen nothing. "See, see the gas cylinder is shaking, he is here, and he is angry with us", the mother had moaned pitifully. "He says we didn't do enough for him. We will have to do some rituals so that his soul will rest in peace, else he will continue to haunt me and you", she had ended, pointing at Sheila. Jittery, Sheila had taken a copy of Amba's photo from the mother, hurriedly left the hut and fled to *Samapathik* Trust.

I gave her the silent treatment for a few seconds and then had quietly extended my hand for the photo. She eagerly handed it to me. As I tore it to bits and threw it in the dustbin, she started howling, "What have you done?" I retorted, "Since I have done the bad deed, her ghost will haunt me, not you, you are free."

The logic was impeccable; she slowly started to relax, but suddenly she straightened; she now had a new anxiety, "*Sir, tumhala tar kahi honar nahi na?*" (Sir, will something happen to you?) She then anxiously monitored me for the next couple of months, sure that some terrible harm would befall me. Months went by, I continued to be hale and hearty and finally, utterly disappointed, she gave up, and over some time, I saw her superstitious nature go in a steady and

significant decline.[1]

Over the years I kept on getting sage advice from superstitious Gay and Transgender persons that since I was working in a very 'challenging and sensitive' field, I could do with all the support I could muster. Therefore I should go in for— getting my Horoscope read, *Reiki*, *Feng Shui*, *Vastu Shastra*, *Gemmology* and once even *Magnet Therapy*. But as they realised my unprintable views on these matters they gave up.

Since I am known to work with the LGBTIQ community, I still, sadly, get calls from superstitious people on my helpline number pleading, “My family is going through bad times. A spiritual guru has asked us to give *sari-choli* (saree and blouse) to a Hijra so that things will improve. Please get me in touch with one.” *Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti* (Committee for Eradication of Superstition) has its task cut out.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individuals, the name Sheila and Amba used in the chapter are pseudonyms.

[1] I have met quite a few Hijras and Jogtas who are very superstitious. And then, there are also a few Hijras and Jogtas who practice *jadutona* (black magic) or *devrushipan* (spiritual invocation by someone acting as a medium between mortals and the Gods) as a profession and exploit the naïve, god-fearing populace, whatever the victim's gender or sexuality.

In 2019, during my session on LGBTIQ issues, at Dr Hamid Dabholkar's *Parivartan* NGO (Satara city), for workers of *Parivartan* and *Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti* (ANS), Mr Prashant Potdar, Chief Secretary (Maharashtra State) of ANS narrated an incident where he assisted in filing an FIR against a Transgender Jogta referred by the populace as *guruai* from Talbid (District Satara) who had extorted thousands of rupees from a male victim under the name of warding off evil spirits. After the traditional clapping, the *guruai* had threatened the victim that unless he parted with money, she would

make him 'like she was' and make him clap like her. (*Mazhyasarkha banvun talya vajvaila lavte*). FIR No: 0012. February 09, 2016. Talbid Police Station, Satara.



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## HELLO, SAMAPATHIK TRUST HELPLINE?

The idea of a helpline arose as an outcome of the support group meetings with the Gay community. I was appalled at the ignorance of Gay men on Sex Education, HIV/AIDS and LGBT. Probing condom use by the community invariably invoked a quick, impatient dismissal. And so I had been mulling on the best way to reach out to LGBT people and finally concluded that a helpline would be a good way to do so. Later on, a government agency did start a helpline on HIV/AIDS. I called it once to check it out. But it was an automated system- 'Press 1 for information on HIV, Press 2 for....' so for most practical purposes it was useless. Unsurprisingly it didn't last long.

In an ideal world, I should have first sought training on operating the helpline before I started it, but in my case, I decided to learn it on the fly and in January 2003, launched the helpline. I applied for a landline connection and along with it, got for free, the nightmare of keeping the telephone connection functional. Initially, I decided to run the helpline for only a few days a week for a couple of hours where I would give necessary information on Sex Education, HIV/AIDS and LGBT to the callers.

The key to the success of the helpline was, of course, to advertise it effectively. Considering my financial limitations, I decided to promote the helpline, just a few days of a week, thru classifieds, in newspapers. Apprehensive that the word 'Gay' might not be accepted, the initial classifieds, carried words- Sex Education / Sexuality / Sexual Health / HIV/AIDS.

The first publication house I approached was *Kesri* a small circulation Marathi newspaper. I was hesitant in approaching the counter as I was unsure how the receptionist would react to the classified I was planning to give. A pleasant surprise followed, there was no objection and submitting it, I eagerly waited for D day. Excited, butterflies in my tummy, I landed at the office, itching for the phone to ring.

As the first call came, and I eagerly picked up the phone, all I could hear was silence. I anxiously checked the wiring. Nothing seemed

wrong. The caller disconnected and I waited for the caller to call again. He/she did. Silence. Disconnect. As the phone rang for the third time, I desperately grabbed the receiver, hoping fervently for a successful connection. Silence. And with this encouraging start, the first and also the last call of the day ended.

Over months, as I started advertising in various newspapers, calls began trickling in.[1] I vividly remember the encouraging response from the person handling the advertising section at *Maharashtra Herald*, “Sure, we will give this ad. It's (*Sex Education*) a crucial issue”.

The lady at the *Prabhat* newspaper, kindly told me, “Our circulation as compared to some other newspapers is less. I suggest that instead of booking the classified for a month in bulk, you book it for a few days for just one week, see what the response is and if it is good, go in for more dates.” I agreed, thanking her for her considerate advice but patently inconsiderate of newspaper revenue.

So it was with full confidence that I approached an English newspaper, sure that they would accept the classified and ran into a bouncer. The lady at the reception, politeness personified, told me that, “You are using the words Sex/Sexuality/Sexual. You cannot use any of these words in your advertisement. This is our policy”. I got into an altercation with her and frustrated she went in and came out accompanied by a senior guy. I argued again, stating that it was an NGO that was running the helpline, and I had a letter on the NGO letterhead. No dice. I mulled whether I should run the classified with the words HIV/AIDS only. But since I had other newspapers, even Marathi newspapers, which had already gone much further, I walked out. For a while, after this experience, I viewed the newspaper with a jaundiced eye. But, despite this one-off negative experience, they gave and continue to give outstanding support and coverage on LGBTIQA issues in Pune, and I am thankful to them for that.

And so, I was understandably wary when I approached *Sakal* a famous Marathi 'family' newspaper, almost sure that I would face a problem. Surprisingly, I didn't.

One fine day I confidently landed at the office a good half hour early

before the start of the helpline and waited and waited... not a single call. How could this happen? I checked the calendar for the date. No problem there. I picked up the receiver... therein lay the problem; the line was dead. Frantically I checked the phone every 10 minutes to see whether it would come back to life- no such luck.

Next day I lodged my complaint. It took their staff 3-4 days to show up. After getting the work done, I got the phone going for a month or so before it went dead again.

I especially remember one occasion where I was running a high fever and yet, had come to the office to operate the helpline. After the helpline timings, a closeted Lesbian policewoman from Mumbai who had come to Pune to meet me was to call me and get directions to the Trust office lest she got lost. As I kept the phone beside me and fitfully slept, a knock on the door woke me and opening the door found her standing outside, furious at me for not picking up her calls. It had taken her some time to find the Trust office, and she was not in the best of moods. I picked up the phone; it was dead. I told her and true to her profession, she dialed the number to check that the phone was not ringing (but she could hear the ring on her cell phone) and then slowly calmed down. After that, we had a good talk, and later on, over the next couple of years, she came to Pune once every few months when she desired to talk about her stormy relationship with her girlfriend. Later on, I met her girlfriend too (by then she had become the Policewoman's ex-girlfriend) and became friends with her.

The unreliable telephone service was not the only problem. The other one was that despite advertising the timings, people called any time as per their convenience. If I was in the office, I was able to take their calls, but I am sure there were many, many more calls which I was not able to attend. So I decided to get an answering machine giving the helpline days and times to callers. I got one, recorded the message and thought that it would take care of the problem. It didn't.

I had failed to take into account that with frequent and prolonged load-shedding especially during summer and the answering machine battery lasting just a couple of hours, the solution was a nonstarter.[2]



After a few months, I became more confident and decided to introduce the words 'Gay counselling' in *The Indian Express/Loksatta*, *Sakal* and *Maharashtra Herald* newspapers. I was apprehensive that they would refuse the word 'Gay' in the classifieds, but happily, they didn't; I guess, the letter on an NGO letterhead worked wonders.[3]

**Help** line free information men's sexual health, aids, sex education 4272806, Monday to Wednesday, 2.00 to 4.00, Samapathik Men's Health.  
16408042001000

*The Indian Express/Loksatta*  
(Pune)  
(April 14, 2003)

**Help** line! Free information! Sex education, Aids, Gay counseling, Monday to Wednesday, 4272806, 2:00pm to 4:00pm, Samapathik Trust, Pune.  
26861034001000

*The Indian Express/Loksatta*  
(Pune)  
(July 13, 2003)

**HELP LINE**  
Free information "on sexuality issues hiv aids 4272806 samapathik mens,sexual health trust Monday to Wednesday 2.00 to 4.00 pm (HA 9134F)

*Maharashtra Herald* (Pune)  
(February 10, 2003)

**HEALTH & FITNESS**  
Help line! Free information on sex education, AIDS, gay counselling: 4272806 Monday to Wednesday 2:00 to 4:00pm Samapathik Mens Health. (HA 9630)

*Maharashtra Herald* (Pune)  
(June 17, 2003)

हेल्पलाइन! मोफत माहिती. लैंगिक, आरोग्य ज्ञान, एड्स- ४२७२८०६, सोमवार ते बुधवार, दुपारी २.०० ते ४.००. समपथिक पुरुष आरोग्य, पुणे.

*Sakal* (Pune) (March 17, 2003)

**Help Line!** Free information on Sex Education, Aids, Gay Counselling, Monday to Wednesday 2.00 p.m. to 4.00 p.m. 4272806, Samapathik@hotmail.com Samapathik Trust, Pune.

*Sakal* (Pune) (August 3, 2003)

### \*\*\* Notes and References

I experimented with the words and language in the classifieds, so they vary a bit.

[1] I ran classifieds for over ten months (from January 2003 to October 2003); on a few days of the week, predominantly in Marathi and

English newspapers in a staggered fashion- *Kesri, Prabhat, Sandhyanand, Maharashtra Herald, Aaj Ka Anand* (Hindi), *Pudhari, Sakal, Lokmat, The Indian Express/Loksatta, Punya Nagri.*

The total calls received from January 7, 2003 to March 31, 2003 on the helpline were 55. 5 queries were about homosexuality/bisexuality, 12 queries were about HIV/AIDS, STIs, 20 queries were related to heterosexual intercourse related issues, 24 queries were related to Sex Education and the rest of the queries were of a miscellaneous nature. (Note the total number of calls is not equal to the number of queries asked, as a single call can have queries on multiple topics.)

The total calls received from April 1, 2003 to March 31, 2004 on the helpline were 255 (of which 33 were followup calls). 41 queries were about LGBT, 44 queries were about HIV/AIDS, STIs, 38 queries were related to heterosexual intercourse related issues, 68 queries were related to Sex Education and the rest of the queries were of a miscellaneous nature.

[2] This unsatisfactory state of things changed when Tata introduced its wireless phone. I surrendered the landline connection and got a new number from Tata for a wireless one. It was very reliable and had an additional advantage- I could carry it with me and take calls from home.

[3] It is possible that some of the staff in the advertising section may not have understood the word 'Gay'. Would they have accepted the classified, if I had used the word 'homosexual'? It is also possible that some may have misconstrued the meaning of 'Gay counselling' as implying counselling to guide the caller away from 'such tendencies'. Looking back, I also realise that I did not use the words '*samalaingikate baddal samupadeshan*' (counselling about homosexuality) in the Marathi classifieds (e.g. *Sakal* newspaper); wherever I have used the words 'Gay counselling' in a classified in a Marathi newspaper, the classified are in English. Did I do that intentionally? Sadly, I don't remember.





## XRAY

As I started advertising, calls started coming in, not many; sometimes a couple on the days the helpline ran, sometimes not a single call for a week. Periodically I would be flooded with calls when news appeared about an HIV vaccine; the callers confusing the vaccine with a cure. But all this while, guilt nagged me that I had received no formal training on operating a helpline of any kind. So, on my next visit to NARI, I voiced my concern to Dr Gangakhedkar, and he suggested that I meet Dr Vijay Thakur.

Dr Vijay Thakur, a Psychotherapist in his fifties, who had spent quite a lot of time working in the field of HIV control, sat on the bed, his back supported by a back-strap, a walking stick next to his bed. Finding his house had been a bit of a pain, and by the time I arrived, I was thirsty. As I gratefully sipped water that his Mom served, I introduced myself. He mistakenly thought that I was from another NGO which worked with MSM & TGs, but I quickly dispelled this notion telling him bluntly that I was not on good terms with that NGO. I told him that I had started a helpline, the Gay component of the helpline was a first of its kind in Pune, but I had no training on how to run it professionally.

Although he was willing to teach me, he was soon moving to CBD Belapur for good, and since he was busy making arrangements for the move, he was not in a position to teach me during his stay in Pune. Disappointed, I got up to leave.

“There are a couple of options, though.” I stopped hopefully, “You contact Psychotherapist Ann Speirs, who can teach you a few basics. If that doesn't work out, I will be coming to Pune once every few months to train female sex worker Peers of *Saheli Sangha* and female sex worker groups from Karnataka and Andhra on HIV prevention. After their training is over, you can come in the evenings to discuss the calls you have had and the way you have answered them, and I will critique them. Keep in touch”.

*Saheli Sangha* is a female sex workers collective, formed under the mentorship of Tejaswi Sevekari, its office located in Budhwar Peth's

red-light area at shouting distance from my office. The female sex worker groups from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were doing the work of condom distribution, referring their colleagues for HIV testing of their own initiative as funding for their work had come to an end. In the absence of a Project Manager, Counsellor or ORWs, they along with Peers of *Saheli Sangha* were guided by Dr Vijay Thakur who would meet them once every few months in Pune at a hotel in Mangalwar Peth.

Dr Ann Speirs was an American, an ardent devotee of *Meherbaba* and stayed in Meherabad, Ahmednagar. I set up an appointment with her, and riding my bike visited her for the first session. The session was useful but considering the cost and the travel time involved I gave up this approach, informed Dr Thakur accordingly, and we settled on the second option- my training during his visits to Pune.

On Dr Thakur's next visit to Pune, the first thing he did was guide me in designing a Call Record form and told me to make copies of it. Till then, I used to write a summary of the calls in a diary and had not developed a particular format. He advised me to enter the details of the call into the form immediately after the call ended.

And so for the next couple of years, a pattern got established where he would come and stay at the hotel and train the Peers on HIV and condom distribution. He would guide them on ways of procuring condoms, establishing condom depots, keeping condom inventory which was a bit of a challenge as some of them were illiterate. I would come near the end of the day, at the fag end of the last session of the training, which, more often than not, happened in his hotel room. I would sit on a chair in the corner as he sat on the bed, his back resting against the pillows, his walking stick at his side, discussing practical problems in running a non-funded HIV intervention with the Peers. He would speak with the Peers in Kannada or Telugu or a mash of Marathi and Hindi. Once, when he was speaking in Kannada or Telugu, he suddenly turned around and asked me, "Can you read an X-ray for diagnosing TB?" I sheepishly shook my head in a 'No'. He proudly looked at them, "They can". They doted on him, because he doted on them, treated them with dignity and respect. Although

there were times when he would lose his patience, I never saw him shout at them or insult them.

It would be around 7 pm or 8 pm by when Dr Thakur would complete the training sessions with the Peers. He would order his dinner as they headed out and offer me a drink, which I would politely refuse, not because I was a teetotaler (I was not), but it didn't seem right to drink in front of my teacher.

My training would start at around 9.00 pm and last till about midnight or so; him smoking a cigarette or two as he mulled over my answers and challenged me. I was at liberty to select tough calls and discuss my approach and doubts to get his opinion. Dr Thakur would role-play the caller and hear my answers to check whether I was able to take up the challenge. He would never outright state that I had screwed up, but his counter-questioning left no doubt in my mind, and I quickly learned the tools of the trade.

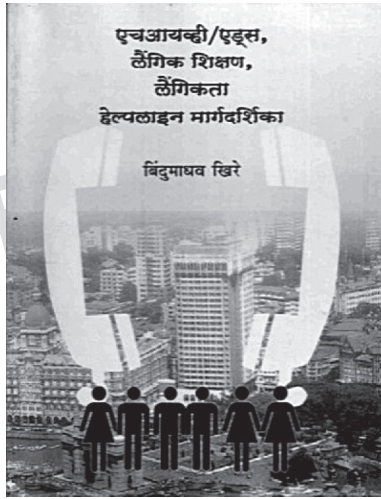
Sometimes Dr Thakur would conduct the training sessions whilst out on a stroll. When he desired to go out after dinner, he would slowly put on his back-strap, take his walking stick and we would head out for a walk. Lighting up a cigarette, he would talk of this and that of HIV/AIDS interventions, funding agencies, his vast knowledge and experience lighting up the night. Suddenly he would stop, "Have you read that paper of mine?" I had a stock answer "No" and next time he would bring the paper for me to read and give my opinion.

These training sessions went on for a couple of years. During all this time, Dr Thakur never once mentioned a fee, nor did he charge me a single rupee for the sessions. None of them did- Dr Raman Gangakhedkar, Dr Bhooshan Shukla, Amma, Vivek Raj Anand, The *Humsafar* Trust. And in return, I made it a point never to charge anyone for my befriending sessions. Since we are on the topic of funds, there were very few donations; my financial infusion to the Trust sustained the administrative and activities cost, including helpline advertising.

A few years down the line, I went on to write and publish HIV/AIDS, *Laingik Shikshan, Laingikata Helpline Margadarshika* (A Guide to

Running a Helpline on HIV/AIDS, Sex Education, Sexuality) one of the first of its kind manual in Marathi. When I couriered a copy to Dr Thakur, he had one trainee read it out to him and noticed a mistake in one of the definitions in the manual. On his next visit, he mildly pointed it out and moved on to other topics.

Later on, Dr Thakur, Avert Society-USAID-BIRDS, *Saheli Sangha*, Kalyani (an employee of HST) and myself decided to collaborate on a project which involved Training the Trainers. It was during this time that I had a disagreement with him and walked out of the project. And for many, many years kept on sorely missing his guidance. It was after I wrote this piece, that I got in touch with him again and have promised to visit him after the COVID-19 crisis is over.



Book Cover: *HIV/AIDS, Laingik Shikshan, Laingikata Helpline Margadarshika*

(Samapathik Trust. Pune. 2007)





## PSYCHIATRY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

*“Kasai na... pustakat kai lihilai tyacha vastavashi kahi sambandha nasto”* (See, what's written in textbooks has no relation to real-life) an older Psychiatrist was preaching to me. I was doing the rounds of Psychiatrists to tell them that I had started a Gay support group, and they were welcome to send their Gay clients to the group. As I mentioned DSM and ICD manuals, prompt came the reply, *“DSM, ICD maddhe samaliangikata aajar nasla, tari to ahe”* (Though DSM, ICD may indicate otherwise, homosexuality is a disorder.) Well, you can't teach an old Psychiatrist new tricks.

But he, helpfully, gave me references for other Psychiatrists I could meet. I learned one more lesson- when a homophobic Psychiatrist recommends other doctors and Psychiatrists, be rest assured that those on that list would turn out to be worse than the referrer. This list had a lady Psychiatrist who, aghast at my introduction, replied, “I didn't know there were groups who supported such things, if you had worked to convert them to normalcy I would have considered your request”.

Later, I would meet one of her ex-patients from Nashik, who had the novel experience of being screamed at by her while her forefinger made stabbing motions at male and female anatomy diagrams she had angrily drawn, *“Tumhala kalat nahi ka? Ha, purshacha avayav, to stree cha ya avayava saathi, ha stree cha avayav, to purushacha ya avayava saathi, yevdhya saadhya gosti ka umjat nahit”* (Don't you get it? This male organ is for this female organ, this female organ is for this male organ, why can't you understand such simple stuff?)

Another Psychiatrist was much smarter. He side-lined the topic, stated that he had just returned from the USA, and became a salesman; “You know I have got suction pumps from the USA for those of you who have difficulty in getting it up, you can buy these from me. They give complete satisfaction. Would you like one?”. I gave a sweet smile and walked out, thinking that since he guaranteed complete satisfaction, he must be one very satisfied customer.

Another one I remember was not a Psychiatrist but owned a small hospital (where I could have referred Gay and Transgender clients for STI treatment.) The moment I introduced myself to him, pat came the response, “*Tumhi hi naka yeu ani aslya lokanna hi naka pathvu*” (You don't come here and neither should you to refer 'such people' here.) I thought to myself sarcastically, what a great learning experience for the interns of this honourable profession, who were studiously hanging on to his every word.

Thankfully not all Psychiatrists or doctors who worked in the area of sex/sexuality were so homophobic or transphobic. I was lucky to have some very good ones on my side, though admittedly they were few.

I approached Dr Bhooshan Shukla, a Psychiatrist who had been referred to me by Dr Vijay Thakur. Dr Shukla had his office on East Street, Camp and I sought an appointment with him to check whether he was LGBT sensitive and inclusive, so that I could refer clients to him for mental health issues (notably, depression.) He had been extremely courteous, and during my first meeting with him, made it clear that he didn't entertain parents who insisted on 'curing' their LGBT kids. In those days, such a clear, unambiguous stand from a Psychiatrist was extremely rare. Going further, he introduced me to LGBT friendly Psychiatrists Dr Soumitra Pathare and Dr Kaustubh Joag.

During the next two years, Dr Shukla took time out to teach me skills and knowledge of handling questions related to sexual problems of arousal, stamina, orgasm, resolution and sexual satisfaction that periodically popped in my sessions. These questions arose mostly in the sessions I conducted at training workshops organized by *Muktangan De-addiction Centre* and on the request of Anuradha Karkare at *Kripa De-addiction Centre*.

I also attended an *Alcoholics Anonymous* meeting, uninvited, to talk about LGBT issues and addiction. But the moment I introduced myself, they immediately asked me to leave. Subsequently, I approached a couple of participants from AA to see whether I could get formal permission to talk on LGBT and addiction. No success.



During one of my visits, I narrated to Dr Gangakhedkar, statistics that I had read in a newspaper, on questions asked by people on the *Family Planning Association of India* (FPAI) (Mumbai) helpline. One of the statistics was related to the number of people who asked questions on homosexuality- 3 to 4%[1][2]. I was pleasantly surprised to see that there was no value judgment attached anywhere in the article; the number simply stated as a fact. I asked Dr Gangakhedkar whether Dr Anant Sathe (of FPAI, Pune) and his wife Dr Shanta Sathe (both residing in Pune), were Gay friendly. He replied, “Why don't you meet them and find out? What is the worst that can happen? They will turn you away.” And so I got their number, called them on the landline and landed at their place.

Both were in their sixties and were very excited like children, to see someone taking an interest in their work. As I spoke to them, I realised that they did not harbour any homophobia or transphobia and the next two hours just breezed by as they spoke on the need of comprehensive Sex Education for youth- including Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. At the end of the first visit, they gave me their book and material to study, which they used in their sessions on adolescent sexual health. And it is through their guidance that I started to deliver Sex Education sessions. I was also fortunate to learn a lot through my colleagues, Meghana Marathe and Dr Nitin Sane, while observing their sessions on HIV/AIDS and Sex Education.

And so months flew by; I read medical books, badgered doctors with questions, conducted training sessions, whilst learning on the fly. I noted down queries which I didn't have answers to and diligently went back to the relevant teacher to seek answers, grabbing every opportunity I got, to expand my linkages.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Let's talk about sex. By Manoj Nair. *Sunday Mid-Day*. Mumbai. June 2, 2002. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: The article also listed helpline numbers of FPAI, *Aanchal* (for Lesbian and Bisexual women), *Humsafar* (for Gay men) and SNTD.)

[2] Till then, I had come across references to homosexuality in the following surveys-

- (a) Sexuality in the Indian Context. (by Dr Mira Savara and Dr C. R. Sridhar). Published by Shakti.
- Sex Survey. Debonair. October 1991.
  - Marriage & Sex. Debonair. January 1992.
  - Sex life (of Indian women.) SAVVY. April 1992.
- (b) Sexual Behaviour amongst Different Occupational Groups in Maharashtra, India and the Implications for AIDS Education. Mira Savara and C.R. Sridhar. Published by Shakti. Reprinted from Indian Journal of Social Work, TISS, Bombay, Oct. 1994.

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## MORE THAN ENOUGH

The school gave me an exhaustive list of things I was not to teach: no condom demonstration, no mention of masturbation, no use of the word Hijra or *chhakka* (a pejorative term to refer to Hijras, Transgender persons and Gays), and no mention of LGBT. I was to restrict my talk to anatomy and reproduction.

Invariably my first impatient instinct was to turn down the invitation. Still, better sense prevailed, and I agreed, craftily stating that “Unless anyone queries on these topics I won't speak a word about them.” The organisers were satisfied and relieved. I added a condition of my own, “But, since students don't ask questions in the presence of teachers, no one else, other than the boys and me, should be present in the classroom during the session”. They looked unsure but relented, in a way relieved that they won't be liable for anything discussed in the session. I assume they were also relieved that they didn't have to listen to all the shocking queries. I guess they preferred the illusion of having a class of naïve, obedient boys who had no pesky questions up their sleeve and who quietly went about their fumbling libidinous business unknown to anyone in the still of the night.

When I first started conducting Sex Education sessions, I made the mistake of allowing the teachers to be present as they were wary of what I would teach, especially knowing that I was openly Gay. That meant that the students listened to everything but afraid of the teachers, didn't dare to utter a word. Although I took permission from the school to provide my helpline number at the end of the session, it was not the same as being asked a question in front of the class, since many would probably have the same query.

The other problem was, if an adolescent was spunky enough to ask a question openly, there was no knowing how the teachers would react. On one occasion, one of my friends called me to conduct a Sex Education session for adolescent boys, and the teachers insisted on attending the session. The class remained deathly still throughout, but about 40 minutes into the session, an enterprising boy raised his

hand and asked, “Do girls masturbate?” Delighted at finally being asked a query, I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could get a word out, one of the female teachers suddenly got up and said sternly, “I think the information we have got so far is more than enough. Thank you for coming here to talk to the boys on such an important topic. Boys, you will now head back to your classroom—in a single file please.” My mouth ajar, the session abruptly came to an end as the boys resignedly got up and filed out.

So, I made it a rule that teachers could not attend my session with the students. The other significant change I made was that I started giving out blank pieces of paper for students to write their queries on and hand them to me without their writing their name on it. Invariably it worked wonders and all the issues that I was not supposed to talk about unless specifically asked— “*Sir, Hijadyanna khali kai asta?*” (What organs do Hijras have down there?), landed on my platter.

At this point, let me emphasize that the written queries were necessary only in schools where students were from a middle-class background (in short *sanskari*, the word derisively used to address me, by my foes.) Conducting a Sex Education session for adolescents from slums was a different ballgame altogether.





## TELL US ABOUT THE GIRLS

The dynamics of conducting a session on Sex Education to adolescents in slum areas were very different from conducting a session for middle-class students; the mechanism of anonymous chits was not necessary. The mechanism of anonymous chits was also not necessary during sessions I conducted in Corporation schools when CYDA (Centre for Youth Development and Activities) invited me to teach Sex and Sexuality Education.

The sessions arranged by CYDA was part of a series of a very asexually named course “Personality Development” although I suspect the teachers well knew, that part of it was anything but asexual. The classes were sex-segregated, and the boys had no inhibitions of any kind.

I vividly remember one such session where near the end of the session, a ninth standard student, asked me, “*Sir, poranj maazha tondat ghetla tar kahi problem nahi na?*” (Sir, there won't be a problem if a boy takes my organ in his mouth, right?) Another student sitting nearby had responded: “*e gap re..., Sir, he dogha na...*” (Shut up..., Sir, these two...); he trailed off, his irritation directed towards the student who had asked the question and the student sitting adjacent to him. That didn't leave much to my imagination as to what was going on between the two. (The context of the 'problem' was, whether a male could become pregnant through unprotected fellatio with another male.)

As I started doing these sessions, I came to know the extent of exposure these adolescents had to pornography, watching intercourse through cracks and holes of tin shacks and huts in slums where they stayed and trying out what they saw. These experiences were in stark contrast to adolescents from middle-class backgrounds; they would get red-faced and looked down ashamed whenever the topic of masturbation came up.

Logistics was often a challenge when enthusiastic *Tarun mandal karyakartas* (volunteers of social youth clubs) or NGOs working with

slum children invited me. I had to prepare myself mentally- these sessions tested my patience, I needed a LOT of it.

For one, the session never started on time. Despite advertising the details of the session, the hunt for male adolescent participants would begin in earnest about ten minutes before the scheduled session time. About forty-five minutes later, I would have a gaggle of male pre-pubescent to college dropouts seated in front of me, on torn mattresses or the floor, gossiping, fighting, teasing each other. Very few of the sessions were co-ed.

Then came the obligatory exercise of asking each participant his age; this effort was to identify the pre-pubescent ones and have them leave the room. Sometimes an older looking boy would turn out to be a young one (although the boy would pretend to be older, the genuinely older ones always ratted on him and unhappily he would leave) and then there would be an odd one whom I would request to leave as he seemed too young. The others would support him, "*Sir, to mothai, tyachi item ahe*" (Sir, he is old enough, he has a girlfriend.)

The exercise in removing under-age participants was more or less futile because invariably the room had broken windows, and sometimes a missing door. Those who left simply climbed the window sill from the outside and listened in from there, getting a balcony view of the proceedings.[1]

And so the class would commence, with participants coming in and going out of the room, the participants giggling when I spoke about penile tumescence, urging me to move on, "*Oh! Sir, he sagla mahit ahe, porincha sanga*" (We know all about this, tell us about the girls.), as they looked hungrily at the diagrams of female reproductive organs. The questions they asked were more or less the same I got thru chits and helpline calls and could be grouped into 11 categories- 1. Masturbation, 2. Penis size, 3. Intercourse stamina, 4. The comparative sexual desire of men and woman, 5. A test to prove that the female is a virgin 6. Any incontrovertible proof that the female was sexually satisfied after intercourse and was not faking it 7. A sure shot method of begetting a male child 8. Concept of Hijra 9. Infertility 10. HIV/AIDS and the rest fell into the miscellaneous 11<sup>th</sup> category

(e.g. How are identical twins born?)

Considering the distinct possibility that at least some were sexually active, I made it a point to spend some time on HIV/AIDS and STIs, the importance of using condoms for safe sex and family planning. I used to and still get enquiries from young adults, looking for an abortion clinic for their pregnant girlfriends. In many of these cases, it comes about that the girl has hidden the fact from everyone, many times to the point where it is no longer legal to undergo an abortion. And the callous politicians of the state government of Maharashtra (whatever be the ruling party) continue to be vociferous in their belief that Sex Education is against Indian ethos.

The expletives that were running through my mind as I debated the issue of Sex Education in schools on a Marathi Channel with a politician from BJP are best left unprinted. He kept on insisting that girls learnt everything they needed to know from their mothers when they had their first menses. The fact that the mothers knew even less than the daughters and were also responsible for perpetuating the same superstitions about menses that they had learned by rote was lost on him.

And what about the boys? Apparently, they don't need to be taught anything: They 'know' it all! I don't quite get it. Just ask a Straight guy, willing to answer questions honestly on these matters— 'Does he get 'it' right the first time? How many fumbling, embarrassing and frustrating attempts does it take to get 'it' right with his girlfriend or wife before he can say Hurrah!'

I had once been to a Sex Education syllabus related one-day meeting in Mumbai called by some officials from the Education Department. I do not remember how they got my name; I am not known to hobnob with government functionaries to be the usual suspect at such meetings. As usual, officials made notes, paid our honorarium/travel and that was that. I didn't receive the minutes of the meeting; I do not know the outcome of the meeting. But that is how it always is. If you don't attend, you are not participating in the democratic process, so you have no right to complain, if you do, your views are not worth a damn. I do not remember who was present and I do not remember

the discussion – the usual platitudinous drivel no doubt.

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

[1] I insisted on the exercise. As an openly Gay man, I was always in a vulnerable position, when dealing with underage persons. There were specific policies which I strictly followed:

1. *Samapathik* Trust never admitted a minor person into the Drop-in centre unless a guardian or school Counsellor accompanied him/her/them.
2. I conducted sessions of Sex Education, HIV/AIDS, STIs for adolescents on the invitation of the NGO/institution or guardian/school Counsellors.

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## THE FEEL OF IT

The challenges of conducting Sex Education sessions for adolescents were varied, but conducting a session for visually challenged students at a Blind School was by far the most difficult challenge I faced. I had approached the school with the idea; initially, the school had some misgivings, but finally, a while later they relented.

The school was aware that what I was doing was much needed but was understandably unsure whether I would be able to deliver the goods without any controversy. To get an idea of the challenges involved, taking the school permission, I had gone to meet the adolescent boys to get an understanding of the way they understood sex and sexuality.

I sat talking with a group of male students around 13-14 years of age, trying to build rapport, to understand the common questions they had so that I could do some homework about addressing them. Expectedly, there were a lot of superstitions and misconceptions. Eventually, a boy had opened up to talk about a homosexual experience, but the others had immediately shushed him, and he had clammed up. (I came to know later, from other sources, while doing research for my book *Manavi Laingikata- Ek Prathamik Olakah* (Introduction to Human Sexuality) that some visually challenged adolescent boys sexually pleased each other, but even in that sightless world it carried the stigma of the sighted world.)

Since I was habituated to drawing male and female anatomy diagrams on the blackboard, the biggest challenge was, explaining the structure and arrangement of reproductive organs (especially of the opposite sex.) While interacting with the boys, I came to know that, there were a few who had maybe 10 to 15% vision. They came very close to the blackboard, and slanting their heads in a specific angle, were able to see the diagrams vaguely. But many did not have any vision at all.

I tried to ask around, but I was unable to procure models of male and female reproductive organs. So, in the end, I came upon an amateur

solution. I asked my Mom to prepare Wheat dough and used that to make male and female external genitals to the best of my creative ability. I dried the 'organs', knowing that even if the outlines were passable, the texture was definitely not and then placing them in the flat vessel meant for keeping *chapatis* (Indian leavened bread) took them to class, setting myself the lowest possible standard of success—the session has to do no harm, if not good.

Did the session succeed? I had no way of knowing... then.

Fast forward to 2017, about twelve to fourteen years later. *Tathapi* Trust (Pune) which worked on disability and sexuality (amongst other sexuality-related themes), had prepared a manual of Sex Education in Braille and had invited me as a speaker at the event organised for the release of the manual. After the event, one visually challenged man in his late twenties brought to me by a volunteer said, “Sir, I will never forget the valuable information you gave us...”. I had been able to address a lot of their misconceptions about sex, and for the first time in their lives, they had a session where they could giggle and laugh in a class and openly ask questions on 'THE' topic. Keeping down the snack dish beside me, I sat there, quietly relishing in the praise. Finally, he took out his cell phone, “Please give me your number, and I will call you if any of my friends have queries which I cannot answer” and started entering my number in the mobile, expertly feeling the Braille numbers on the keypad.





## THE AUGUST GATHERING

You can well imagine my excitement and trauma at getting an opportunity to speak at an event planned for *Indian Psychiatrist Society (IPS)* (Pune branch) members. Sometime in 2002, Dr Mohan Agashe, then the Director of *Maharashtra Institute of Mental Health (MIMH)*, *Sassoon Hospital*, Pune, introduced me to Psychiatrist Dr Nischol Raval who was a lecturer in Psychiatry there. Dr Raval was very supportive of LGBT, and a couple of months later, during one of our discussions, I had hesitantly broached the idea of talking about my work and Trust at an IPS meeting. He was up for it and had successfully lobbied to get me 10 minutes to address the audience, before the wining and dining started, at an event (I think it was a drug launch, am not sure), that was held someday in mid-2002 to mid-2003.

Coincidentally, on the same day, Abhina, a trustee of *Samapathik Trust* and I had organised a Gay party at a bungalow at the base of Sinhagad fort. Even though the event was not a *Samapathik Trust* event, I had to attend.

A Gay guy, I forget his name, took charge of working out the details, and I sponsored the initial expenses. After the party, he didn't bother to provide any account of the monies. He kept whining that my sponsorship + the charges of ₹50 (I think) per person that we levied for dinner (alcohol was not served, nor was it allowed at the venue) had not resulted in any profit. Instead, he had ended up with a loss. It was the first party I planned and, as it turned out, the only one. I had learned my lesson.

With the golden IPS opportunity on hand, I decided that I would give the talk and then, late at night, go to the party. I arrived at the IPS event venue a few minutes early, and as I nervously sat in a chair in the front row, I took a look around. Many were wearing coats, and I hoped that in my trademark shabby apparel, I didn't look like a doofus amongst them. I then timidly got up and went around distributing my pamphlets, the doctors looking at me questioningly. I hurried back to

my chair, heart thudding, sweating profusely, gouging the skin of my thumbs with my forefingers. I have had this habit forever, and at times people draw my attention to it when they see bleeding, the skin around the thumbs having come off.

As the event started, Dr Raval announced my name and I, a bundle of nerves, went to the podium and spoke or rather, looking at the august audience, stammered. Was it just my imagination? Or was the audience stone-faced? As I ended requesting them to refer their Gay clients to my support group meetings, there was a deathly silence, and shamefaced I slunk to my chair and sat down. Dr Raval thanked me for the information and called for a round of applause; there was only a smattering of claps.

I sat for a while, and as the doctors made a beeline for the watering hole, leaving behind my pamphlets on the chair, I desperately wanted to slink away. But I wanted to thank Dr Raval before I went and just as I was about to get up, a lady Psychiatrist came up to me and wished me the best. I stammered my thanks and wandered around, searching for Dr Raval and finally locating him, I started to thank him, for the opportunity, profusely. He interrupted by insisting that I have dinner before I leave. Nodding assent, I waited till he turned away, and quickly left, relieved that the ordeal was over. As I stepped outside, I took a deep breath and as I mounted my bike, I could feel my scrunched shoulder muscles relaxing.

Then came the next part, the anxiety to quickly and safely drive to the party to make a fleeting appearance before it shut down. As I rode, in pitch darkness, in the biting cold, my fingers freezing around the bike handbrakes, alongside Khadakwasla dam towards the base of Sinhagad fort, I knew Abhina would not be too pleased that I had missed most of the party. And so it was, her face showed her disapproval although she didn't say so.





## HEART OF STONE

“Am I speaking to Bindu Khire”, the voice was not familiar. I was at *Samapathik* Trust office when the call had come in. That was my first interaction with Dr Raman Khosla. He introduced himself to me and said that he would like to meet me in my office, unwilling to disclose the nature of the visit on the phone. He was a LGBT-friendly Psychiatrist, and a few of my visitors were his clients. They spoke highly of him. Intrigued, I waited.

At the knock on the door, I opened it and met him for the first time. Dr Khosla was in his late forties, fair, tall with a perpetually serious expression on his face. He came in and sat down, his body hunched. “You know Nachiket” he asked.

The question was rhetorical. He knew that I had known Nachiket for some time. He was a very handsome, spunky Gay youth around 22-23 years old. I had spoken to Nachiket on the helpline a few times and had also met him once at Green Bakery for a befriending session. Afraid that he might bump into some of his friends at the bakery which was one of his favourite haunts, we had gone on a long walk in the by lanes of North Main Road.

The doctor fell silent and then said resignedly, that Nachiket had died by suicide. There is no training on earth that can prepare you for such news. My clichéd response, “What” was simply my mind going blank. Well aware of what the sentence meant, my mind slammed the door on the news, declining to face it. Nachiket had been a client of Dr Khosla, and this had come as a shock to him too.

“What happened” I asked him the technicalities, but these were robotic questions meant to fill the void between us. Dr Khosla knew it, and I knew it. He briefly sketched the details, but at the end of it, all that remained was this heavy silence between us. Nothing to be said, nothing to be done; Dr Khosla left soon after. Later on, as our association grew; he conducted many *gratis* sessions on LGBTIQA for student Counsellors and was one of the few Psychiatrists who intervened on behalf of the LGBT community in the Supreme Court in

the Sec 377 IPC case.

I sat there in the office, in a daze, thinking- Nachiket had my helpline number. Why hadn't he called me? Why hadn't he called me? Why? Why? Like a cassette player, I replayed the question in my mind over and over. I was there, wasn't I?

What was the use of running the fucking helpline? I felt wholly and thoroughly useless. I got up and went home. Closing the door of my bedroom, I sat on the bed, staring blankly at the wall. Ruminating, ruminating... and then the shock hit me. How can someone, 22-23 years old, 16-17 years younger to me, who had his entire life ahead of him, just leave like that? How dare he? I felt so, so old, ancient.

And then, the tears started. I started crying, the pain in my chest unbearable. I went on and on as if the grief would never end. Realising that I desperately needed to speak to someone, I called a friend and Counsellor I knew, Sunita Wahi. I could hardly get the first two lines out, and she knew I was in bad shape. She was at Crosswords at Soharab Hall near Pune Station. Would I like to come there now? I left immediately, crying during the drive to the place. Parking my bike, I wiped my face and met her. For the next one and a half hours, we sat at the Crossword café, and she patiently heard me. Sensing I hadn't had any food for a long time, she ordered snacks and coffee, and we sat there, I pouring my heart out, uncaring of what the others around us felt.

Dr Gangakhedkar was sympathetic, "The moment a patient dies, the doctor is trained to walk away, you are not so trained, so it is hard for you." Apparently dealing with the first suicide case is the hardest. For me, that turned out to be true. From then on, I lost all sensitivity to such news.

Later on, on quite a few occasions, Transgender persons and Gays came to give me the bad news- a hanging or jump in front of a train. I know a couple of community members who revel in the tragic stories; that is the only time I see their faces aglow. Sometimes even a natural death is eagerly announced as death by suicide, and the breast-beating starts in earnest. In one case, the news of the death by suicide

of a Gay ex-staff member of my Trust, soon after his marriage, turned out to be a natural death- by a heart attack.

Inured to such news, it had no visible effect on me at all, and I remember Transgender Sheila complaining plaintively, “*Tumcha hruday dagdacha ahe*” (You are a stone-hearted person.) Yes. It is a waste, such a waste of beautiful lives but if I were to mourn every LGBTIQA death by suicide, every death of an HIV positive Gay or Transgender youth, I have not an iota of doubt, I wouldn't survive. But despite the desensitisation, the news took its toll in other ways. I would become irritated, quickly flare up in anger, and my depression always lurking under the surface, would eagerly reach out with its tentacles to pull me in.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individuals, the names Nachiket and Sheila used in the chapter are pseudonyms.





## NEWBIE COCKUPS

As a newbie, my work was a cocktail of trial and error, my cockiness and a devil may care attitude ensured cockups aplenty, and it took some time for me to find myself. One of the earliest cockups I remember was in 2004 when I was invited by Dr Manisha Gupte and Milind Chavan to conduct a session on LGBT at a workshop organised by *Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal* (MASUM.) Ketki Ranade (who was then working in *Bapu Trust*) and I were to conduct the session. I would focus on the basics, Sec 377 IPC, and Ketki on mental health and counselling aspects of LGBT. Ketki was a laid back person, calm and patient in her approach; in contrast, I was a shock-and-awe tactics guy. It was this strategy that I was going to use to start the session, and as I mentioned it to Ketki, she raised her eyebrows; that should have been warning enough.

Predictably my session was a disaster. In the beginning, I asked participants who in all probability had never heard the terms Gay, Lesbian... their reactions to a hypothetical scenario where they unexpectedly came home to see a guy and their adult son fornicating. The start was too overwhelming for the conservative audience, and the shell shocked silence gave me the first clue that maybe I need to re-strategise the delivery of my session. In contrast, the Counsellor's gentle manner of conducting the session was better received. A few days down the line Milind Chavan called me to inform me of the participants' feedback. I had scored 10 out of 10 for knowledge and 0 out of 10 for communication. Big surprise. It would be a long time before MASUM invited me again, but they did, and happily, participant feedback significantly improved over the years.

In 2004, with my (over) confidence growing, I approached Dr. Mohan Agashe (Director MIMH) and Dr Alka Pawar (MIMH), and they permitted me to conduct a session on LGBT issues with the Psychiatry PG students. By then Dr Nischol Raval had left for the UK.

I remember quite vividly that I was bloody stupid. Stupid to give PG students group work; they were doctors for god's sake, not



adolescents attending a session on Personality Development and although they were polite enough not to crib to my face, I suspect they were not happy. Had I been a PG student, I wouldn't have been either, doctors are accustomed to a certain style of presentation, and this definitely was not it. I returned home, kicking myself for not having taken some tips from Dr Shukla before conducting the session. How could I be such a moron? I had got a golden opportunity and stupid, stupid me had botched it up, royally, again.

But again, it might not have been the complete, unmitigated disaster as I imagined it to be. As I got to know a couple of Psychiatrists at MIMH, one of them held a long conversation with me about his unpleasant experiences with the Gay community where he had multiple times suffered unwarranted attention as he stood in public urinals.

“You know, I understand that we need to be sensitive and all, but we are human too. It is so difficult not to feel rage well up in you when you are suddenly accosted in a urinal and a stranger grabs your privates” I was sympathetic. I knew exactly what he meant, I had had similar experiences, and if you, gentle reader, believe that a stranger making a grab for my Gay privates at a male public urinal was a turn on for me, you are very much mistaken, I get mad with rage.

The only difference is, as an activist, I am not supposed to complain about such deplorable behaviours by a few community members. Calling out such actions is regarded as the ultimate betrayal. Instead, I am to ignore it or if possible, vigorously defend it. I do not, and that is another point of friction between some of my community members and me. But that has not stopped doctors, media, police, religious leaders et al. from making me their official punching bag for the wrong doings of a few.

To the Psychiatrist's credit, despite his unfortunate experiences in public urinals, he was very supportive. A few months later, he called me to MIMH and introduced me to a Gay youth, whom he had invited to the same meeting. I spoke with the young man and invited him to my office for a dialogue. As expected, he didn't show up. But then, those days, most of them didn't; they had second thoughts of coming

to a LGBT NGO.

A couple of years later, when MIMH was conducting counselling workshops for state government ICTC Counsellors, Dr Alka Pawar made it a point to add a LGBT session in the schedule even though the session was not part of the curriculum. I am thankful to her and the then director of MIMH- Dr Mohan Agashe for the opportunity.

On another front, I had started facing an internal conflict during my befriending sessions with clients. Before my training under Dr Raman Gangakhedkar et al., I used to think and state that I was a Counsellor mistakenly; I had neither a BA nor an MA in Psychology nor a Bachelor or Masters in Social Work, nor was I following principles of counselling. (In 2018 I attempted to do an external course of MA in Psychology, but unlike my study for a Law degree, this one turned out to be quite pedestrian and I gave up.) I didn't know then, but what I was doing was a mixture of 'befriending' (a word first introduced to me by Dr Vijay Thakur) and activism.

I was challenged on the word 'counselling' by Psychiatrist Dr Ulhas Luktuke when I went to request him if he would be so kind as to refer his Gay clients to my support group that I was struggling to run. He patiently explained to me that I was using the wrong word, and would I kindly read some textbooks to understand what exactly I was doing before using the term. Chastened, I slunk out of his clinic and went hunting for books on counselling.

Eventually, reading books and learning HIV pre-test and post-test counselling from Dr Raman Gangakhedkar prepared me on principles of counselling which I stated using in my befriending sessions. Still, a conflict that was subconsciously forming in my mind erupted unexpectedly at a befriending session with a closeted Gay youth.

I had arranged to meet him at Bund Garden for a befriending session. A little into our conversation, he started talking of wanting to get rid of this 'filthy, dirty desire for men.' Furious, I junked the principles of counselling and switching from the befriender mode to the activist mode gave him a piece of my mind. The session ended with a showdown, and we had parted with ill-will, each openly accusing the

other of being a loser.

As I left, my mind was all a tizzy. His barbs had bled all the wounds I had thought were healed. The scars were fragile, and a few scratches from a stranger had been sufficient to rupture them. It hurt, my whole life being invalidated again. It took a while for me to calm down, and as I did so, I knew that I had fucked up big time.

The next Saturday I went to Dr Gangakhedkar and confessed. I could see he was livid, his face stony, and as I prepared myself to be blasted out of the office, he got up and walked out. He was out for some time, and I shamefacedly waited, studying the tabletop, not knowing whether to leave or to stay. Just as I was about to leave, he came back and said, "*He barobar nahi kelat*". (You didn't do right) and that was it. But those words hurt more than all the homophobic remarks of the client.

That was the first time; I consciously realised the conflict- my struggle to be a Counsellor, and my brain itching to be an activist. I couldn't just sit there listening to a Gay man tell me that I was wrong and that he was right in deciding to get married for the sake of his parents or religion or whatever. Or where the Gay guy didn't want to marry, I couldn't just sit there seeing him in pain and turmoil, his instinct telling him that what he felt was natural but the entire world opposing him, hellbent on throttling his instinct. The match was very uneven and unfair and my sitting there impartially, playing the Counsellor saying "I see you are in pain", "It must be very tough...hummm" made me feel so fucking impotent and ashamed of myself.

The crisis within me would continue for a couple of years. I remember Dr Bhooshan Shukla once casually saying, "Aha... so now you were wearing the activists' hat in the befriending session". I suspected a mocking tone. That sentence rankled and I introspected, knowing that it was the bitter truth. I was trying to juggle two roles, each with a different philosophy. And so, I finally decided to junk the Counsellor's role consciously.

I started telling my clients that I am a Gay activist. They couldn't care

less as long as they got what they wanted. Most, to their chagrin, realised that I couldn't give them what they wanted- either a cure or a fantastic lover. Had I known the trick of getting a fantastic lover, would I still be single? I was now aiding only those of my clients who wanted to fight this ignorant, homophobic, transphobic world. For the rest, their first meeting with me was also the last.

Now looking back, I can say that that was a good decision on my part. The conflict in me came to an end; I didn't have to struggle with myself to be a professional Counsellor. I knew and understood that the Counsellor plays an important role, but for sure I was not cut out to be one, I never was. A Psychiatrist once told me that, counselling is a matter of practice and skills; I beg to differ. You have to have a particular constitutional aptitude for it, and I am the last one to have it.

Let me end this chapter with a miscommunication howler I can't resist jotting down. A guy called me; his mother being bedridden, he could not leave his house (his wife and children were outstation), and so he invited me to his home. I accepted.

This decision to visit his house may seem strange and unsafe, yes, it was very unsafe, and I would not advise it to anyone. Still, in those days, most people would not be seen dead in the Trust office, because everyone assumed, mistakenly I might add, that the whole world knew that the Trust office was 'that' kind of office. To ease that perception, I had ensured that there was no board put up, which announced that it was a LGBT Trust, but that had made no difference.

The only choice I had was to agree to meet clients at public places during the day, for befriending. Although this policy is against the tenets of counselling, I had no choice knowing that I wouldn't meet even 0.01% of community members if I sat in my Trust office waiting for clients to walk in. In the present case, there was a slight change in format, that for the first time, I was visiting someone at home, instead of a public place like a park or a bridge at Deccan.

It was an older guy (it turned out he was near retirement) who opened the door, and as I came in, his bedridden mother called out,

“Who is it?” He had responded stating “Neighbour”. Before she displayed any curiosity, he stated, “*Aamhi jara gacchi var jaun yeto*” (We are just going to the terrace for a while.) We sat on the adjoining terrace, awhile, talking and nibbling sweets that he had got from the kitchen. He spoke of his sexuality, his wife and children (who didn't know that he was Gay), his loneliness, and his regret at a life wasted pretending to be Straight. Now and then the talk got interrupted by his mother calling out to him, and he would tend to her needs and come back again. As the conversation ended, we got up, and as we were descending the stairs, he suddenly put his hand in his pocket and taking out a ₹100.00 note, tried to stuff it in my breast pocket. Bewildered, I reared back, not knowing what he was doing. “No.. no please keep it”, he implored. I protested, “No... no... why?”.

It transpired that he had assumed that I was a male sex worker and he had invited me to service him, but with his ill mother in the house calling him now and then, he had lost his nerve. Not wanting to cause me any loss he wanted to make up for it by giving me travel expenses; as he delicately put it, “That is the least I can do”- a deeply embarrassing moment for me. I avoided meeting his eyes, muttered a few soothing words and left. For the life of me, I can't remember whether I accepted the money or not.





## 1 MADHAVBAG

I first read the script of the Marathi play *1 Madhavbag*, written by Chetan Datar, a monologue of a mother speaking about her Gay son, in *Purush Spandana* magazine (1999 issue, *1 Madhavbag arthat maazha mulga.*) The play, directed by Chetan Datar, was then staged by *Awishkar* Theatre Group of Mumbai and Rama Joshi did an amazing job of playing the part of the mother. In Marathi, there were very few plays which dealt with LGBT themes and even fewer, which were good- e.g. Vijay Tendulkar's *Mitrachi Goshta* (on Lesbianism), Satish Alekar's *Begam Barve* (on Gender Identity), Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Holi*, etc., and so Chetan's sensitive play had impressed me.

Those days, stage and TV representation of LGBT meant either blatant homophobia and transphobia or supporting, minor male characters presented as feminine clowns. As I write this eighteen years later, tragically, I don't see much change, except for one noticeable difference. Nowadays, once in a while, a Hijra is invited as a guest to a TV show and felicitated. The cameraperson makes sure to capture a couple of film and TV artists, with tears in their eyes as they listen to the travails of the Hijra. These are the same artists who continue to have no qualms in being part of homophobic and transphobic films and serials or playing roles which are blatantly homophobic or transphobic.

Impressed with Chetan's play, I donated a tiny amount to *Aavishkar*, which had staged the play. On receiving the donation, Arun Kakade Sir (Kaka) of *Aaviskhar* Theatre group wrote to me, on July 28, 2002, that he would like to utilise the funds to stage the play again, in Pune.

To be accurate- two plays in one. The first play was a dramatisation of the story *Jave Tyancha Vansha* (In their shoes), based on a Gay-themed short-story by the same name from the book *Ahe He Asa Ahe* authored by Gauri Deshpande (1986, *Mauj* Publication); enacted and directed by Rajashri Sawant-Wad and post-interval *1 Madhavbag*. We mutually decided that *Awishkar* would look after the technicalities of

the play, I would book the theatre, and since my Trust registration was not yet through, the costs of advertising it would be paid for by me.

It was the first time I had undertaken such collaboration. After talking to Kaka, we agreed that *Bharat Natya Mandir* would be best suited for the performance. Although we wanted to stage it on a Saturday or a Sunday, the dates were unavailable. Hence, we finally settled for a show on a Thursday at 9.30 pm. I got someone to prepare the advertisement and submitted it to the Marathi newspaper *Sakal*. I then drafted a pamphlet of *Samapathik* Trust, in English and photocopied two hundred copies of it.

The night before the play, I spent a sleepless night, tossing and turning, tense and excited about the performance. I reached the venue early and heaved a sigh of relief on finding that Rama Joshi and their technical team had already arrived from Mumbai, in their van, and had started preparations.

It was the first time I met Kaka in person. He was a thin man probably in his sixties; it was difficult to ascertain his age. Twelve years later, when we organised the play again, on October 10, 2014 (as part of the two day *Advait* (Pune Queer Theatre and Film Festival), he looked exactly the same.[1] After introductions, he asked me whether I had advertised the play. "Yes, we have advertised in *Sakal* newspaper." Satisfied he went into the theatre wing.

Sitting outside on the wooden bench at the back of the booking cabin, I would now and then anxiously visit the booking window to check the sale. Disappointed, I would return and fidget for a few minutes before heading back to the booking cabin again.

Fifteen minutes before the play, Kaka came out, visited the booking window and quietly sat by my side. I was dejected. And looking at my miserable face, Kaka saw that it wouldn't take much for me to start crying. "You know, on one occasion, Satyadev Dubeyji directed a play that had been staged at Chabildas- an experimental theatre auditorium in Mumbai. As the third bell rang, he saw that there was a total audience of one and the man was standing outside the door. Dubeyji stepped forward and asked him, 'Do you want to see the

play<sup>क</sup> Startled, the man said, 'Yes, but...'. Dubeyji replied, 'Then come in and sit; we are about to start'. And the performance went on as usual." I said nothing. He ended, "It's ok. Sometimes these things happen. Come inside; the first bell is about to ring."

I went to the booking window and purchased a ticket to increase the sale by one. Then, having no staff or volunteers, I stood in the doorway next to the ticket checker to distribute the pamphlets. I saw Sunil Ganu, a friend of mine and warmly welcomed him and handed him the pamphlet. Then behind him, to my delight, I saw Marathi film-makers Sumitra Bhavne and Sunil Sukhtankar walk in. As the first play was about to start, I sat in the last row near the door, to hand out pamphlets to latecomers (two of them.)

After the plays, I approached Rama Mam who in her quiet tone noted, "Lok khup kami hote na?" (There were very few people); shamefaced I looked down; I had no response.

And so on September 5, 2002 (six days before my Trust registration came through), at about 11.30 pm my first collaborative venture of staging two Gay plays in *Bharat Natya Mandir* with a seating capacity of more than 500 came to an end. The expenses were more than thrice the amount I had donated to *Awishkar* for the play; with two brilliant performances by Rajashri Sawant-Wad and Rama Joshi; witnessed by a total audience of twenty-seven (including me.) Kaka Kakade's and my good deed had not gone unpunished.[2]

गुरु. दि. ५ सप्टें. रा. १॥ वा. भरत नाट्य मंदिर  
आजपासून ति. वि. ९ ते ११॥, ५ ते ८ भरतवर सुरू  
आविष्कार सादर करीत आहे  
कथा नाट्य

**'जावे त्यांच्या वंशा'**

कथा : गौरी देशपांडे • दिग्दर्शक/कलाकार : राजश्री सावंत-वाड

**१ माधवबाग**

लेखक/दिग्दर्शक : चेतन दातार  
• कलाकार : रमा जोशी  
ति. दर रु. ६०, ४०, २० फक्त

Advertisement in *Sakal* (Pune). September 3, 2002. Page 5.



\*\*\* **Notes and References**

[1] This time (the year 2014), the play received a fantastic response. After the performance, as I profusely thanked Rama Joshi, she gently said, “*Chan vatla. Magcha veli khupach kami loka hoti*”. (It felt good. Last time there was very little audience.) She had remembered.

[2] *Avishkar* gallantly bore the financial loss of the play.



FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION



## SAATHIDAAR

“Is there any Gay literature in Marathi?”, the youth asked hopefully. I strained to hear what he said, the handkerchief mask muffled his voice and hid his face. He had heard of *Samapathik* Trust from someone, whose name he didn't bother to disclose. He did not reveal his name either.

I made a note to myself that I would have to define a policy, of whether I would allow people to hide their faces when they came to the Drop-in Centre. I felt that it was unfair to other closeted Gay men and Transgender persons at the centre, their faces visible for all to see.

After the usual litany of questions doubting the naturalness of two men loving each other, the youth expressed his desire to leaf through the meagre collection of LGBT books in the Trust library. I handed him a copy of *Loving Someone Gay* by Don Clarke; he returned it immediately: he wanted something in vernacular. I shook my head ruefully.

Of the few books I had on the subject, in the Trust library, I had brought a few from the USA, some were donations, and I had bought most from the second-hand book exhibitions, periodically set up at the *Institution of Engineers Hall*. It has been my hobby to visit these exhibitions, hoping to find some gem amongst the drivel laid on the tables. I spend hours going thru each table painstakingly, shifting my weight from one aching leg to other, the musty smell of books pervading the hall, hoping to experience a thrill up my spine when I stumble upon a book I have long coveted.

Perhaps my love of books had something to do with the fact that I appeared as a sissy to the boys who ragged me: “*Bindu poricha naav ahe, tyachi chaadi kadhun baghu kon ahe to*” (Bindu is a girl's name; let us take off his shorts to see whether he is a boy or a girl.) Terrified, I would seek the safety of the house and a refuge in the books, reading what my parents read, as there were no children's books around. So from the fourth standard (when I was about nine years old) onwards, I

had James Hadley Chase, Harold Robbins, P.G. Wodehouse, Earl Stanley Gardner for company. I distinctly remember, asking my Mom, “*Yacha artha lagat nahi*” (I don't understand this), a line from some book (Harold Robbins' book), which went something like, 'He took off her clothes.... broke the capsule under her nose and she opened up like a flower'. I tried to visualise how a woman can open up like a flower and had asked Mom to elaborate. I don't remember her reply, but she didn't scold me or stop me from reading books.

So obsessed was I with books, that for my birthday, I would decline the offering of clothes from my Mom and demand money for books. Curiously, despite being a voracious reader herself, she staunchly believed that books were not worth purchasing- “After you finish reading them, what's their use”. So every year, just before my birthday, I would start negotiations with my Mom. We would strike a bargain, and she would gift me money to buy clothes, along with additional monies to buy at least one book.

Anyways, so here we were in the Trust. Although my meagre collection had eventually grown- books by Gore Vidal, Randy Shilts etc., in those early years, there were few takers for English books. The American books were cultural aliens and didn't resonate with the readers. So that left only a handful of Indian books- Shakuntala Devi's *The World of Homosexuals*, AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan's (ABVA) *Less than Gay*, a few issues of *Bombay Dost* and a few issues of *Trikone*. All of them in English. (Alas, later on, quite a few books got borrowed never to be returned.)

Marathi literature had very few references to LGBT issues and what little there was, was mostly homophobic, or scandalising presented- Sri. Na. Pendse's *Octopus* (1972, *Continental Publication*) comes to mind. And so, out of the need for Marathi Gay literature which reflected the regional cultural ethos, I decided to make an effort.

I made the first attempt to self-publish in 2003; a sixteen-page, annual magazine, called *Saathidaar* (Partner), priced at ₹50.00 per copy. Wisely, I printed only 50 copies of it. The magazine turned out to be a resounding flop. Many potential buyers were in the closet and couldn't afford to be seen with a copy of it or reading it; worse, it had

neither amorous images nor stories of amatory pursuits.

Despite the flop show, I persisted and brought out another sixteen-page annual issue the next year. That too, bombed. After these two fiascos, it took a long time, fifteen years to be precise, for me to make another attempt and publish *Samapathik*, the first Marathi LGBTIQA Diwali Ank (2019 annual issue) which proved to be a hit amongst readers despite the absence of lubricious images[1][2]. In 2020, I released the PDF version of the magazine for free, during the COVID-19 crisis lockdown.

As I sat sipping tea at Nayan Kulkarni's house (a friend of mine and a good advisor) and stated my decision of closing the publication of *Saathidaar*, she replied, visibly relieved, "*Chala bai, chan zhala*" (What a relief! Good thing.)



*Saathidaar* (2003)



*Samapathik* (2019)

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Samapathik Trust to release LGBT-themed Diwali Ank today. By Prachi Bari. *Hindustan Times*. Pune. Metro. October 15, 2019. Page 3.

[2] *Samajvyathanvar Diwaliankatun Prakash* (Spotlight on social issues thru magazine) By Suvarna Navale. *Sakal*. Pune. October 18, 2019. Page 3.





## MY GARBAGE NOVELLA

It was around the time of *Saathidaar* magazine fiasco that the novella *Partner* was born. I had my doubts about my competency in writing; I didn't know whether the final product would resonate with the readers; nevertheless, I decided to give it a shot. Since I didn't know Marathi typing, I started using the Roman script to type in Marathi- that was the fastest way I could type my ideas.

As I mused and started writing about my past, I realised that I was writing about the misconceptions I had about being Gay and quickly realised that anyone who reads only a part of it was likely to get the wrong signals.

So, I spent a lot of time brainstorming and concluded that I had to fuse two layers somehow; one, the ignorant, insecure me experiencing doubts, insecurities, self-hate. And the second one a more evolved me which who looks back and corrects the misconceptions that the reader might have on reading passages of my un-evolved state. And so the book was written as a two-layered book- while cleaning my house the older me finds a diary which I had maintained since adolescence, and I read the diary and reflect on it.

I used two different fonts to separate the two layers: the diary text is in a standard Marathi font whereas whenever I felt that I had to reflect on the incident of the past, the reflection was in indented paragraphs in Marathi Italic font. For example, my diary read, 'I think I am getting pimples due to masturbation.' It was immediately followed by my musing in the next indented paragraph, in italic font, that 'It was much later on that I realised that there were no bad effects of masturbation...'

As I started work on the book, I quickly got hooked on writing. It was a sort of catharsis for me to write about being Gay. I didn't know of any openly Gay person who had written any such book in Marathi. The book was mostly fiction, a modest seventy-two-page long novella.

The key was to find an agency willing to type the Gay novella in

Marathi, from the Roman script, without blanching at the subject matter. Finally, my friend Sunil Ganu referred me to his friend who had a publishing agency, where the novella was typed and proofread.

How should I go about publishing it? Should I publish it myself or hunt for a publisher? I had no experience in publishing a book; neither did I have the distribution network. So I decided to give the latter option a try and visited a renowned publisher in Pune. After giving him the script, I followed up in a couple of weeks. As I sat down, he immediately handed the script back to me saying, "*He sahitya nahi, kachra ahe*" (This is not literature, this is garbage); read-faced I was out of his office within the minute.

I was hurt, not angry. I had enjoyed writing the novella, and I considered it to be a realistic portrayal of what a Gay youth goes through, living in a conservative environment. His dismissal of my life and lives of scores like me, as garbage, stung me no end. The hurt metamorphosed into anger and I took a call to publish the book myself- a 1000 copy edition.

I asked the publishing agency which had done the typing whether they would be interested in undertaking the book layout and printing work; they were willing, provided their name was not listed on the verso page.

I spent a lot of time contemplating whether the cover should be subtle or an in-your-face type. The problem with subtlety was that since I was an unknown Gay author, potential readers may not be able to decipher it. On-the-other-hand, the problem with the in-your-face book cover was that not only would the Straight audience not touch it with a bargepole, even the Gay audience, which was mostly closeted, would find it difficult to pick it off the bookshelf publicly. In the end, I decided to sacrifice subtlety.

An artist designed two options for the book cover. The first option depicted a Gay man staring at his reflection in the mirror; which I discarded. The second option, with a pink background, showed outlines of two men with butterfly wings holding hands; which I chose as the book cover. It, later on, became the logo of my Trust. The book

was titled *Partner*, admittedly not a very imaginative name but the name along with the cover didn't leave much to the imagination.

My friend Nayan Kulkarni suggested that I request some renowned author to write a preface for my book. She felt it was necessary to get some recognition. Accordingly, I mulled over various names, but the one thing which held me back was not knowing how the preface writer would present the subject. If he/she/they were to write a preface with subtle or not so subtle homophobic elements, would it not undo what I had set out to do? A well-known personality was not a guarantee that the person would be sensitive and liberal. Spending a few days brooding over this, I discarded the idea. I didn't want to take that risk.

I self-published *Partner* in November 2004. I was jubilant, but predictably Mom was traumatised, worried about the infamy that would follow. Intoxicated by my book, I had sadly become insensitive to her fears. I turned a deaf ear to her complaints. Even at the cost of hurting her, I felt I had to do this.



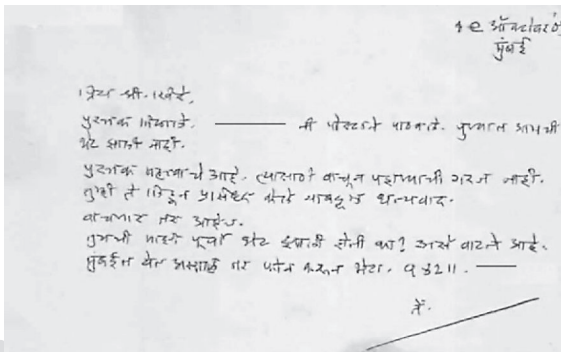
Book Cover: *Partner*





## OUT IN PRINT

A journalist friend of mine was going to meet the great playwright Vijay Tendulkar for an interview. I handed him a copy of my maiden novella *Partner* to gift it to the playwright. Their meeting did not materialise, and so the journalist sent the book to the playwright by post. I wondered what Tendulkar would say on reading the book. Savvy Tendulkar, sent a postcard to me, not after but before reading the book, inviting me to meet him in Mumbai.



### Vijay Tendulkar's Letter to me

(Note by Bindumadhav Khire: I have masked the journalists' name and the playwright's contact number)

I was delighted and looked forward to meeting him. It is one of my big regrets that the meeting never materialised. I got caught up in my work, and despite going to Mumbai many times, I couldn't arrange my schedule to meet him.

At the office, I had stacks of books lining the walls; I had to get them to bookstores. I approached a well-known bookstore in Pune, took out a copy of the book and as I was about to take a seat, handed it to the person who had got up to greet me. He took one look at the cover and cooing as if to a baby in a crib, said, "Such books don't sell here, you should go to Pune Station. There are stalls there which sell such books." By the time his advice ended, I was out on the road; he had whisked me out of the door and closed the glass door behind me.



The stalls at Pune Station that he referred me to, sold pornographic film CDs and soft porn magazines with lascivious stories of *bhabi's* (brother's wife) affair with the *devar* (husband's brother) and all and sundry Straight porn thrown in. The guy had got it all wrong; my book was not soft porn or hard porn for that matter.

Eventually, I hit pay dirt when I visited *Rasik Sahitya* (I am unsure but I think, at that time, they had temporarily shifted to S.P. College while their shop in Appa Balwant Chowk was under renovation.) The person I met agreed to stock a couple of copies, 'on sale'. A journalist friend got in touch with *Akshardhara*, and that enabled me to keep a couple of copies there. Later on, a couple of other bookstores in Pune started stocking them.

Much later, I would get a breakthrough when Shobhna S. Kumar from Mumbai launched *QueerInk*, an online bookstore, where she started stocking my books.

I advertised the book through HST and *GB Yahoo* group. Soon HST organised reading of the book at one of its 'Sunday High' events and a dozen or so, mostly Seenagers came for the reading.

A decent review was given on *GB Yahoo* group by one of the GB list members while pointing out one embarrassing mistake- I had given the reference of the English translation of *Manu Smriti* and had got the name of the translator wrong.

The publicity through the GB Yahoo list and HST was limited, and I started thinking about how I could publicise the book. But this time, for a change, fate was kind to me. Ujwala Mehendale, one of my friends, liked the book very much and requested her colleague, Santosh Shenai who was editor of the Sunday supplement of *Sakal*, to read the book.

He read it, liked it and asked Ujwala to review the book. A glowing review followed in *Sakal*[1]. The next editor's meeting of *Sakal* was a microcosm of the world, a few of Santosh's unhappy colleagues asked him "Why was the topic covered? Why was it given so much space? What would the readers say?" Santosh, supported by some of his other colleagues, stood his ground, opining that *Sakal*, as a platform,

should be made available to an oppressed community if they wanted their voices heard.

And suddenly I was out to all of Pune and beyond. Feedback was bound to follow.

The first one was from one of my neighbours. As I climbed down the stairs, she, standing at her door, said, "We have read the review of your book in *Sakal*." My body was suddenly tense with foreboding, and then she smiled... I was on top of the world.

The feedback was, to put it mildly, outstanding. An old married man called on the landline (In the first edition, I had foolishly printed my home address and landline number) and since I was not at home, the call was received by my Mom. On coming to know that she was my mother, the caller heaped praise on my work and me. That was a pleasant surprise for her and she, in a gush of feeling, narrated the incident to me; she hadn't expected such affirmative feedback from anyone.

I vividly remember a person from Kolhapur who came to meet me. He was on a visit to Pune for some work and had visited the book exhibition at *Atre Sabhagruha* (Atre Hall.) The book cover caught his Gay eye and unable to buy and take it home (he was married), he had stood in the corner of the exhibition hall and read the entire book within a couple of hours. He took a break now and then, lest someone notice him reading the same book whilst he was there. He copied the address of *Samapathik* Trust from the book (given in the Appendix) and had come to congratulate me on what he termed as a very bold book. As he left, he, in his typical Kolhapuri accent, added, "*Aamcha mardani Kolhapurat bi he lai chaltai*" (This goes on a lot in our masculine Kolhapur too.)

I received very little feedback face-to-face from Gay men. Much of the feedback about *Partner* was by email or Inland letters or envelopes stuffed with pages and pages of writing, praising the book and writers using the opportunity to painstakingly note their own experiences in detail, sharing with me their stories of loneliness, pain and loss. The letters were touching, painful to read and repeatedly reminded me of

the importance of the work I was doing.

The only bad feedback I got was from a crazy guy who sent letters to my home address. After the review in *Sakal*, I soon received a letter which had a Nagpur stamp, no return address and fulminated at my warped morality. The writing style was very decorative, all swirls and stalks. Some of the passages indicated that the writer was male and reading the content I got a sense that the person was not playing with a full deck.

Subsequently, over four to six years, I got letters from him about once a year, initially Inland letters and then postcards with the same decorative style of writing, all swirls and stalks. It was the postcards that bothered me because my Mom would receive the postcard (I was not home most of the time) read it and get disturbed about the rant. Anxiously she would hand the postcard to me and wait for a few soothing words from me. I would have a good laugh and tearing the postcard throw it in the dustbin. By the time she got habituated to the stylised writing and stopped worrying, the letters stopped coming. I noted that mercifully, he hadn't dared call me on the landline; had Mom picked up such a call, she would have freaked out.

*Partner* turned out to be my most successful book (the rest barring *Manavi Laingikata- ek prathamik olkah* were flops.) The first edition sold out. In November 2008 I printed another cheap 'newsprint paper' edition of 500 copies. Finally, in 2018, on the occasion of the first annual LGBTIQA Marathi Literary Festival- *Mooknayak*, that we had organised[2][3][4], I made the softcopy (PDF) of the book available for free download on [www.eSahitya.com](http://www.eSahitya.com). I continue to get extremely positive feedback from the new generation readers who come across *Partner* on the website, and I am deeply thankful to them for their kind words.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] *Jagaveglya 'jevalagan'chi kahani (Pustak Parichay.)*(The Story of an out-of-the-world couple) (Book Review.) By Ujwala Mehendale. *Sakal*. Pune. Page 7. February 20, 2005.

[2] *Ghusmaticha Hunkar*. (The voice of the oppressed) Editorial. *Lokmat*. Pune. Page 6. July 14, 2018.

[3] *Mooknayak*, the first annual Marathi LGBTIQA Literary Festival, was held on November 25, 2018, at *Jyotsna Bhole Sabhagruha*, Pune; the second was held on December 29, 2019, at the same venue.

[4] Notes and References on the second edition of *Mooknayak*

At the second *Mooknayak* Literary Festival, three resolutions were discussed and passed. The first one opposed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019, in its current form. After a panel discussion on CAA- Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and NRC- National Register of Citizens and its probable effects on vulnerable populations, a vote was taken- a majority voted to oppose CAA and NRC.

- Second edition of Marathi LGBTIQA literary festival, *Mooknayak*, today. By Amandeep. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 3. December 29, 2019.
- *Shikshan ani rojgaratil saman sandhi ha samalingi samuhacha adhikaar*. (Equal opportunity in education and employment is the right of the Gay and Transgender community) *Pudhari*. My Pune. Page 6. December 30, 2019.





## INDRADHANU

The success of my novella *Partner* goaded me to write the next book- a non-fiction one- *Indradhanu-Samalaingikateche Vividh Ranga* (Rainbow-different colours of homosexuality.) I started frequenting *Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* (BORI) to read the relevant portions of the English translations of various ancient texts which carried references of sexual minorities. I noticed that a couple of English translations mapped a person of uncommon gender/sexuality into the catch-all word 'eunuch', making it difficult to understand the nuances of gender/sexuality.

I also approached the *Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal* (Historical Society of India) to read relevant portions of English translations of historical texts- *Baburnama*, *Akbarnama* etc. Dr Jaya Sagade (former Vice Principal and former Director Women's Studies Centre, *ILS Law College, Pune*), patiently guided me in studying cases related to Sec 377 IPC (I enrolled for and got a Law degree, through another college, much later.) I scoured *Tathapi* Trust, *Alochana* and *Bapu* Trust documentation centres to seek relevant material- surveys, reports, papers.

But try as I may, I could not find the last two issues of Raghunath Dhondo Karve's magazine *Samajswasthya* (R. D. Karve is the pioneer of Sex and Sexuality education in India.) I had read somewhere that a couple of issues of the year 1953, contained article/s on homosexuality and I was keen to know what the article/s said. At BORI, I was able to read his English booklets on Sexually Transmitted Diseases, but the institute did not have the magazines.

On making enquiries, I got to know that, someone had donated an incomplete set of the original magazines of *Samajswashtya* to the *Aksharsparsha* Library in Pune. The magazines were in tatters, the pages fragile, and as I carefully went through them, I realised that the last few issues were not part of the collection.

I then decided to try my luck at *Jaykar* Library (Savitribai Phule Pune University) and obtained a temporary membership. The helpful

assistant tried his best to get me the magazines but finding them turned out to be a nightmare. Finally, he located a few cupboards where he guessed the magazines could be and brought out a couple of bundles bound by string.

It was my job to dust and untie each magazine. Many were tied together with twine, lest the pages fall out. Each time I picked up a magazine to wipe it, to check the date on the cover or untie it, the cover and pages would crack or crumble to dust at a mere touch. For years, and years they had rotted away in the cupboard, uncared. The exercise, sadly, ended with a small pile of dust and scraps of magazine pieces at my feet and the realisation that the last two issues were not amongst the bundles.

Finally, I called up the actor, director Amol Palekar. He had made the outstanding film *Dhyasparva* (*Kal Ka Aadmi* in Hindi) on the life and times of Raghunath Dondo Karve. He would later make a progressive bilingual film dealing with homosexuality for the first time in Marathi titled *Thaang* (and *Quest* in English.) He suggested that I visit the *Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya* (Library) at Wadala, Mumbai. And so, half expecting that my trip to Mumbai may well turn out to be a waste, I boarded the bus. This time, luck was on my side, I got the issues, read them, took notes. The matter was not homophobic, and this was by far the oldest Marathi material I had read which was not opposing same-sex intercourse. Jubilant, I returned.

Having gone thru one unpleasant experience in search of a publisher for my novella *Partner*, I decided to publish *Indradhanu* myself. My friend Nayan advised me to seek the permission of the Trustees to publish the book through *Samapathik* Trust and to donate the funds for the cost of publishing; the reason being that it would give publicity to the Trust. I thought it was a good idea.

The Trustees agreed and passed a resolution to accept the publication of *Indradhanu*; with funds donated by me, with proceeds of sales accruing to the Trust, and that I would not take a single rupee as compensation.

Artist Chandrashekhar Begampure designed the cover for the book. Finally, after working on the book for more than two years, I set the publication date for January 2008. When the edition was ready, my excitement knew no bounds. I checked a random sample copy, verified it and taking charge of the edition brought it to the office in a rickshaw. The lift was, as usual, not working. I took someone's assistance to carry the lot upstairs to the office on the third floor. Task accomplished, breathless, I sat down.

After a while, I leisurely cut a bundle and picking up the first copy, casually flicked through the pages and froze. Some of the pages were blank. With growing alarm I picked up the second copy and the third copy, frantically flipping through each book, realising to my dismay that one out of three to four copies was missing a page or two or had duplicate pages. My excitement turned to ashes as I desolately sat on the floor, staring at the bundles of the thousand copies.



Book Cover: *Indradhanu*





## THE NAZ CASE (Sec 377 IPC)

The first formal meeting on Sec 377 IPC and the related Writ Petition[1] filed in the Delhi High Court by *Naz Foundation (India) Trust* was organised by *Lawyers Collective* on March 10, 2004, in Mumbai. Wanting to be on time, I arrived in Mumbai very early. Still, it took me a while to locate the venue- YWCA at Fort (South Mumbai) once passing by it without noticing the sign and finally with relief located it.

The conference room was a small, spotlessly clean one with about 15-20 chairs arranged around a table. When I arrived, there were very few participants. Amma arrived late, and if I remember correctly, Sopan Muller, Vikram Doctor, Alok Gupta, Gauri Sawant and Geeta Kumana were present.

Sr. Adv. Anand Grover presided over the meeting, and after the round of introductions, he gave a detailed presentation on Sec 377 IPC and the Writ Petition (*Lawyers Collective* was representing *Naz Foundation (India) Trust*.) He had wisely started with basics ('What is a Writ Petition?'), on the (correct) assumption that most of us were not legally savvy. The presentation was peppered with lots of questions, everybody eager to understand the nuances of the issues involved.

The Writ challenged Sec 377 IPC which 'criminalised intercourse against the order of nature' as violative of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of India, namely Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21 as it did not consider consent and age of partners. The section, a relic of the British era, was a cognisable, non-bailable and non-compoundable offence carrying a punishment of- *imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.*

The phrase 'order of nature' had been interpreted by courts to mean intercourse which did not lead to reproduction, which meant it applied to all sexually active Gay, Bisexual, Straight persons who practised fellatio and sodomy. The Straight community had not complained about the section. But it struck at the heart of Gay sexual



expression and became a favourite weapon of unscrupulous elements for extortion and blackmail. With significant involvement in our understanding of sexuality in the past 140 years, development of family planning aids, assisted reproductive technologies, the section's interpretation, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was completely outdated.

The explanation at the end of the section- *penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section* entailed discussion on a case where the Hon'ble Court had considered mutual masturbation, too, as violative of Sec 377 IPC. The Court interpreted the word 'penetration' as enveloping of one organ by another. So 'mutual masturbation' fell within that ambit, raising the possibility that the interpretation of 'penetration between the thighs' may also meet a similar fate.

Someone (was it Geeta<sup>₹</sup> I am not sure) raised a question as to whether the section applied to Lesbians. The explanation at the end of the section- *penetration was sufficient to constitute...* made the application of this section to Lesbian intercourse a grey area. Although there were no case laws which dealt with this issue, it was inevitable that the Damocles sword of Sec 377 IPC would continue to hang over every Lesbian and Bisexual woman.

The audience present at that conference was serious about the issue; it would be later when the issue became glamorous that the freeloaders and the foolish would join the fight. At one of the conferences (*Lawyers Collective* had not arranged it), one 'activist' exclaimed, "*377 se hum ko kya pharak padta hai? Hum to karte aye hai, karte rahenge*" (377 doesn't matter. We have been having Gay sex and we shall continue to do so.) Unable to resist, I had responded with a sharp rebuke. Sadly he was not the only one; I would continue to hear this foolish view for years from other LGBTIQAs quarters too.

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

[1] In The High Court of Delhi.

Naz Foundation (India) Trust v Government of NCT of Delhi and Ors  
CWP 7455 of 2001.



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## THIS IS LIFE!

In February of 2010, the *Zee Marathi* TV channel aired one of the episodes of *Yala Jeevan Aise Naav* (This Is Life) in which Abhina and I were interviewed by the well-known actor Renuka Shahane.[1] The TV channel also wanted a few members of the audience from the LGBT community, and a few Transgender persons and feminine Gay men (most of them HST staff) had shown up.

Abhina wore unisex clothes and had grown her hair long. I did not know then that she was also on hormone treatment. When I had first met her at HST, around nine years ago, I had thought that she was Gay, but I was wrong; she was blossoming as a Transwoman.

Abina, a trained dancer, had recently started trying out *satla* (female clothes.) She started 'Dancing Queens' with other Transgender persons, doing *Lavni* shows (a combination of traditional song and dance commonly associated with the state of Maharashtra, performed by women, primarily for the male audience, to the beats of a percussion instrument) with a group of cross-dressing queens.

The shoot, at a studio in Mumbai, started late but went very well; Renuka was at her professional best.

The bitching from some Gay men, started after the TV channel aired the show. They began grumbling that the audience of feminine Gay men shown in the interview were not representative of Gay men and that we should have found a more representative audience. Although this was the first time I was getting flack on the issue, it would not be the last.

Their perspective had two significant flaws. One, feminine Gay men too were part of our community and should not be denied their representation. The other was that the grumblers who considered themselves the 'correct' (read masculine) representation of Gay men refused to come out in the media. While they spent their whole time criticising everything, when it came to being out in public, they took no initiative, showed no gumption to take centre stage.

I faced the same problem with Lesbian and Bisexual women. For this show, Renuka had wanted their representation too, preferably Marathi speakers but if I could not find anyone who was able to speak Marathi, even a Hindi speaker from Pune or Mumbai (or for that matter anywhere in Maharashtra) would do.

I remember calling Lesbian and Bisexual individuals/groups in Pune and Mumbai that I knew. Not one was ready. One of the Lesbians from a Lesbian-Bisexual group in Mumbai harangued me: on how as a man, I would never understand the problems single women faced, even in a metropolis like Mumbai; that I would never know what it meant to be a Lesbian; she would face hell from male neighbours if she were to come on TV.

After blaming all the ills on the patriarchal society, the lament finally ended with, "Everything is so easy for you men". Click. Nachiket, the Gay youth who had died by suicide came to my mind. Yep! It must have been pretty easy for him.

Over the next few years, this accusation flung at me, quite a few times, always embroidered around the core theme of the charge 'you men'; implicit in it was the accusation of my being a CIS gendered male. I was the representative punching bag, the accusers not realising that I was fighting the same enemy. Their hitting out at me was evidence of their impotence, an implicit admission that they did not dare to take on the real enemy.

At times, I did try to present my view, but, it turned out to be a lost cause. They were willing to lend an ear only as long as I parroted their viewpoint and mutely agreed with them to the T. But God forbid, I was to disagree with them on even a comma or semi-colon. In a flash I was treated as a pariah in their Queerland, the accusations of being a male-chauvinist-pig, casteist, privileged or a *sanghi* (belonging to RSS) conveniently coming in handy.

Anyways, a month or so after the interview, I was sitting in the salon waiting my turn, with only one barber to take care of the long queue of people waiting for a haircut or a beard shave. I kept myself engaged, pretending to diligently read every single word of a spread

of the Marathi newspaper, unwilling to let go of it. The other parts of the newspaper continued to circulate amongst others in the queue. For a Saturday evening, the salon was surprisingly crowded. Since it was considered inauspicious to get a haircut on a Saturday, the salon would get very few customers, and so Saturdays worked great for me.

As my turn came, the barber, gesturing to me to sit in the chair, smiled, "Saw your program on TV". I hesitantly smiled, not knowing how to respond and how he would respond. Without a word, he went about his usual job of cutting my hair to a crewcut and then set about preparing for a beard shave. As he tilted the chair and laid a towel on my chest, he asked, tongue in cheek, something he had never asked in the many years I had visited him, "*Misha kadhaicha ka?*" (Shall I take off the moustache?) Embarrassed, I softly replied, "No, keep them". Impishly, he bit his lip and got busy.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] *Yala Jeevan Aise Naav*. Interview by anchor Renuka Shahane. February 12, 2010. *Zee Marathi* TV.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICijm8VpsTE> (part 1)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jp7h2jfSa4> (part 2)





## A MATTER OF SHAME!

“....He is at my place. Would you like to come?” It was late evening when I got the crisis call from Zameer, and by the time I reached his place behind Market Yard, it was past 10.00 pm.

Zameer opened the door, waved me in and introduced me to a youth in his twenties sitting cross-legged in the hall.

The youth stayed alone in Pune and had a budding career. He had a boyfriend (but they did not stay together.) One fine day his doorbell had rung, and without using the safety latch, he had opened the door to a nightmare.

As he narrated the ordeal in a dead voice, I sat, shocked in silence. Two men wearing handkerchief masks barged into his flat, assaulted him, tied him with a rope and raped him. During these activities, one of them mentioned that he deserved this for snaffling someone's boyfriend.

After they left, he sat alone in his flat for a long time, his mind a blank. As the shock set in, he had felt dirty at the violation. He went to the washroom to shower, washing, again and again, trying to get rid of that filthy touch. He spent the remaining day trying to figure out the next course of action and then called one of his Gay friends who referred him to Zameer, who in turn had immediately asked him to come to his place and called me.

Zameer had given him medication for the wounds. The youth was distraught; terrified that the guys might pay another visit. Zameer asked him to stay at his place overnight. The next day, I referred him to a female Counsellor, I knew. He met her a couple of times and found her counselling useful. I remember that, a day later, he asked me whether I could arrange for some sleeping pills as he was unable to sleep at night. I don't remember doing so, for I had reservations about him taking sleeping pills unsupervised.

I believed the youth, after questioning him to ascertain whether he was telling the truth. I asked him about his foes who could have done

this, but he kept on repeating that he had none; he was a docile person who minded his own business. I met his boyfriend at my office the next day. He came immediately and was willing to assist in any way possible, including providing a statement to the Police. He candidly stated that this was not his first relationship, but could not imagine any former boyfriend who could be so vindictive.

It was the legal part that was a bottleneck. The youth was not out. He was also adamant that he did not want to inform his family of the incident, and the news should not reach the press on any account.

A vital consequence of this case was that I suddenly had to face my shortcomings. I realised that thus far, I had made no efforts to liaise with the Police. I had made no effort to network with them, to identify officers who were sensitive on LGBT matters; someone I could confide in, someone who could counsel the victim and gain his confidence. I had come across cases where Policemen had extorted Gay men at cruising sites; and on one occasion, one Policeman had forced a Gay youth to perform fellatio on him.

Within this context of facts: neither the victim nor his boyfriend was out, and that the perpetrator had mentioned that it was something to do with his boyfriend's past; the Police were bound to, in such a serious case, investigate his boyfriend and his ex's. Did the victim and I have the confidence that Sec 377 IPC would not be used against any of them? Tragically, no.[1]

And so the matter ended. The victim was afraid to seek justice, the perpetrators roam free, and I, as an activist, failed. With my lack of network with the Police, I was ill-prepared to assist him in getting justice; it was a matter of shame for me.

The breakthrough came in 2011, when, the then CP of Pune Dr Meeran Chadha Borwankar Mam arranged a meeting of NGOs. But, more on that later.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] The years till the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC

were not easy; either for the Gay community or NGOs who worked for the Gay community. Two cases, given below, though not of Maharashtra, will give the reader an idea.

(i) In 2001, spurred by an informer, the police raided *Naz Foundation International* and *Bharosa* Trust offices in Lucknow, jailed four staffers and declared HIV/AIDS-related material found at the offices as 'obscene'.

- Sex, Lies and Lucknow. By Ashok Row Kavi. *Bombay Dost*. Vol 8. No. 1 & 2. Page 8. March 2002.

(ii) In 2006, Uttar Pradesh Policemen laid a trap and arrested four Gay men. Neither was a *panchanama* done, nor a medical examination. Identities revealed, the men faced a media trial.

- NGOs protest gay arrests in UP. By Rakesh Mohan Chaturvedi. *The Times of India*. January 4, 2006.
- Lucknow cops won't release gay men. *Mumbai Mirror*. January 12, 2006.
- Gay Community Protests Lucknow Arrests. *Mumbai Mirror*. January 14, 2006.







## MY LOYAL COMPANION

The trek to *Hadsar* fort had been fulfilling. I had reached the fort around 10.30 am. It was cloudy, the hills green in the rainy season, the fort easily identifiable by its two adjoining cylindrical shapes with a steep duct in between.

Parking the bike at the base of the village I walked on the rice farm bunds, making my way up. Luckily I met a shepherd on the way and asked for directions. He asked, "*Nali vate jaichai ka lambun sopya rastya vate jaicha*" (Did I want to climb the duct Or take the longer and easier way around) I took the longer route, and as it turned out, I had been wise in doing so, for on reaching the first rampart and looking down, I couldn't see how I could have found my way up the duct; all that was visible was dense green foliage.

The long route had been easy except for the part where some buffaloes, quietly grazing on a narrow path having a near-vertical cliff on one side and the other side a steep fall, had blocked my way. Every time I moved towards them, the last one would turn around and menacingly move towards me, head low, horns pointing and I would hastily retreat. There did not seem to be any shepherd about, and all I could do was be patient as they took their own sweet time to cross the narrow path.

The fort constructed during the Satvahan era had steps and arches carved from the rocks. Walking up, I crossed multiple sites, each with a stone arch, before finally reaching the top where a splendid panoramic view awaited me- green hills covered with mist, cloudy skies, waterfalls in the distant hills glistening like silver streaks. As I sat down in the grass, a cold wind blowing, I suddenly felt a pang; in this deafening silence, I missed having a boyfriend; I wanted to experience this beauty with him sitting beside me.

Descending the fort was easy enough, but I lost my way near the base, as the pathways on all the farm bunds looked the same.

The next day, although tired, I felt light, relaxed. I desperately hoped

that things would improve over the coming days. There was a lot of work to do, and I simply could not afford another attack of depression. It was this fear that had galvanised me to go on the trek.

The fear had gripped me a week before as a crick in my neck woke me early in the morning. As I turned, a stab of pain shot through my side—*déjà vu*. I was about to go through the same cycle again.

The pattern was always more or less the same. Unknown to me, silently, a nameless anxiety would start gnawing at me, slowly getting worse as days went by. I would begin worrying of things that others would ignore; panic about things that were of little consequence; and brood over worst-case scenarios of pain and death.

As if this was not enough, my Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) would aggravate. My staff was accustomed to it and ignored it, patiently waiting for me to turn off the water taps and check the locks again and again and ...; it was not enough that my staff did it. The worst part was when working on a book. I would keep on reading a paragraph over and over again checking for errors. It slowed down my progress, and despite the multiple reads, my brain was not processing the information. The experience was similar to the time when I drank *Bhang* (a drink made using Cannabis) that a Transgender person had generously brought to me on a couple of *Mahashivratri* festivals.

All these were invariably signs of an impending depression. I may not have been lucky to have a long term relationship with a man, but I did have a very long term relationship with depression; it played the part of a very loyal companion. It was because I punished myself with work till almost breakdown that I could keep it at bay and function to the maximum extent possible. But even that was not enough as the work itself was one of the causes for the depression.

As the symptoms worsened, I would either start waking up suddenly in the middle of the night unable to sleep for the rest of it or get into a fitful sleep filled with nightmares. The next day, feeling dizzy and irritated, I would then vent my anger on my staff for small, real or perceived mistakes. Later on, when Tinesh Chopade, who would become my foster son, joined my Trust, most of its brunt was borne by

him. I would know I was nasty and at times cruel, but during such periods I simply lashed out, seeking relief, unable to contain myself, control myself.

I learnt to recognise these signs. Day in, day out, I would go about my work, shoulders hunched as if they carried some invisible weight. My right and left forefinger would intensify their scratching at the base of the thumbs till they dug into the skin, tore and bled it. Still, I kept on doing it, conscious of what I was doing, stopping only when the nail suddenly gouged through flesh deep enough to send a searing stab of pain that my brain could no longer ignore.

I had been on anti-depression medications a few times but invariably discontinued them because of the side effects; especially erectile dysfunction, the mortal enemy of all men. Denied the most basic fundamental right; the right to self-pleasure, I junked the medications; the disease better than the cure.

Recognising these signs I would go on a trek to a fort, most of the time taking my bike, (my bike is my boyfriend), in biting cold or searing heat, punishing my body till the only thing I craved for would be to be back home, in my bed, yearning to sleep, hoping for a better tomorrow. The trek made me forget everything and focus on a tight schedule; start early in the morning to ride my bike for around a hundred and fifty km to a fort. Climb it, hoping all the while that I wouldn't lose my way, rest for half an hour and descend the fort to reach the base, latest by 4 pm and then start the ride back.

When the source of depression was the repeated failures and setbacks I faced, while working on LGBTIQ issues, this trick worked. But treks did not work when the source of the depression was my emotional loneliness. The only partial remedy for that was going on vacation to Konkan with my Mom.





## SO MUCH TO TELL

“The contract of doing the MSM & TG survey in Pune has been awarded to you.” The 'you' was HST. This was February 2005.[1] The call was music to my ears; finally, a big break. When *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* decided to work on HIV/AIDS and STI control in India, *Pathfinder International*, Pune, had become a nodal agency for implementing this project in a few high-risk districts of Maharashtra, which included Pune. Their initial focus was female sex workers in Budhwar Peth area and female sex workers who plied their trade on highways.

As far as MSM & TGs were concerned, there were no estimates of population in Pune/PCMC.[2] The funding agency needed data to decide if they should start a HIV/AIDS Targeted Intervention (TI), i.e. HIV/AIDS and STI control project in Pune for MSM & TG communities. They needed to know whether there was: a) a significant population of these communities and b) whether their sexual behaviour was high risk (unsafe sex), that could lead to increase in HIV infections, to warrant funding such an intervention. And so, they issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) to undertake a MSM & TG Survey in Pune to arrive at an estimate of the population and glean information about its HIV related risk behaviours.

I knew my application to undertake the survey would not be selected, as *Samapathik* Trust did not have any experience in conducting surveys. So, I negotiated an agreement with HST, whereby I wrote the proposal, and if accepted, *Samapathik* would be in charge of implementing it. HST would provide technical support and some staff for the survey.

Since this was the first time I was doing a survey and with no staff working for me, it was a big challenge. The first one was to design the questionnaire. I had to do this under the guidance of the expert- head of *Pathfinder International* (Brazil) Dr Carlos Laudari. He came to India and spent weeks in Pune, training me on drafting the questionnaire, pointing out my many mistakes in addition to doing a dozen other things for *Pathfinder International*, Pune. I am indebted to him for the

knowledge he gave me and the patience he showed in teaching me. In his spare time, Dr Laudari happily continued pursuing his favourite hobby of collecting curios. He once showed me a gorgeous, intricately carved silver ring he had purchased (from either India or Bhutan), which had two hinges and fit an entire finger.

Finding community Field Investigators to do the survey was a tough job. HST provided me with a few Field Investigators and a couple of Supervisors, but I needed another half dozen from Pune who knew the cruising areas. It was during this time that I approached Kailash, a youth from the community, and I told him that he could be the Supervisor of the Pune group if he was willing to form his team. Eagerly he called all his contacts and arranged a series of meetings at *Rudra* Restaurant, opposite *Alka* Theatre (The Restaurant closed a few years ago). The head waiter, in his fifties, would welcome the regalia that flounced in daily, with a broad smile on his face and the other waiters would delightedly watch the antics of the queens from the corner of their eyes as we, under their benevolent eyes, planned the survey with the community and interviews with service providers, Doctors and Counsellors.

After a one-day training of the Field Investigators and Supervisors, followed by trial runs, we conducted the survey in one week, from February 25, 2005 to March 03, 2005. The survey sites selected from Pune city and neighbouring areas were those which saw a high level of sexual interactions. Each team was to be on-site from 3.00 pm to 11.00 pm. The teams were to estimate the number of MSM who frequented the site (yes it would be a ballpark figure) and to canvass potential community members for an interview. We were paying a measly ₹50.00 to each interviewee for his time.

During the exercise, a particular site turned out to be a problem. Sandeep Mane (from HST), being experienced, had been given this site. A lot of cruising took place at that site. But enumeration or interviews became impossible as noticing Sandeep and his team members sitting or loitering nearby, military men began harassing them for sexual favours.

The refusal for sexual interludes became a point of friction, and we

accordingly informed *Pathfinder International* that in consideration of the safety of the team, we have removed them from that site and placed them elsewhere.

During the survey, I would take my bike and with the schedule of timing, team allocation, and site list with me make surprise visits to check whether the staff was in place. Likewise, the Supervisors did the same. Once, when I reached Swargate bus station, an interview was in process and strategically hiding so that the Field Investigator and the interviewee would not notice me, patiently waited for the interview to get over. Just as they parted after the interview, I saw the Supervisor Kalyani (from HST), who too, unknown to them and me, had hidden well, come out and meet the interviewee. Kalyani spoke to the interviewee for a few seconds, called the Field Investigator, they talked for a few minutes and then the interviewee left.

As I came out of hiding to meet them both, Kalyani was lambasting the Field Investigator. It transpired that Kalyani had asked the interviewee whether he had received the token amount. The interviewee baffled had replied in the negative, the Field Investigator had not told him he was due any amount for the interview. The Field Investigator had 'failed' to inform the interviewee and had tried to pocket the ₹50.00. His vociferous defence that the Supervisor had butted in when he was just about to hand it to the interviewee did not wash. Later, when we started work on our TI projects, I continued to face similar experiences from some of my community staff members and the list of those fired for either corruption or fraud or indiscipline continued to grow. Some things never change, some of the community members continue to be the community's worst enemy, wantonly exploiting, manipulating its own.

From *Pathfinder International*, Mr Shende and Mr Sourabh also made surprise visits, and during one such round, we ended at the same site. It was late evening, and they could not find the Field Investigator at the site. Aware that the site is not exactly the best place for a one hour interview, I traversed the nearby streets and finally located him. I noticed him because he had a habit of tying a red bandana on his forehead. The road had low lighting, and he was sitting cross-legged

on a dirty, piss-stained footpath, under a street lamp, garbage littered around, the pad and form on his lap, the interviewee sitting cross-legged opposite him huddled down as he gave his answers. I stayed for long, looking at them, a motherly feeling welling up in me, suffused with guilt, ending with a wave of rage at the Straight world washing over me, for making us go through all this for something that was our right all along.

My initial apprehension about the willingness of the community to open up to the Field Investigators turned out to be wrong; they were more than willing. They eagerly opened up, grateful that there was someone who was a witness to their pain and suffering, a few of them refusing to accept the ₹50.00, stating that they were thankful to us for bringing these issues to the forefront. The repeated response I got from Field Investigators was, "*Interview sampla tari khup vel boltat, bharun bharun boltat*" (Even after the interview is over, they continue to speak for long; they have so much to say.)

Yes, they had much to say: their experiences bitter; the wrongs done to them, their frustrations, suffocation and betrayals all suffered in silence; surrounded by loving family and relatives, who could not be trusted with their secrets.

Later, as more and more private and government agencies started doing surveys, the novelty of experience sharing lost its sheen. The answers to queries on 'use of condoms' came by rote, the travails the community faced became exaggerated, and sometimes fictitious; conducting surveys became pointless, neither factually valuable for the surveyor nor an emotional catharsis for the community.

I went back and brought Mr Shende and Mr Sourabh and pointed to the pair from afar. Satisfied that the survey was being sincerely conducted, they proceeded to take me to a restaurant, and over fruit juice, they expressed satisfaction at the way the survey was progressing.

We collated the data of one hundred and ninety-one on-site, one-on-one interviews and sent it to Dr Hemant Apte, who is an expert on research methodology.[3] Even today, he continues to be my guide in such matters.

I couldn't make public the report sent to *Pathfinder International*, as it was for their internal dissemination only. Low condom usage, incorrect information about HIV/AIDS and STI transmission and a population of 3288 men involved in same-sex activities was substantial evidence to convince them to start a TI project in Pune (and later on in PCMC.)

But it would take many months for that. In the meantime, I was offered a consultant post at *Pathfinder International*, but I refused. I wanted to be independent, free to do what I desired, that was the whole point of giving up my Information Technology (IT) job. Since I needed to remain financially sound in the short and long term, I kept my needs to the minimum (e.g. no car) and invested in real estate in Pune and PCMC. Luckily for me, some of these decisions turned out to be very profitable. *Samapathik* Trust operated from a property I owned. I could transfer rent of some of my other properties, to the Trust; to continue my work, albeit on a small scale, when no grants were forthcoming. It also helped a lot that both my parents were pensioners, thus financially independent and able to take care of household expenses.

During these in-between times, I got a chance to meet Dr Vijay Thakur. I described my experiences in detail, confessing the guilt I felt on seeing the Field Investigator and interviewee sitting in filth for the interview.

Later on, as LGBT became a glamorous subject, I would come across many Straight and LGBT students pursuing Masters in Social Work (MSW), Psychology, Sociology, Journalism and Mass Communication, Law, Mphil or PhD who shamelessly exploited the LGBT community for their academic assignments.

I came across PhD students pushily handing me survey forms, demanding "*Tumcha lokanna bharun dyaila sanga, mi pudhcha mahinyat yeun gheun jain*" (Ask your people to fill in the survey forms, I will collect them next month.) After a couple of such experiences, I stopped entertaining them. My refusal stung them. How dare I refuse? Their patented response was: "*He sagla tumchach bhalya saathi challai na?*" (Isn't all this for your welfare?) Sometimes



I would get a slightly different response “*Sorry, mi agodar sangitla nahi tumhala, pan mi community cha ahe, tumhi mala nahi mhanna anyaay ahe*” (Sorry, I didn't inform you before, but I belong to the community, your denying my request is unfair.)

I started detesting this resume-fattening mechanisms of exploitation and their hypocritical pretense of caring for the community. It was even more appalling to see the closeted community observing LGBT brethren under the microscope; comparing their own miserable, insecure lives with the 'samples', nay 'victims', and using the findings to write their scholarly papers so they could fly around the world earning *per diem*, talking loftily about the valuable 'research' they were doing. All this put me off research, surveys and papers. But all this was far off in the future. As I sat in front of Dr Thakur that day, all I cared about was addressing my guilt.

Dr Thakur suggested that since it would take time for *Pathfinder International* to start a project and I saw the immediate need for condom distribution, I could start doing it on a small scale, by having a couple of community members doing the distribution at just a couple of sites, with my funds for at least three months. It would benefit the community, and I would feel good that I was providing them with some service.

He also suggested that I make a pamphlet of the critical findings of the survey and distribute it to the community, so they would know their risk and also gain some insight into their risk behaviour. They would also feel proud of being part of this project. The idea though good, could not be implemented as the findings were not for the public.

But I did start the pilot project. I again approached some members of the Pune survey team, and we began to cover two sites in central Pune, a couple of times a week for two hours each. But the exercise did not last long. My surprise visits showed a dismal picture; the Peers were not at the sites on time, and at times they did not have any condoms with them (then what was the point of coming to the site?) Furious at the repeated indiscipline, I terminated the pilot project unceremoniously.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] The Firm Fixed Price Contract between *Pathfinder International* and HST signed by *Pathfinder International* Country Representative Rekha Masilamani and Ashok Row Kavi (Chairperson of HST) is dated February 15, 2005.

[2] Till then, I had come across only two surveys which dealt with MSM in Pune.

(a) Networks, Language and Sexual Behaviours of Men who have Sex with Men in an Urban Setting (Pune.) Dr. Vinay Kulkarni, Dr. Sanjeevane Kulkarni, Ms. Neelima Sahasrabudhe, Ms. Meghana Marathe. *Prayas*, 2000. 30 interviews conducted. (Estimation of MSM & TG population in Pune & PCMC was not the objective of the survey.)

(b) Behavioural Surveillance Survey (BSS) in Maharashtra. Funded by *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID) and conducted by *ORG Centre for Social Research* (ORG CSR), with the technical assistance of *Family Health International* (FHI.) Summary report presenting key findings and conclusions of the survey conducted between October 1999 to March 2001. The survey had a sample size of 626 (300 in Mumbai + Thane and 326 in Pune + Sangli.) It assessed HIV related risk behaviour. (Estimation of MSM & TG population in Pune & PCMC was not the objective of the survey.)

[3] We approached a total of three hundred and twenty male participants at various sites. One hundred and twenty-nine males refused to participate; some were interested only in sexual activities, some were uncomfortable in being singled out for the survey, and a few were incorrectly identified (they did not have sex with men.) And so, against a target sample size of one hundred and fifty-five, we were able to get one hundred and ninety-one on-site, one-on-one interviews.





## KEEPING A WATCH

The new office of *Samapathik* Trust that I purchased in Budhwar Peth was in the red-light area. When I got possession of the property in 2006, I took my Mom and Dad to see the place.

Mom stood at the window and looked down the street lined on the other side with old *waadas* (mansions.) Female sex workers stood invitingly at the entrance and the men casually strolled down the streets checking out the variety on display or stood on one side of the road, their faces inscrutable, taking their sweet time in finalising the catch lined on the opposite side.

My Mom frowned; it was not the best of areas to buy a property. Well, first of all, because of the location, the place was affordable. Secondly, since the area was close to Mandai (the centre of the old city) and adjoined Laxmi Road (a well-known shopping street), it was accessible to all. The accessibility was important for Transgender persons, who could easily drop by to spend some time at the Trust office, without being harassed in the building or the alleys. *Gadikhana* housing the NARI clinic was also walking distance from the office.

Initially, despite the accessible office location, the number of community members who turned up was few. Members of the Transgender community did not drop by because then, I had no projects and hence no Transgender staff and without a *behen* (sister Transgender) in my office, they were unlikely to visit. As far as Gay men were concerned, they did not drop by because, unlike the men's urinals frequented by them for cruising, my Trust was not considered a respectable place for hanging out. It would be some time before the community (not all of it) got over its hang-ups.

Of the few people who visited, I had some strange visitors, each who came with a different purpose. One of the first ones was in his fifties, and one look at him and I suspected that he was a plainclothes Policeman. He did not identify himself as such and stated that he had casually dropped by to understand the work I was doing.

We had a pleasant discussion, and I told him about my background and that the NGO worked primarily on HIV/AIDS and STI related issues of Gay and Transgender persons. He politely asked, “*Ya aslya lokanna kai suvidha deta?*” (What services do you provide to 'such' people?) I told him that we provide befriending services, information on safe sex and underlined the fact that we emphasised on adult, consensual intercourse in private.

Was he trying to figure out whether I was a pimp in the red-light area, plying my trade under the garb of an NGO? Frankly, he did not do a good job of keeping his objective inconspicuous. Or maybe that was his objective, to give a hint that someone was keeping a watch, lest I play naughty. Satisfied, he left. Did a *khabri* (informant) in the area inform the Police that here was a new NGO, in the red-light area, working on a not very respectable issue and was this a casual inquiry to know more? Who knows.

A few months later, I had another visitor. He told me he was from a reputed educational institution. He asked whether I had 80G certificate (Section 80G of Income Tax Act, 1961 deals with donations made to charitable institutions. The 80G certificate can be used to claim a tax deduction.) I replied in the affirmative. It had taken me multiple visits to the Income Tax office with newspaper records (of helpline classifieds and news about Trust events) to provide evidence that I was doing bona fide work before I got the certificate.

All that effort turned out to be a waste as the amount I received through donations was negligible. 80G certificate was not enough to entice people to donate to 'such' a cause, and those few community and non-community members who did donate, did not care whether I had the certificate. (The less said about the support, financial and otherwise, provided to my work, by the LGBTIQA community, the better).

The visitor then calmly and very confidently explained to me an elaborate scheme of using the 80G certificate of *Samapathik* Trust to turn his institution's black money into white. As I realised what he was suggesting, I showed my impatience and walked him to the door. As he left, I asked him, how he had got my contact; he was not

forthcoming. I still wonder whether it was an intelligence officer trying to find out the real purpose of my NGO or some 'well-wisher' intent on trapping me in this shady scheme. Or I could be wrong on both counts; this guy might have been who he said he was- an agent working for the said educational institution or some other.

Another visitor I remember quite well was a closeted Gay youth, seeking employment. He was upfront in telling me that another NGO had dismissed him on baseless allegations about irregularities. I said to him that alas, I had no projects, so I had no staff; I was whole and sole, receptionist to the President. I have been scouting for project opportunities, but so far have failed to get one. As I apprised him of the situation and got up to indicate that the meeting was over, he replied, "I know... You could apply for a project on HIV positive people."

Perplexed, I paused. Smiling craftily, he took out a file from his bag, with a sheaf of papers in it. "I have a xerox of papers listing all the personal details of PLHIV who are registered with my ex-NGO. You could claim that you are providing services to them. I could assist you...". As I let him out and shut the door, I worried whether, in the future, I too would unknowingly end up hiring people who would gain my trust and betray my community and me at the first opportunity. But the immediate concern was whether I should inform his NGO about this incident. I did not. Should I have? Some would say yes, but even today, I would still take the same call, at least part of the reason being that the NGO referred to did not have a good track record. Ironically, a few years down the line, he ended up working again in the same NGO this time as a PLHIV.

Let me end this chapter on a humorous note. After we started work on the TI project, my Trust received another visitor. The guy had barged into the office through the unlocked door and started ordering my staff around, "*Mala mahit ahe kai challai ithe.... Kai kai lapavlai ahe te sagla kadha. Mi CBI madhun aloi*" (I know what's going on here. Show me everything that you have concealed. I am from the CBI (Criminal Bureau of Investigation.))

I was not in the office. A couple of my staff members were and having

worked with me for some time; they had got confident. They asked the man to show his ID and the search warrant, neither of which he had on him. Neither did his appearance indicate that he was from that exalted office (not that my staff knew what CBI personnel looked like on a raid.) Without wasting a single moment, they had physically thrown him out of the office and warned him not to come back again and meek as a mouse, without a squeak, he left.[1]

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Curiously, when writing this piece, when I tried to verify the CBI incident with one of the staff who was present, he did not remember it.

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## FINALLY... A PROJECT

After submission of the TI project proposal, Dr Michelle Andina, then the Director of *Pathfinder International* invited Vivek Raj Anand and me for a preliminary discussion and a few months later, after a few rounds of talk with Mr Pramod Nigudkar (Program Director at *Pathfinder International*), who was very supportive, we were awarded one-third of the TI sites in Pune and PCMC to work in; two of my rival NGOs got one-third sites each.

But, *Samapathik* Trust did not an account as required by the Foreign Currency Regulation Act (FCRA) as we did not meet FCRA eligibility criteria. That meant the Trust could not accept foreign grants or donations and one of the conditions of awarding this grant was that the funds had to be given to an NGO with an FCRA account. Finally, it was agreed that since HST had an FCRA account, my team and I would become staff of HST to implement the project in Pune and PCMC. And so, it was March 2008 when we started work on the TI project.

Without HST's backing, I would not have got the chance to implement the project; I owe Amma and Vivek a lot. I especially owe a lot to Vivek as within six months after the launch of the project, *Pathfinder International* summoned Vivek and in his presence lambasted me for poor performance. Vivek was patient and remained so throughout the project as I would regularly get the flak for below-par performance for years.

A couple of years down the road, on one occasion some highfalutin official from Delhi came with some *Pathfinder International*, Pune staff and tore me a new hole in front of my team for poor performance. Insulted, after the meeting I had an argumentative discussion with Dr Deepak Khismatrao, the then Director of Medicine/STIs at *Pathfinder International*, who was part of the visiting team.

And so, throughout the project, the discord between *Pathfinder International* and me over the project's poor performance continued. There was no way I could perform to 80-90%, as my rival NGOs had a

track record of giving. Our performance continued to hover between 40% and 60%.

But despite the friction, Dr Darshana Vyas, the newly appointed Director of *Pathfinder International* in Pune and Mr TK Jayarajan, the Deputy Director of Communication from her team did not give up on us. They appreciated the inherent strength of our community-led approaches and continued to work with us providing additional technical assistance until the end of March 2012. At this time *Pathfinder International* wound up its TI work, and transferred their projects to the *Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society* (MSACS.) Over some time, *Pathfinder International* staff realised that although we were nowhere near the surreal statistical wonders of our rival NGOs, the honesty and quality of community-based work delivered by us was unmistakable.

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## TARGETED INTERVENTION

“Hello, I am..... You had given an appointment to my wife for interview.... post of the accountant...”

“Yes,” I replied.

“I am calling from a coin-box nearby... I was at the entrance of the lane leading to your office. My wife does not want to come to work in this area, so don't wait for us”, and he hung up.

Recruiting an accountant had turned out to be excruciatingly difficult. It seemed that no out or closeted Gays or Transgenders were commerce graduates or all of them had jobs or, did not want to work in an LGBT CBO. To complicate matters, no commerce graduate from the Straight community was interested in working at an LGBT CBO located in the red-light area.

I had promised the funding agency that I would fill all positions within a month of the start of the project. But we were way past our deadline, with no accountant in sight. So, in addition to managing the project, I had to learn *Pathfinder International's* financial reporting formats to ensure that the monthly financial reports were filed on time.

It took a couple of months before I had a breakthrough, with a call from a person working in CYDA. His Straight friend from Bihar was a Commerce graduate and looking for a job. The accountant had his mobile shop in Bhagalpur, but that had been shut down. I asked him to have his friend hop on the next train and bring all the original certificates.

And so we got Ranjan Kumar Saha, our first accountant. He turned out to be a very conscientious accountant. Initially, I kept a hawk's eye on him, but my misgivings faded away quickly. By then, we had a staff of around 20, and accounting had become a fulltime job. This was before we crossed the 1000 MSM & TG TI population target and as the numbers swelled, we got another project from *Pathfinder International*, to cover a part of PCMC with a target of 400 MSM & TG

population, which meant hiring 15 more staff members. (After a few years, with no prospect of a promotion or increment, Ranjan sought a better opportunity and left and I lost touch with him.)

The difficulty of finding an accountant was in addition to, the one of finding ORWs (Out Reach Workers) to mentor and supervise Peers on the field. Most of the Gay and Transgender staff I had, had very little education and could not be directly promoted to ORW level.

Eventually, I got help from unexpected quarters; 'the out-station Straight gang'. Quite a few students pursuing a Masters Degree in Social Work (MSW) were from out-station, staying in Pune, sharing rental spaces, sometimes three to four students in one room. Many came from middle-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds and needed supporting income. Since their home town was not Pune, they were not worried about being seen in the red-light area or working for the Gay and Transgender population.

I hired the first two who applied. During the interview, they immediately made it clear that they were not, 'like that' and their only concern was about being sexually approached by Gay or Transgender staff or other community members in the field. Well, that was unavoidable, they would just have to take it as a compliment and learn to say a polite no, however ardent and persistent the proposal. I had my concerns, whether they would be able to deliver as they were Straight and building rapport with the community would be their biggest challenge.

We agreed that they would come to the Trust after college hours, have a quick lunch and then work till 6 pm in the office and then leave for fieldwork and go home at 10 pm. They were desperate for a job, worked hard, learned fast and were grateful for the opportunity.

From the community, initially, I had only one experienced ORW-Lachi, a temperamental member of the Transgender community. Much before the launch of our *Pathfinder International* funded TI project, we had been running our own tiny self-funded HIV/AIDS TI on and off, with Lachi as Peer and ORW rolled into one. Lachi was assigned the high-sex transaction area, near Pune Station. The area

covered a circle radius of approximately one km, had cruising spots and a section where the masseurs plied their trade.

At times in *khada* (male clothing) and at times in *satla* (cross-dressed), Lachi faced frequent challenges in the field (later on, she switched to *satla* for good.) When in *satla*, with her gaudy makeup, a heavily powdered face and blood-red lipstick, she would often be mistaken as a Transgender sex worker by the Police.

The very first week of our self-funded intervention, in September 2006, as Lachi stood on the premises of Pune Station, one of the railway staff had driven her out despite showing her ID card. She had no permission to be on the premises. The next day, I prepared two copies of a letter on *Samapathik* Trust letterhead for the Station Master, requesting him to allow her on the premises. I mentioned in the letter that our ORW will always carry an ID card, will not harass anyone, will not distribute condoms at reservation counters, canteen or railway platforms and would be on the site for only two hours a day- 8 pm to 10 pm.[1][2] Empowered, she had strode into the Station Master's office, and after a long dialogue with an official, he had resignedly given a sign, stamp and date on one copy of the letter. From then on, Lachi carried a xerox of it in her large purse.

A month later, while doing her rounds, she was accosted by two Policemen. They grabbed her purse and started searching it even before she had a chance to show her ID. Finding a condom demonstration model, they said this was proof that she was a sex worker. Patiently she brought out her ID card from one of the numerous compartments of her large purse and showed it to them. Lots of questions related to the project followed and satisfied that she had the answers, they had asked her a few questions about HIV/AIDS that they had doubts about and had let her off.

But, a couple of months later, when the Police accosted her again, it did not matter that she had an ID card, they were in no mood to check it. As she was loitering near a mens urinal, a popular and thriving cruising place near Pune Station, to distribute condoms at peak hours, a Police van suddenly appeared, and the Police jumping out with sticks started a mild lathi-charge. The crowd taken unawares ran

helter-skelter.

Assured that she had an ID card with her, Lachi sagely tried showing it to the Policeman who charged at her, and before she knew, she had received a few choice blows on her calves. Her pleading, "*Aaho aika maazha... mi NGO maddhe kaam karte, maazha kade ID ahe.*" (Listen to me, I work in an NGO, I have an ID card) had fallen on deaf ears and with the Policeman chasing her snarling, "*e chalnigh*" (Get lost.) Lachi was left with no other choice but to lift her sari and join the stampede, her masculine legs more than making up for the hindrance of her feminine attire.

The next day, she stomped into the office and heaped abuse on the Police; her righteous soliloquy reverberated around the walls. I was sympathetic. I could understand her anger, but at the same time, I commiserated with the Police as the urinal was close to the Pune Police Commissioner's office. For readers eager to check out the cruising site, alas, it was demolished a long time ago.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] The letter to the Station Master, Pune Railway Station is dated September 25, 2006. Ref. No. 001/09/06. The letter is stamped and signed by the Station Manager on September 26, 2006, with the permission timing scrawled on it.

[2] After we started implementing the *Pathfinder International* funded HIV/AIDS TI project, we prepared introduction letters and submitted them to relevant Police Stations. We mentioned that if the Police have further queries they could talk to the ORW who was bringing the letter to them or drop by at our office to get more information on the project.





## EPILOGUE

The dismissal of the petition on Sec 377 IPC by the Delhi High Court, in 2004, came as a rude shock. The Hon'ble Court stated that- *...there is no cause of action as no prosecution is pending against the petitioner. Just for the sake of testing the legislation, the petition cannot be filed.*[1] The social stigma resulting from 'coming out', being labelled as criminals by civil society and the distress, extortion faced by closeted Gay men had not been enough to move the Hon'ble Court.

Soon after, a one day conference was organised by *Lawyers Collective*, in Mumbai. I along with three-four dozen participants attended. The discussion centred on various options of taking the Sec 377 IPC case forward. Of the options discussed, I remember only two: one, was to file a Special Leave Petition (SLP) in the Supreme Court only on the limited ground- 'whether a PIL could be dismissed for want of a cause of action.' The other, to give up this track entirely and start anew by searching for an appropriate case concerning Sec 377 IPC and use that case as a launchpad.

After discussing the pros and cons of each, I opposed filing the SLP when the participants cast their votes for a viable, actionable option. I was worried that an adverse outcome would be a significant setback. It made sense to me, to do our homework and attack Sec 377 IPC using an appropriate case. I was one of the very, very few who opposed; the majority decided to go ahead with the SLP. Thankfully, as it turned out, I was wrong. The Hon'ble Supreme Court judges remitted the case back to the Delhi High Court, stating that- *... but are of the view that the matter does require consideration and is not of a nature which could have been dismissed on the ground afore-stated.*[2].

Now, all we could do was wait for the majestic wheels of justice to take their own time to turn. To my surprise, the hearings were conducted pretty early by Indian standards. Before we knew, on July 2, 2009, the landmark Judgment by Hon'ble Justice A.P. Shah and Justice S. Murlidhar was delivered, declaring Sec 377 IPC as violative

of Articles 14, 15, 21 of the Constitution of India to the extent it criminalized intercourse 'against the order of nature' between consenting adults. The LGBTIQ community owes a lot to *Naz Foundation (India) Trust*, Anjali Rajgopalan, *Lawyers Collective* and Sr. Adv. Anand Grover for staunchly backing our cause.

As I came to know of the judgment, I rushed to the office, and the staff began impromptu celebrations. The team decorated the office, ordered snacks, and invited community members and allies to join the celebration. We danced, I with my two left feet, making a fool of myself, our Straight staff heartily joining in the revelry. I vividly remember our accountant Ranjan dancing with me in his macho Straight-style. We were on a roll. Our team was a big family of LGBT and Straight staff of diverse religions and castes, fraternally working towards a common goal.

The making of this fraternal family had not been easy. Realising that the Straight staff were a minority, a Transgender Peer had once threatened a newly appointed Straight Project Co-ordinator: "*Ithe amcha rajya ahe, amcha mule tumhala nokrya ahet, amhi sangu te aikaicha*" (We control what happens here, you owe your jobs to us, you have to follow our orders.)

He complained to me. I called for a meeting of the entire staff and straightened out the matter. Anyone who felt the Straights were outsiders or servants could fuck off right now. The message had struck home, and I did not hear any such nonsense again. But, another aspect, the bickering of handsome Straight staff for being repeatedly propositioned by some of the more persistent community staff members continued. I resignedly gave them an ear and kept warning the relevant team member. I could very well understand the predicament of the Straight staff, they could not deliver what they were not programmed for, but there was no denying the truth, a couple of them were delicious fodder for wet dreams. I distinctly remember one of the Straight staff members telling me, "*Kahi vatatach nahi Sir. Nahitar nakki kela asta.*" (I simply don't feel anything at all Sir. Otherwise I would definitely have done 'it'.)

For us, the judgment on Sec 377 IPC was the cherry on the TI cake;

there was no stopping us now. We could now expand, reach out to people openly without fear; the law was on our side. Even when I came to know that as a celebration of the Judgment, a couple of Gay men had misbehaved in a restaurant in Pune, in flagrant disregard to public decency, it was not enough to dampen my spirit. What could go wrong?

Now all that remained for a young me in my early forties was a prince of my dreams, and we would live happily-ever-after working together for the Queer community, angels with lutes and lyres singing paeans of our love. I didn't know then that naughty Cupid, like the Hon'ble Supreme Court, was waiting just around the corner, sap in hand, determined to teach me a lesson I would never forget.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] The High Court of Delhi, New Delhi. Dismissal of W.P. (C) No. 7455/2001. Signed by Hon'ble Chief Justice and Justice Badar Durrez Ahmed. Sept 2, 2004.

[2] The Supreme Court of India, New Delhi. Civil Appeal No. 952 of 2006. Arising out of SLP(C) No. 7217-7218 of 2005. Order by Hon'ble CJI Y. K. Sabharwal, Justice C. K. Thakker, Justice R. V. Raveendran, Justice Lokeshwar Singh Panta. February 03, 2006.

End Of Book I



# BOOK II TWILIGHT

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## PROLOGUE

*At sunset, with the barest of strength remaining, Sanji reached for the light switch next to her bed and pressed it. The light hurt, and she quickly squeezed her eyes shut. Slowly she opened them again and painstakingly got down to the floor. Bending, she pulled the squashed tin trunk squeaking from below the bed, her breaths coming in torturous rails. Opening the lid, she rooted around until she found it; a torn, fading album of photographs. The trunk lying open, she pulled herself up onto the bed and lay down, eyes closed, waiting for the breathing to slow down. It took a long time.*

*She slowly opened her eyes, and lifted the album to scan the photos one at a time, her gaze resting on a particular one, she with her Mom, on her twelfth birthday at a photo studio, the only person who had ever loved her. Mom had passed away the same year; breast cancer detected too late. When not cursing his son Sanjay, in a drunken stupor, for being a chhakka (eunuch) and bringing shame to the household, her Dad spent his time doing odd-jobs. Until one fine day, he fell off a building under construction; his unprotected head splitting wide open on hitting the ground, killing him instantly. It had been a relief for Sanji.*

*The meagre compensation Sanji had received had not lasted long, and she had dropped off school. Crossdressing and identifying herself as a Hijra, she became friends with Sweety another Hijra from a slum nearby. Now calling herself as Sanji, she had started accompanying Sweety for the mangti (asking for alms) rounds, noticing along the way, the randy youths, their eyes and signals beckoning. Others who couldn't imagine having their way with her or weren't ballsy enough, simply teased her and harassed her and she would respond with the choicest of vile words she had learned from Sweety.*

*It was not long before the abundance of attention drove her into the arms of a handsome youth. One evening, in the warehouse where he worked, he had taken her virginity. Taking care to avoid seeing her tumescent manhood, he had quickly laid her down on her stomach*

*and pulling up her sari he had roughly entered her, her grunt of pain and bliss coming as one.*

*From that day, every evening, she would undress before the mirror to look at herself with pride. Oh! She looked ravishing. Especially her lips! The lips had become full, and she had learned how to pout in a certain way for specific daatas (shop owners) to entice them in being more generous. Her bra, artfully stuffed, looked all too real. In one instance, in his Dad's absence, the son of a daata had desired to play with them, and she had, coyishly citing her respect for his father, refused.*

*Over the next few weeks, the warehouse became a regular haunt, and just as she started dreaming of living happily ever after, realisation dawned that she was just a casual fling, in his words- time pass. The news of her availability had spread fast amongst his friends who now smiled lasciviously and whistled at her, each one trying to outdo the other's vulgarity of manhood.*

*And finally, bit by bit, she gave in to everyone and everything. The more they desired her, the sexier she felt. A year ago, she allowed Sweety to initiate her into drinking and lately it had all become a pattern. She got up late, going for mangti always with an eye for a raunchy male and binge drinking at night with Sweety.*

*It was a few weeks ago that the diarrhoea started, which wouldn't stop even with medications. A mere 10-minute walk for mangti left Sanji exhausted. It didn't take long for her to figure out the cause, but she tried to deny it for as long as possible, paying no heed to Sweety's prodding to consult a doctor. No doubt Sweety was eager to confirm what she suspected. For all her help and companionship, Sweety desired that such an ill befall Sanji; in that sense, she was like some of the Hijra sisters she knew.*

*Finally, the confirmation of HIV came as a sort of relief. The ICTC Counsellor suggested that she register herself for ART which was free; giving her the customary pitch that she would see a quick recovery if she started medications immediately. Sitting by her side, Sweety had interrupted him repeatedly, urging Sanji to listen to him. And while Sanji sat there, her gaze fixed on the Counsellor, robotically nodding*

*at Sweety's encouraging remarks, she had already made up her mind. She asked for a couple of days to get her documents for ART registration, picked up the medications prescribed by a doctor at the hospital and left never to return.*

*Sanji stopped going to mangti and started to live off her savings. She would quietly lie on her bed the whole day, watching TV or dozing a while before the next bout of diarrhoea woke her. Her interaction with Sweety became minimal, especially after a showdown regarding her refusal for treatment. Even then Sweety did come by and bring her food, unable to bear seeing her friend wither away, stubbornly denying lifesaving, free treatment.*

*Once in a few days, if Sanji felt better, she would take a short walk in the neighbourhood, sitting on a bench or steps of a shop every minute or two. A couple of youths, who had their way with her, were horrified at what they saw. Suspecting the worst, they scurried to the nearest private clinic to get themselves tested again and again and again; cursing her under their breath the entire time. Those, reassured, that the results of their tests were negative became very cautious as they moved on to other pastures.*

*Surprisingly for Sanji, her decline was not as painful as she had heard of others. Likewise, her mind too was calm. She hated no one, loved no one, cared for nothing and desired nothing. She was not worried about what was forecast for her in her next life; this life had arduously and competently prepared her for the next one.*

*A life of everyone desiring her and none loving her, Sanji had no regrets of leaving. Akin to an ascetic who had reached the stage of the nirvana, she was alone and at peace with herself, as she, for the last time, slowly flipped through the album, her mist-filled memory trying to grasp the shreds of the old days when she was young and loved by her mother.*

*And, in the twilight, lost in this incomprehensible maze, drowsiness crept over her, and her breathing slowed down to a gentle stop.*





## OUR TESTING CARAVAN

“*Sir, ek minute*” Milind who was the Project Co-ordinator at the time, anxiously approached me, “*Mashidi samor gadi nahi lavaichi mhantait*”. (They are not allowing us to park the medical van in front of the mosque.)

We were at Yerawda health camp, where the medical van had just arrived. The driver was trying to parallel park, on a public street, next to the wall of the mosque. On seeing the medical van, a couple of skull-capped Muslims from the mosque came to inquire, and we told them that the van was for testing our registered population for HIV. They ordered us to move the van as they did not want to sully the purity of the mosque. Rather than get into an altercation, with that sanctimonious attitude, we moved the van twenty-five meters.

Since the MSM & TG population did not find it convenient to come to the ICTC centres or clinics for testing, we had started arranging HIV, Syphilis testing and EGE health camps near Hot-Spots. *Vanchit Vikas*, another NGO which had a project from *Pathfinder International*, had been given the medical van, to be shared with other NGOs. At the end of each month, the NGOs would send them the timetable for next month. Accordingly, *Vanchit Vikas* made a schedule for sharing the van between different NGOs. An MBBS doctor who had been appointed by *Vanchit Vikas* would come to the health camp.

A private Lab Technician initially did HIV and Syphilis testing. But later on, for purposes of transparency, we started inviting government ICTC Lab Technician and Counsellor to take care of it. The Lab Technician would bring the HIV test kits, and we would get the TPHA kits (for testing for Syphilis), which we had purchased in bulk. The Project Co-ordinator organised the health camp; the ORW and Peers assigned to the area, mobilised the registered population; our Counsellor co-ordinated the exercise.

As we parked the van at the new spot, Dr Kanchan Pawar (medical supervisor from *Pathfinder International*), came to oversee the camp. Dr Kanchan was our favourite officer and would make infrequent

surprise visits at health camp sites to make sure that we did a good job.

She set about talking to a group of MSMs about condom availability, and a youth from the group pointed out that there was a condom depot installed at the men's public toilet. But someone had vandalised it a couple of days ago.

I left, not wanting my presence to hamper the discussion. Milind stood at a discrete distance; there could be a question or two which only he could answer and more importantly, which the doctor was not aware of, to ensure her safety. A few youths who were not MSM and habitually loitered around group discussions, found her to be beautiful and additionally, she had a disarming way of communicating with all of them. These men who seldom had an opportunity to talk freely with women were likely to take uncalled for liberties. So, Milind and I, ensured that one of us was always on the lookout for her safety. I suspect she was naïve and did not have any idea that some of the non-MSM members hanging around had designs on her.

For Dr Kanchan, the van afforded privacy and safety, but, she was a woman; she could not sit in the medical van when a patient was there. The youths felt extremely embarrassed and refused to undergo EGE in presence of a female doctor. She could sit in the van only when there were no patients.

But, using the van for a health camp was not always a solution. There were some slum pockets which had very narrow lanes and could not be reached by the medical van. At other times, we would plan a health camp, but the van was not available. In such cases, we had to find other spaces at the Hot-Spots to conduct the health camp.

In Daund, in contrast to the mosque experience at Yerawda, we conducted a health camp on temple premises. The Manager of the temple had no objections to the temple grounds being used to provide health care services. He allocated a part of the temple pandal to be set-up as a makeshift clinic. A doctor from the town examined clients in the light of the torch as load-shedding was on. In those days,

the load-shedding problem was so common that we carried emergency lights with us to every health camp; the lighting equipment as necessary as the Key Population list (MSM & TGs registered with us), consent forms, testing kits and gloves.

It was the job of the Project Co-ordinator and Counsellor to go hunting for possible locations for the health camps. They would seek rental spaces at nominal rates; we would pay ₹200.00 to ₹250.00 for two hours as the health camp timings were 8 pm to 10 pm.

At Market Yard, at times, we used the community hall. On one occasion when it was unavailable, the Co-ordinator, along with Rani, our Transgender Peer, who stayed in the slum and was known to almost everyone, approached a *Buddha Vihar* in the locality for permission of using the space at the back. They enthusiastically gave it saying, “*Changla karya kartai*” (you are doing good work.) The volunteers at the *Vihar* personally undertook the job of cleaning the space, assisting us in procuring and setting up tin sheets to provide privacy and requested that the rental fee be given as a donation to the *Vihar*.

Near Parvati, we used the terrace and a room above a public toilet for hosting the health camp. One of our staff members had prolific contacts with youths in that area and had receded the place during one of his social calls. The place was convenient for all, the person staying in the room above, looked after the toilets below. So his one-room home became the clinic, and the youths would stand chitchatting on the terrace until the Counsellor called their name.

The only time I had a problem in organising a health camp in Pune, was when we arranged it at the office of a political party. Despite knowing it was for our registered MSM & TG population they had, without intimating us, put up banners about HIV testing camp with their party symbol and photos of politicians. Mani, a Transgender ORW who had arranged the health camp, informed me of the developments; I went to the site, saw the banner got furious and cancelled the health camp. From then on, I ensured that we did not ever connect with any political party worker in Pune for assistance in holding the health camps.



But the PCMC was a different ballgame. At one Hot-Spot, the enterprising ORWs had approached a *Mitra Mandal* (group) run by volunteers of a political party, and the youths would provide their office for the health camp. The office did not have an electricity connection so they would get us a line from somewhere and on request, procure a socket holder and bulb. If the place was not available for some reason, we held the health camp at a nearby shed, which was used by volunteers of another political party.

My favourite place of hosting a health camp at PCMC was a famous (amongst the community) garden close to a cruising place. The ORW from the area approached one of the stalls holders adjacent to the garden and negotiated a fee to compensate the proprietor for his loss in closing the shop early; the tiny shop became the clinic for the duration of the camp.

We would sit in the garden, on the lawn, our eyes scanning faces of passers-by. A wave or a look of recognition on their face would indicate kinship, and they would change the path and saunter towards us. Some would chit-chat standing; others would daintily spread their handkerchiefs on the grass before they allowed their lovely asset to rest on it, my eyes hungrily checking out everything and everyone. The Counsellor, who carried the 'test due' list would search for the name, and if due, they would accompany him to the 'clinic'.

As the shadows lengthened, the Counsellor would get *Wada Pavs* (snacks), mineral water bottles and importantly tea. Without this elixir, the doctor and I would get noticeably antsy.

During *Ganpati* festival, the various *Mitra Mandals* of Pune and PCMC who assisted us in organising these health camps would contact us for donations and Project Co-ordinators would go about giving them ₹201.00 or ₹251.00. We would insist on receipts, and most of the *Mitra Mandals* would studiously prepare them, and these were then attached to the accounts as rent for health camp setup.

How many MBBS doctors, Counsellors, Lab Technicians would have agreed to work in such conditions ₹ In hutments, tiny shops ₹ At times

with the aid of emergency lights In sweltering heat or pouring rain  
How many Straight, Gay or Transgender staff has worked in such conditions

I remember Sachin our Counsellor, later promoted as Project Co-ordinator, telling me, "... the health camps would get over at 10 pm or sometimes even at 10.30 pm and at times, I would miss my last bus and walk for miles and miles to my room. *Te diwas kase kadhle te amhalach mahit... athavla ki ajun hi angavar kaata yeto*" (You have no idea how we endured then. Even now I get goosebumps when I remember those days.) The budget allowed for a meagre honorarium and travel allowance- post-midnight an auto-rickshaw cost a bomb. So he had no option but to hope for a lift or walk home. The entire credit of the success of these health camps goes to the Straight, Gay, Transgender staff.

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## CONDOM DEPOTS

“I have asked Payal to leave ----- immediately”, Project Co-ordinator Pradeep's voice was urgent. The particular Hot-Spot looked after by Pradeep had its share of ex-convicts and anti-social elements.

During the early days of implementing the TI project, Transgender Lachi used to stay in that area. She was approached by an ex-convict, “*Tula mahit ahe mi porinvar rape karto... mala condom de*” (You know I rape women... give me condoms.) Lachi dutifully called me to ask whether she should provide a potential rapist with condoms; I assented.

We had been lucky in finding a small inclusive clinic in that area, for conducting our health camps; the doctor was non-judgmental and had a good rapport with the community members. Near the clinic was the local railway station. We had installed a condom depot at the urinal at the railway station, and it was the job of the ORW to replenish it once or twice a week.

The condom depots were wooden boxes, which we had custom-designed. Inside the men's urinals, we tied these to a window with a wire. Anyone could freely pick up the condoms from the boxes. In many places, we had an arrangement wherein we paid ₹100.00 per month to the toilet supervisor to allow us to replenish the boxes. We could not replenish the boxes daily as the urinals were spread over a large area. In addition to Pune and PCMC areas, we also covered Dehu Road, the farthest point for us, on the Pune Mumbai railway line around 36 km from Pune; Daund, about 80 km from Pune, on the Pune-Solapur railway line. On the Pune-Nashik highway, we covered Bhosari which was about 18 km, Chakan 33 km and Rajgurunagar, 44 km from Pune.

Each site had its peculiar problems. Daund had the worst connectivity; there were very few express trains in the morning. The ICTC was some distance from cruising areas, and taking a client to the ICTC was difficult. Finding a Peer who lived there was impossible; the community was too closeted to be of any use in this work.

Chakan was a political quagmire and infighting between closeted and relatively less closeted, married and the unmarried community members was the order of the day. Despite having a high volume of same-sex transactions, there was little chance of doing significant work there.

Further on, Rajgurunagar (Khed) had a different problem. Its community was well known to a closeted Gay guy, but he considered it to be his territory and did not take too kindly to an outsider like me stepping in. I remember sitting with him and Bunty (the ORW who was then looking after Chakan) at a small roadside snacks centre negotiating terms and willing to give him far more latitude than I gave to other ORWs. He refused. As I got up, telling him that the opportunity would always stay open, I knew that he would never take it; his sense of power came from withholding. And yet we continued to work in both Chakan and Rajgurunagar.

As a director of the TI project, I made it a point to visit each and every site in my project area, even far-off ones in Chakan, Rajgurunagar, and Daund. I knew every Hot-Spot and location of each condom depot. Whenever in the mood, I would take my bike, ask the Project Coordinator to ride pillion and without informing him of the destination visit random Hot-Spots, check condom depots, and over a cup of tea chitchat with the community and assess TI outreach.

Although we had installed condom boxes in many places, there were other ways of delivering condoms too. In one Hot-Spot in Rajgurunagar, it was convenient to have a plastic bag carrying condoms tied to a tree in the jungle that the community frequented for a quickie. At a site in Pune, we hid the condoms under a designated rock. In some places in Pune, we had made arrangements with *Paanwalas* (Paan shop) or *Chaiwalas* (Tea stall), and they would stock the condoms. The Peers and ORWs informed community members of the locations of condom depots.

After Lachi left, till the end of the project, we never found a Peer to work in that area. And since it was not possible to visit the site every day, Payal, the ORW assigned to the place would visit the site once or twice a week, contact the registered population and replenish

condoms in the depot.

It was on one such visit that Payal had been accosted at the railway station by a military man. He would not take no for an answer and finally, grabbing her, he lifted her forcefully and tried to carry her to a secluded spot. Her cries of help went unanswered; it was late in the evening, and since there was no local train coming anytime soon, the platform was more or less deserted. Fortunately, unlike some fragile Hijras, Payal was sturdy; she had broken free and ran away (she wore a Punjabi dress, not a sari, which enabled her to make a quick escape.)

From outside the station, safe in a crowded place, she called Pradeep from a coin box. The military man had not followed her. Pradeep advised her to stay put till she saw the local train coming and quickly enter into a carriage, within the crowd of other passengers. She was immediately relieved from that site and replenishing the depot became Pradeep's responsibility. But not for long, a few months later, someone vandalised it, and we did not bother spending money in ordering another one.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Pradeep used in the chapter is a pseudonym.





## PLAYING NURSE

“I don't think they will allow you to attend *Sassoon* Skin OPD as an observer” Dr Sunil Tolat said. We were in the *Sassoon* Hospital Skin Department; a couple of medical interns stood nearby. Dr Tolat was a renowned Skin Specialist in Pune and an authority on Leprosy. I introduced myself to him and like a typical upstart, stated that I would like to learn diagnosis and treatment of STIs by observing him at work, as Gay and Transgender STI patients approached me and the doctors treating STIs were not always sensitive.

I had experienced this first-hand. In a government clinic, the STI department housed a doctor who made the patient I accompanied, stand at a distance of six feet. That was his *laxman rekha*, (he was observing social distancing, sixteen to seventeen years before COVID-19 made it obligatory.) At that 'safe' distance, he asked the patient to unzip and diagnosed the ailment (wrongly as it turned out.)

In another case of penile Genital Warts, a private doctor, had asked the patient whether he was married. Receiving the answer in the affirmative, the doctor had assumed that he had gone to a female sex worker (the patient was a closeted Gay guy) and asked him, "*Ghari kahi problem ahe ka? Mag baher ka gele?*" (Do you have a problem at home? Then why did you go elsewhere?) Such judgmental attitude was pervasive amongst medical practitioners.

With this backdrop, I desperately needed either sensitive doctors or failing that, someone to teach me to diagnose common STIs. Always interested in medicine, the second option, though a poor choice appealed to me more.

Dr Tolat went on, “...What I suggest is this, you accompany the patients either to *Sassoon* or to my clinic, either is fine. I will explain the symptoms of the patient you have accompanied, and you can learn”. That worked out great, one of his clinics was located close to Mandai, a location which would in a couple of years become my new Trust office and so would become convenient for the patient and me.

And so to my absolute delight, I started accompanying patients to his clinic. It was supposed to open at 9.30 am, and I was habituated to doctors generally showing up around fifteen minutes to a half-hour late, but not Dr Tolat. He would be in the clinic, sometimes as early as 8.30 am, and if you were early enough, you could be in and out in fifteen minutes. But that was rare, even at such an early time, there would be on the average of ten patients waiting.

He treated my patients with the utmost dignity and respect. He would ask the patient to explain the problem, and the patient embarrassed would invariably look at me. I would describe the issue. He would then ask the patient to lie down on the examination table and have him pull down his pants. He would then closely examine the ulceration/warts/abrasions and then pull a large magnifying glass mounted on a stand, over the wound. He would then prod around, scrutinizing it. A brief commentary would ensue, "See these bumps and notice the depression at the top with a cream-like substance there.... you see it?" I would peer and nod. "That is Molluscum".

"Take the patient to *Sassoon*; they will apply TCA". The Doctor would apply the TCA by dipping a tooth-pick in it, shaking out the excess acid, and insert the tip into the depression of the bumps; the process repeated for each bump. It could have been a time-consuming process, but the Doctors at *Sassoon* were quick and efficient. Fortunately, patients with Molluscum were a rarity.

The most common STI was Genital Warts (and continues to be.) Anal warts were especially a problem as the patient would be so ashamed of them that they wouldn't disclose the malady to even their close friends till it had grown to a large size and bled while defecating. In some cases, the patient put off consulting anyone for so long that defecation became difficult because of the obstruction and the warts spread inside the rectum, making surgery imperative. In one case a Gay youth from North India who had migrated to Pune approached me with anal warts. He was perplexed by their recurrence, as he had been operated on by a Doctor in his home town when they had first appeared a few months ago. Further inquiry revealed that the Doctor had misdiagnosed warts as- Piles. In Pune too, STI misdiagnosis was

common amongst medical practitioners (of all types- BAMS, BHMS, MBBS); they indiscriminately prescribed antibiotics and hoped for the best.

As a last resort, the patient would confide in someone who would call me and as I cajoled him or her to bring the patient in for examination another two weeks would go by before the client mustered the courage to come to the Trust office accompanied by the friend. I would examine the patient and then take him/her to Dr Tolat, and he would prescribe Podophyllin in Benzoin Tincture for the druggist.

Lest the patient comes to him every week for application, Dr Tolat had, the first time I took a patient of Genital Warts to him, demonstrated the application of the solution. He showed me how to apply Vaseline in the surrounding areas to make sure that the surrounding skin didn't get burned, showed me how to use cotton ear buds to apply the solution. The solution would slowly burn the warts, they became sticky, and the patient sensed the burn. The burning process lasted for 2-3 days. The next week, the patient would again come to my office for the next round, and I would repeat the process. After a few weeks, satisfied with the result, I would take the patient back again to the doctor, and he would have a look-see and sign off. (I never charged a single rupee for this work.)

Other than diagnosis and treatment of classic symptomatic presentations of Urethral Discharge (UD), I never diagnosed or treated ulcers, Genital Warts, genital abrasions on my own. I would examine, make a tentative diagnosis and then take the client to Dr Tolat, waiting for him to explain. An amateur, I was more often wrong than right.

I was not a qualified Doctor or a Nurse, so my treating Genital Warts was not legal. I had done a Nursing House Assistant's course at a small nursing school in Pune but had left it during my internship. So, I had no legal protection if something were to go wrong. It was a risk I was taking and so, the first visit to the doctor for accurate diagnosis and the final visit to ensure his satisfaction was a must.

None of my staff was allowed to apply Podophyllin on Genital Warts.



For their knowledge, I once demonstrated the technique to Tinesh, Parikshit and Sachin so that they learned the process, but that was it. I remember Tinesh blanching as he watched the patient who had Genital Warts get an outrageous hard-on as I started applying the solution to his penis glans. Some of the patients would get embarrassed at this involuntary response, and the erection would quickly subside. Still, some of the patients, especially those who were proud of the length or girth of their manhood, would mischievously look at me to gauge my reaction.

My reputation as the Podophyllin applicator grew, and patients from as far as Chakan started visiting me. The reputation soon reached an NGO working in Budhwar Peth, and I was approached by their female Doctor to treat Genital Warts of female sex workers. I refused. First, the diagnosis had to be done by a Skin/STI specialist and secondly, I suggested that a female Nurse or Doctor should apply the solution to a woman's privates. I was willing to train the Doctor or take her to Dr Tolat, who could teach her. She refused to undertake the task, and that was that.





## DRIPPING TAPS

*“Te kai zhalai te baghana tyala”* (Check him, he has some problem.) The mother, a stout looking harridan in her forties, one hand-decorated in tattoos, had come with her son, a 16-year-old school dropout.

I never took on cases of HIV testing or STI treatment for minors unless there was a guardian or Counsellor with them; I was then on safe ground. There were exceptional cases where I had to arrange for HIV tests for 15-16-year-old-adolescents, at the request of a guardian or school Counsellor, knowing that the minors had a history of unprotected intercourse. I don't know how I would have dealt with such a case if any of the results had turned out to be positive.

Although the word guardian means someone who is able, willing and has the maturity to take care of the child, sadly, that was not always the case. And this was a case in point.

I took the boy to the other room and had him unzip. He was not wearing underwear, it had become soggy with discharge, and he had come without wearing one. As he peeled his wet jeans from his scrotum, drip-drip went his tap, the drops splattering on the floor accompanied with his enlightening comment, *“Te galta”* (It's dripping.) A fulminating Gonorrhoeal/Chlamydial co-infection

I asked him whether he had sexual intercourse. Yes, for the past two years. He had a girlfriend whom he was engaged to marry; she was a minor too. Did he use condoms “Never”. I took him to his Mom, gave him medication. As I started my sermon on safe sex issues, the mother anxious, asked, “Will he be ok” She then went on the offensive, *“Ti progi bekar nighali. Ata nahi ticha sanga to lagin karnar”* (The girl turned out to be bad, he won't marry her now.)

Taken aback, I stared at her blankly. I spent the next half-hour trying to convince her that we needed to talk, that her son was at risk of HIV, he needed counselling, an HIV test, he was a minor and it was illegal for him to marry at this age. But her entire focus was on was 'the slut' and

finally, my intransigency too much for her, she stomped out, the boy languidly following her.

I encountered quite a few cases of UD amongst MSM & TG population. Not all cases showed classic symptoms; in fact, quite a few would be asymptomatic carriers. Since quite a few MSM & TG persons practised fellatio, a few would suffer from Gonococcal Pharyngitis, an oral Gonorrhoeal infection. It was mistakenly treated as a common throat infection by the family Doctor, entirely in the dark about the patients' sexual history. The receptive partner too was not aware that unprotected oral sex carried the risk of Gonorrhoea from an asymptomatic carrier.

To deal with the problem of UD, *Pathfinder International* followed NACO guidelines and used 'Syndromic Management Protocols' to treat high-risk populations. For treating asymptomatic UD, all TI projects issued 1gram Azithromycin and 400 mg of Cefixime to every newly registered MSM or TG client.

Initially, we suggested that these be taken half an hour before or half an hour after meals. But the Peers and ORWs started reporting cases where the person, leaving the health camp, would throw away the tablets as the concept of an asymptomatic carrier was utterly lost on them. So we had to change the practice and started ensuring they swallowed the tablets in front of us. If they stated they had not eaten for long or were not likely to eat for a while, they were enticed wherever possible with a *wada pav* (snacks.)

Of less frequent occurrence was Syphilis or Chancroid. Along with HIV, people registered in the projects were also screened for Syphilis by VDRL testing. Initially, *Pathfinder International* had provided us with vials of Benzathine Penicillin, the gold standard of treatment for Syphilis, so that we could take Syphilis-positive patients to a hospital and give them injections of Penicillin, after checking for sensitivity.

However, considering the risk of anaphylaxis (a potentially severe allergic reaction to Penicillin), and the reluctance of Doctors to give Benzathine Penicillin injections, *Pathfinder International* discontinued the practice and decided that it would be preferable for

the Doctor to prescribe antibiotics and then confirm if the patient had responded to the treatment by conducting an antibody titre test, after a specific period after the end of the last dose. We made special efforts to follow up with the Syphilis-positive cases, to ensure that they completed their course of antibiotics.

By the end of March 2012, when the funding from *Pathfinder International* ended, and the projects transitioned to MSACS, we had zero cases of Syphilis and Chancroid. A proud moment for both *Pathfinder International* and us as it was rigorous follow-up and screening over years that had enabled us to achieve this milestone. Sadly, later on, a couple of years after we shut down our TI projects, cases of Syphilis started surfacing again in the MSM & TG population.

I must make a special mention of the rampant problem of fungal infections, mostly due to lack of hygiene. Although there were a few exceptions where the youths had shaved their scrotum, I came across many who had never trimmed their pubic hair, and had smelly unwashed genitals; a consequence of bathing in public places with their underwear on. Retraction of the foreskin showed an unclean penis glans lined with smegma.

For fungal infections, we gave them a cream (a mixture of Clotrimazole and an antibiotic) for local application which gave a lot of relief. Many clients said they attended our health camps to undergo an EGE solely for the purpose to get the cream. For years, after the termination of the project, I had instances of men walking into the Trust Drop-In Centre, asking for 'that cream'. Wisened by the experience, I made it a point to spend a few minutes on intimate hygiene during Sex Education sessions. We also made a pamphlet on intimate hygiene in Marathi, laminated it and distributed it to Counsellors, ORWs and Peers. They were to read and understand it and make it a point to discuss it during their interaction with MSM youths at sites.





## A QUEEN'S TANTRUM

I was on my way home when the call came. Parking my bike on the side of the road, I checked the missed call number and removing my helmet I called back. Vivek answered immediately, and before I could speak, a torrent of abuse ensued; Vivek, was the ORW from Kasarwadi area (PCMC.) The doctor has flatly refused blood transfusion stating he didn't want to waste blood on an HIV positive patient. Vivek had lost it, and his high pitched voice screeched in my ear.

Sanket, a youth from North India, had migrated to Pune for work and had been referred to Vivek by some community friends. Sanket belonged to the community and had not informed anyone that he was HIV positive, although it later transpired that he had known it for years. He had wished it away by not thinking about it and had, one not so fine day, become so weak that he could barely stand. His friends had taken him to a local BAMS or BHMS doctor who had done a Hemogram and recommended him to a hospital for treatment for severe anaemia. It was then that he had confided in Vivek that he was HIV positive.

Vivek had admitted him to a PCMC hospital in the general ward, and as was usual in such cases, none of the patient's friends had turned up. Vivek was all alone to take care of the patient's needs, and now, the doctor had turned out to be callous.

As I headed to the hospital, which was far away, Vivek-the-queen continued with his tantrum. After showing his ID card to the doctor, with all the curious spectators now gathered around him, he grandly told the doctor and the audience that the NGO president was on his way and this was not the end of the matter rather, just the beginning.

By the time I landed at the hospital, the doctor had grudgingly relented. After determining the patient's blood group, Vivek was given a slip of paper for the blood bank. He was waiting for me, just inside the entrance of the general ward. The ward was full, and with no vacant beds available, Sanket, a thin, dark-skinned youth, had

found a chair and was docilely sitting in it, eyes closed.

As Vivek introduced me to Sanket, I told him that we would need to inform his family as his friends had not shown any willingness to take responsibility. He instantly became voluble and loudly insisted that he did want to tell his family. As the neighbouring patients and relatives started taking an interest in him, I nudged him out of the chair and took him outside the ward to talk to him.

After protracted negotiations, we agreed that neither Vivek nor I would call his family; he would do so on his own and tell them that he was in the hospital without disclosing his HIV status. I made him call his family then and there, and as his uncle picked up the call, the patient started bawling. Without allowing his uncle to get a word in edgeways, he bawled and bawled about how life was not worth living and that he was feeling suicidal and he didn't want to stay in Pune. We looked on helpless as the patient cleverly manipulated his uncle for close to 20 minutes with his heart-rending lament. His uncle had promptly ordered him to come home.

Call over, aim achieved, the patient had dramatically quietened down. I told him sternly that as he didn't want to enlist the support of his family, we were not interested in taking his responsibility. He tersely responded that he would have one of his friends come the next morning and take charge. Turning around, he went to the ward, followed by us. Another patient had taken the chair, and our patient then sat down in the corner, eyes closed, his back to the wall.

In those days, that particular hospital did not have a blood bank, and we were instructed to go to *Talera* hospital. So I sat pillion on Vivek's bike, which incidentally was not his but borrowed from another ORW and experienced Vivek's petrifying driving, heart thudding in my mouth. Midway, I asked him to stop, took charge and with him riding pillion proceeded to *Talera* hospital. It took an hour or so, and by the time we came back, the doctor was nowhere to be found, so our search began, in wards, passages, and in the end, we headed to the emergency ward, which was chock a block with patients' relatives.

Inside the entrance, a woman wailed as her relative lay on the

stretcher as the portable ECG flat-lined his journey. Taking a good look around, we headed back and handed the blood to the nurse in the general ward. She said she would consult the doctor and start the infusion the instant a bed became available. I asked Vivek to stay back until the start of the procedure and headed home. The infusion began around 10.30 pm, and then, Vivek left.

The next morning Vivek was back to hand over his charge to Sanket's friend only to realise that Sanket was missing, his mobile unreachable. Asking patients about Sanket had not been fruitful, and the search for him high and low had been in vain. In a panic, Vivek called me. I asked him to call his friends who had referred the patient to him, to check whether they were aware of his whereabouts. Vivek called them and found out that Sanket had left the hospital early in the morning, gone to his room, packed his bags and left for his hometown without communicating with us.

A few months later, Vivek heard from some friends that the patient had disclosed his HIV status to his uncle and was getting 'treatment' from a quack who promised 100% cure for HIV. Two years after the patient left for his hometown, Vivek was left speechless when he got a brief call from the patient who said that he had shelled out ₹1.5 lakh and was now 'completely cured of HIV'.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Sanket used in the chapter is a pseudonym.





## THE FAUX MEET

As the meeting ended, Project Co-ordinator Pradeep, sitting next to me, whispered in my ear, "Mihir wants to meet you in private". I asked him to send Mihir in.

Closeted, married and in his late twenties, Mihir was one of the ORWs posted on the PCMC TI project. As he daintily sat down, he looked around nervously. Other than him, Pradeep and I were the only ones present in the room.

"Sir, although you are getting support group meeting reports from ---- -- Hot-Spot from Avinash, I don't think they are taking place." I looked at Pradeep who nodded; apparently, Mihir had spoken to him before informing me.

"Why do you think so?" I asked suddenly alert; I knew Mihir wouldn't exaggerate or lie.

"Sir, I have my suspicion; the statements given by the Peer are contradictory; he mentioned nine people had attended. When I asked him a day later, he mentioned seven people had attended, and the meeting report lists eight names. I suspect that Avinash has himself signed the names and signatures on the attendance sheet." Pradeep, apprehension written all over his face, suspecting that he would become my target, quickly responded, "Sir, I have been getting the reports on time along with the snack bills." The snack bills had to be submitted to claim reimbursement of the expenses sanctioned for the meeting.

The support group meeting Mihir was complaining about had happened a few days ago. "What was the venue of the last meeting? Does the snacks bill have the address of the snacks centre where the Peer purchased snacks for the participants?" I queried.

Sometimes the bills submitted were rough bills made on notepad paper and stamped by the proprietor because small snack centres didn't generally carry a printed bill book. In such cases, the proprietor simply stamped the bill with the name of the place without any



address, or the stamp was illegible, and you couldn't decipher the address. Fortunately for me and unfortunately for Avinash, he had submitted proper bills, all seemingly in order.

“Well, then there is only one thing to be done. Mihir, please visit this place tomorrow with the latest bill and if possible carry a photograph of the Peer and show it to the cashier. Go at around the same time, the meeting had taken place.” Mihir nodded. Warning him not to discuss this issue with anyone else, I let him go while asking Pradeep to stay back.

“Pradeep, if Avinash is told of this investigation before it is complete, I will hold you responsible”, I warned him. “No Sir, of course I will not tell him, why should I? If he has screwed up let him pay for it” Pradeep appeared flustered; it reflected poorly on him if, under his management, one of his Peers turned out to be a cheat.

Mihir was back the next day; his smug face giving enough indication of what was in store. “Sir, the Peer had snacks alone and then asked the cashier to give a blank bill; the cashier told me so. If you want, you can send someone with me to the cashier to verify.”

“Please call Avinash tomorrow; I want all three of you present”.

Avinash was a lanky, obsequious guy whose sexuality I never did figure out. Rising or bending to the occasion, he could be anyone. He sat down, leaning forward, eager to please. Without telling him of the investigation, I questioned him generally about his work, slowly leading to the support group meeting. His earnest responses made me want to trust him, believe in him but knowing the truth I quickly got bored with his pretence at sincerity and dismayed, I presented the evidence. Stonily looking at Mihir, he dared to defend himself, saying that the bill was in order. At which point I directed Mihir and Pradeep to accompany Avinash to the cashier and have the cashier give his say and dismissed them all.

As they got up to go, Avinash relented and pleading, stated that this was the first time he had done it. Unmoved, I terminated his appointment with immediate effect, called in the accountant to pay his dues minus the last support group meeting bill and dismissed

them all except Pradeep.

“How long has this been going on?” Pradeep shrugged. “Did you know?” a stupid question by me, responded by the prompt, indignant response, “No Sir. I swear on my mother, I didn't know. You know that I would have immediately told you had I known”. Looking at him, I wondered whether he had always suspected the truth but wanting to keep everyone happy, as was his nature, had done nothing. I would never know. Only a couple of months before, on a complaint I received from a Peer, I had warned him not to use his fiduciary relationship with the Peers to borrow money from them. Long after Pradeep left the room, I kept thinking about him, wondering whether I should find a replacement for him, well knowing that finding good, senior staff to do this thankless work, for a pittance with no prospects of a raise or promotion was near impossible. It is Avinash who I should have worried about, instead. I had thrown him out and seething in anger; he was planning his revenge.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individuals, the names Pradeep, Mihir and Avinash used in the chapter are pseudonyms.





## REVENGE OF THE PEER

“Sir, there has been some matter at ----- site”. I looked at the clock; it was around 9.00 pm. That evening a health camp was being held at the site. As usual, the Doctor and the Lab Technician had accompanied the mobile clinic van to the site. Mihir (ORW) and Javed, the Peer, who looked after the site were busy mobilising community members for the health camp.

Just as the health camp started, Avinash, who angered at his dismissal for fraudulently submitting a forged snacks bill, had come with half a dozen of his friends, assaulted Mihir for snitching on him and pelted the medical van with stones. The health camp was suspended immediately.

Javed panicked and called Pradeep, who in turn, called me. I asked Pradeep to go to the site. Pradeep started by bus; he didn't own a bike.

By the way, most of my staff used public transport, and it irritated me no end. It took one and half to two hours to travel from Pune to a PCMC site, whereas the same distance could have been covered by a two-wheeler in half an hour to an hour. But I couldn't very well complain because, with the meagre honorarium and travel they were getting, they couldn't afford even a second-hand bike.

Twenty minutes later, Pradeep called again. He had got stuck in traffic and had no idea how long it would take to reach the site, which was a good twenty kms away. I asked Pradeep to tell the medical team to leave and took my bike and went to the site, taking a roundabout route to avoid the traffic in the city.

Being on a bike gave me the latitude to manoeuvre through small lanes, bypass traffic snarls and reached the site at around 10.00 pm. I waited. Soon Pradeep showed up, and we went to the Police Station, waiting outside as a heated argument ensued inside with half a dozen people standing around the desk of the Officer-In-Charge.

A constable gruffly questioned me, and after informing him that I was

in charge of an NGO and there had been an assault on my staff member and stone-pelting on the medical van, he immediately took me inside. The ongoing argument of the group went in pause mode, and after I explained the situation, the Officer-In-Charge asked me, “Do you want protection for the van? If so, give me in writing the next date of your health camp, and I will post a constable there”. That was the last thing I wanted; the sight of a cop at the health camp venue would be the death of intervention at that site.

“Then what do you want me to do? Do you want to file a complaint?” I replied, “Sir, I don't want to file a complaint, but can you please talk to him and ensure that if he ever again directly or indirectly interferes with my project or staff, he will have to face serious consequences?” I had my hands full and didn't have the time to pursue this matter more than what was necessary for the safety of the staff and the functioning of the project.

Relieved at the saved paperwork, the officer immediately replied, “Sure, give us his number, and I will call him to the Police Station and have a talk with him”. The officer tried to call Avinash, but his mobile was switched off.

Although we knew Avinash stayed near the site, I didn't have his address at hand, and neither did Pradeep or Javed. Promising the Police officer that I will get his home address, we left the Police Station.

Outside, Javed remarked that he knew a Transgender person who knew where Avinash lived. He called her; she knew where Avinash lived but didn't know the address. The closeted Transgender person was requested to come to the site of the health camp; asking her to come to the Police Station would have petrified her. She came but was afraid that Avinash would have his revenge on her if he came to know that she disclosed his place of residence. We assured her that Avinash would not know, as she could take us close to his home, point it out and then leave.

We reached the two-storied residential building, through labyrinthine ill-lit streets. The house was dark; Avinash lived on the

first floor, with a balcony overlooking the street. I noted down the address of a shop in the vicinity. Ideally, I should have gone to the Police Station, submitted the address and left. But, by then, I had gone ballistic. Like a drunkard, I hollered to Avinash from the street. No one answered. I screamed again; the third time I shouted, “If you don't come down, I will come up”.

Sensing that if I came up, his family would be witness to the altercation, Avinash quietly came down and my anger exploded. As I started raining blows on him, he pleaded, “Sir, I have had an appendicitis operation, please don't... please”. I pulled his shirt up, true enough; he had a scar running down his right lower abdomen. My anger subsided abruptly upon seeing the scar; I stepped back. (It was a rule that the staff never make the cardinal mistake of interfering in my fights.)

As we left, I told Avinash to follow us to the Police Station. As we started walking in silence to the main road, I calmed down, realising that I had not been thinking straight. Avinash had not followed us. Stupid of me; I should have dragged him to the Police Station. So, again we went to the Police Station. As I handed over the address to the Officer-In-Charge telling him that I had slapped some sense into Avinash, he nodded knowingly, “*Aamhi hi amcha parini samaj deto*” (We will also drill some sense into him.)[1] They did.

For the first time after coming out, I was in my new butch avatar. I remember crying in the class in the ninth standard, at the age of fourteen, fearing the teacher would hit me for not doing my homework; he hadn't. He had looked at me disparagingly and moved on, slapping some of the girls who took it in their stride, not a tear nor a sob from them. (As an aside, I hated all schools and my favourite fantasies were of burning them down.)

The community soon came to know of the incident, and they started respecting me for my 'butch' avatar. Till then, their internalised homophobia had ensured that they had only disdain for a bottom like me- as they had for all bottoms; a characteristic they had in common with homophobic Straight men. From then on periodically, they kept on hearing of my violent outbursts, and that reputation so far has

remained more or less intact.

But despite being vigilant, rotten apples amongst staff kept cropping up once in a while. Till date, I can't help but feel sad at losing an excellent LGBT ally, a Doctor to whom we used to refer our clients for EGE.

A Peer tried to bribe him to stamp patient coupons without bringing in the client, and in anger, he called me. I immediately visited him to apologise, but he was in no mood to listen. "I don't want to work with your organisation again" were his final words, and that was it. The Peer joined and flourished at one of my rival NGOs, but I lost a very valuable ally.

At times, some non-staff community members would screw up things. I particularly remember a Transgender sex worker who plied her trade at one of our sites and had adroitly robbed a drunken customer of his gold chain during coitus, not realising that she had chosen a particularly wrong customer to rob. Later on, the customer came to his senses, and as realisation dawned, he had started making the rounds at the site, with a couple of his rowdy friends, intent on beating up any and every Transgender person that came their way.

Dropping out of sight for a couple of weeks, the same Transgender sex worker, again, showed up at the site; recognising her, the customer had stabbed her in revenge. She survived. A few months later, she resumed plying her trade at a different location, but I heard that she had not learned her lesson and the streak of robbing unwary customers continued.

In all this, we had to pay a heavy price; our work at the site suffered immeasurably, as we had to suspend operations for a few months, in consideration of the safety of the Peers and ORWs.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individuals, the names Pradeep, Avinash and Javed used in the chapter are pseudonyms.

[1] The incident occurred on April 02, 2009, and we submitted a letter to the Police Station on April 03, 2009.



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## PARTY TIME!

I excused myself from the group I was talking to, at a health camp and took the call. It was Sameer known for arranging parties in Pune.

“You know that I arrange parties, right?”

“Yes”, I had replied, perplexed, not understanding where the conversation was heading.

“Then why don't you arrange the party with me? Why are you teaming with her?” a name of a Queer female who too had started arranging parties in Pune popped up.

That I was into organising parties was news to me. “You think I have nothing better to do?” I caustically replied. That was true, with so much on my plate; parties were the last thing on my mind.

Organising Gay parties at clubs has always been a fat cash cow, and I had been at his parties in Pune a couple of times. I remember Zameer and I dancing in front of an enormous mirror at one of the clubs as one of our friends sat nearby playing mock judge; Zameer won hands down.

My visits to these parties ended, when my request to Sameer, that he should keep condoms for free distribution at the venue went unheeded; I was willing to provide him with condoms for free. That was the last time I ever attended a Gay party; this was I guess around eleven-twelve years ago.

Today's call by Sameer was a result of a little bird whispering in his ear that I had got together with his recent rival to host parties. Like the mafia which chalks out its territory of operation, he was upset with me, wrongly believing I was the rival organiser crossing into 'his territory'.<sup>[1]</sup> Tersely telling him that there was not a snowball's chance in hell that I would arrange parties, I ended the conversation and headed back to the group discussion, which was more important.

Over the years, Sameer intermittently kept on enticing me with a promise of, what else, a donation- suggesting that he was willing to



donate a portion of his earnings from one of his Gay parties if I would oblige to show up at his parties. Suspecting that he wanted to use my name to further his legitimacy and perhaps use my contacts with the Police if need be, I wisely kept my distance.

Once, I did receive a call from him around 1.00 am; checking the caller and the time, I correctly surmised it to be a Police raid. The Police had come across the Gay party (I think in Lonavala, am not sure), in full swing, way past closing time. Taking one look at the dolled-up crowd, the Police had gone in for a shakedown. The closeted queens had bent over backwards (and forwards), eager to hand over cash and gold rings, to be released incognito. My cell phone ringing unattended, I blissfully turned over and went back to sleep.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

The identity of the individual Sameer used in the chapter is a pseudonym.

[1] The disputes, between various LGBTQ individuals and groups in Pune, over organising LGBTQ parties, continue; one dispute made it to a newspaper.

- Dis-harmony amid city-based LGBTQ groups goes to cops. SPPEKTRUM alleges MIST created trouble at its Oct 27 party, spreads rumours online; latter completely denies accusations. By Sukhada Khandge. *Pune Mirror*. Nov 7, 2018.





## MAHABHARAT

The first of the many 'mini' *Mahabharats* I experienced in India, was at a conference in Mumbai. As usual, showing up before time at the conference room, I had strolled around saying my Hi's and Hello's to those few who had shown up early. Suddenly in my neighbourhood, I heard a shrill, falsetto voice, "How dare you assume that I am a female?"

Hairs stood on the back of my neck as I remembered a similar denouement at a party held years ago in San Francisco (USA.) A Lesbian hosted the party where a Queer woman started spewing venom at someone I couldn't see (too much crowd taking up the front seats.) "How dare you..." kept on being repeated intermittently. Still, I couldn't get the nub of the matter. The place had gone deathly still; no one dared, least of all the host, interrupt her flow. After emptying herself of all her venom (and foam too), the accuser stomped out. After a long pause our collective breathing resumed and as I asked the host what that was all about; she dismissed it saying, "She does it every time. She has to have her moment". I had wondered then why the host had not intervened, but she was more experienced than me; she had just shrugged it off and moved on.

If this single experience was anything to go by, this was going to last a while. It transpired that a timid youngster, let's call him Babyface had come to the conference, probably one of his first ones and bubbling with excitement had gone on a spree to introduce himself to one and all. He had looked at this person, who dressed in jeans and having her assets straining at her T-shirt, looked female and having received no other visible clue about her gender, had made the cardinal sin of assuming that she was female.

At that, all hell had broken loose. "How dare you assume that I am a female?" Babyface, his bulging eyes now almost as big as his face stood frozen, as the Transman railed against Babyface, his body shaking with anger. All of us eagerly gathered around the drama unfolding surprisingly this early in the morning.

Babyface did try a valiant effort to get a word in edgewise, to no avail. Should I interrupt? I wondered. My mother-hen feelings urged me to protect Babyface. But deciding against it, I quietly sauntered outside, leaving Babyface to learn the most important lesson of his life that not all LGBTIQA community members are worth knowing.

Sauntering outside, I bumped into someone who proudly announced: "I am the first MSM HIV positive person in India". Puzzled, I looked at him; was he proud of his illustrious health or the 'distinction' of being the first one? As we spoke, it dawned on me that he considered it something of an achievement to be the first HIV positive person in India. (I do not know whether that is true or not.)

Soon after someone from Chennai joined us. I fondly recounted my memories of my 1990-1991 stay in Chennai for my first job and the infrastructural changes that have happened since. He kept on punctuating my remarks by comparing developments in Chennai with developments in Pune and Mumbai, insisting every time, "...but ours is much, much bigger". After a while, I got bored of this one-sided friendly cockfight and unsure of which dimensions he was subconsciously obsessed about, I returned to the conference hall.

As I eventually realised, tantrums at conferences (that I attended) were generally, the realm of a few select Hijras who were not habituated to coming so early (they considered it demeaning to follow any kind of schedule or show some discipline.) Their grand entrance would occur around morning tea, disrupting the speaker by their loud Hi's, claps and raucous laughter. I thought that over the years, they would settle down, make peace with the world, and move on from the years of abuse faced by them. But that didn't seem to have happened for a few. It became an attention-seeking addiction.

It was usually a post morning tea break that things started looking up. At times a Hijra participant noticing a waiter being particularly attentive to her would glide out after tacitly asking him to bring mineral water to her room. An hour or so later, her thirst satiated, she would shower and surreptitiously tiptoe into the conference hall. She would demurely sit at the back of the conference hall for the rest of the day, a mystic smile on her face, daydreaming about her conquest

and too tired to be part of the afternoon's showdown at Conference Creek.

Many years later, as I took my seat at a conference, post-lunch, I realised that nothing had changed. It had become an almost unspoken rule that tantrums had to happen post-lunch. As if everyone agreed amongst themselves that they needed something more stimulating to keep awake; especially after a sumptuous lunch and double helpings of the dessert, which in today's case was *Gulab Jamuns*.

Everyone knew it was time for an 'attention-seeking' ritual, but no one knew precisely when it would crop up. As the afternoon session started, participants started filtering in, the rich food making them too drowsy to pay attention. A Hijra activist lay down on a couch on her side, at the back, her head cradled under her arm, her eyes challenging everyone for a fight, desperate that someone would ask her to show some manners, to get up and sit straight. The looking-for-a-tantrum challenge was evident to everyone and wisely ignored.

Just as the Facilitator welcomed everyone back, crack, crack went the claps. The Facilitator dutifully stopped talking, knowing he could now rest for a full half an hour. As one, we all turned around to see the Hijra activist now in full force screaming at a young Hijra, (I didn't recognise her, a newbie I guess) who had had the temerity to offend her. However, in what way no one knew.

Wisely, the Facilitator made no effort to intervene. The rest of the participants at the conference rolled their eyes, perked up and became a captive audience for a half an hour of a verbal World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) episode devoted to reviling, mind-numbing display of viciousness which was nothing but ill-disguised self-hate.

All you could hear from the young Hijra was "*Nahi Guru..*" (No Guru), but those were about the only words we heard. She was no match for the dinosaur. While the tirade went on in a mixture of *koti* words (vocabulary used by Hijras) and Hindi someone probably the young Hijra's 'sister' informed her Guru (who was at the conference but not

in the conference room, probably putting on make-up or getting it on) of the goings-on. In a few minutes, the Guru arrived foaming at the mouth.

I am sure that those Straights, Gays and Lesbians who were first-timers at the conference must have been aghast and awed at the spectacle. The *Mahabharat* raged on for twenty minutes before subsiding as suddenly as it had begun, like a small tornado you see in a field, in full strength for a second, gone in the next.

And suddenly, unexpectedly, I heard a soft snore near me. Startled, I turned around seeking the source. There, two chairs on my left and slightly at the back, a large belly arose and fell majestically with every sonorous breath; spectacles precariously placed on its top, bobbed up and down. Head thrown back, eyes closed and lost in la-la land was Amma; for him, this was just so much static.

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## IN CAHOOTS

As I started evaluating a health project of female sex workers, the staff started giving stock answers, and for someone like me who has spent so much time in the field, it had taken me very little time to scrape the veneer to see what lay underneath.

Accompanied by the funding agency officials, I started the evaluation in the morning. I cursorily went thru the daily dairies of the Peers and then asked one about the work she had done that day; she replied, "None". If that was so, then someone had cooked up her daily diary entries and a dodo would have caught that one out. After I pointed out the discrepancy that she had already made a note in the diary of delivery of condoms for the day, no justification was given by her.

The refusal of female sex workers to go for an internal examination was that, "*Te phulala chimta gheta*" (That device (Speculum) pinches the Cervix.) On showing the array of instruments, not a single staff member was able to identify the Speculum. Ironically, their Doctor had records which showed that more than 80% of their registered population had undergone internal examination. When I pointed out the discrepancy, no justification was given by the Doctor. He just sat there quietly, waiting for us to leave.

I asked the staff about their honorarium, an area that I was officially not supposed to inquire into, but me being me, I had. I was tersely informed, by one of the senior staff, that it was none of my business. Sadly, one of the staff members had already told me that, "I don't know, it varies from month to month" and "We were not to question the calculation on how the specific amount is arrived at."

I demanded to meet some female sex workers as part of the project evaluation. They ferociously denied my request. Finally, they relented to the extent of arranging a focus group meeting with a few female sex workers, under their supervision.

During the meeting, an older sex worker made a statement which gave me a valuable insight: many of them were from other regions.

When there was a drought or famine in that region, one of the adult women in a family was sent here, to a female sex worker who was her aunt or cousin. This aunt or cousin already in the trade mentored the newbie, who became part of the extended family.

I got a good idea of how they treated their extended family when I came to know, that they just dumped a female sex worker in a government hospital when she became too sick and left her to her fate.

Before the presentation of the evaluation, I requested a female colleague to accompany me for an unsupervised visit to meet female sex workers. We spoke to a couple of them, asking about the medical services they received from the NGO. The answers were uniform: they received a box of condoms every month; that was it. Did they visit a Doctor or did one visit them for a medical checkup? No never. No.... No Never... No...

As the staff came to know of my visit, all hell broke loose. "*Tumchi himmat kashi zhali, amhala na sangta, tyanchashi bolaichi?*" (How did you dare to speak to them without informing us?) Well, I didn't need a permit to do that. But then they made the mistake of going on the offensive, "One of the female sex workers has complained that you sexually assaulted her and we are thinking of going to the Police." A threat; coated in a cheap lie. They thought they had me by my balls.

The problem was that they had a stereotypical idea of what Gays looked like and had no idea that I was Gay, and a 100% permanent one at that; not of the 'sexuality is fluid' variety- 'Today I am Gay, who knows who I maybe tomorrow?' kind. As I revealed my sexuality, there was pin-drop silence, their *Bramhastra* (ultimate weapon) had failed, and their senior staff member forbade me from completing the evaluation. (But, had I been Straight...?)

Furious, I got up and left. Furious at the exploitation female sex workers under the garb of their welfare; furious at the organisation lies and mafia tactics; furious of the impotent funding agencies knowingly funding rampantly corrupt organisations; and lastly, furious at the funding agency staff present with me at the

evaluation.[1] All through this sordid episode, the funding agency staff mutely sat at my side, minding nothing but their jobs.

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

[1] Dozens of books can be written on corrupt NGO/CBOs running government or privately funded projects. In cases where such organisations purportedly work for the extremely vulnerable communities of Gay, MSM, Transgenders or sex workers, such NGO/CBOs are the community's worst enemy, exploiting the already exploited all in the name of social welfare.

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## A QUESTION OF TRUST

“Do you really trust these people?” a manager from an NGO's healthcare centre asked me, disdain in her tone. I stared at her, a couple of expletives running through my mind. So much for an NGO working for the underprivileged.

“Yes, I do, she has no reason to lie”, I quietly replied. The manager was sceptical; she considered Transgender people a community of liars, wont to doing 'such things' to gain attention.

The 'such thing' was a charge of sexual harassment against a staff member of the healthcare centre. The victim Seema, a HIV positive Transgender person, had approached me stating that her Doctor had asked her to do an x-ray. Since she had come after *Gadikhana* OPD closed, I had referred her to this healthcare centre, where I had previously referred a couple of MSM & TGs.

Seema came back and informed our Counsellor that a Technician at the healthcare centre, had grabbed her hand and placed it forcefully on his crotch after taking the x-ray. When she resisted and broke free, he had taken a ₹10.00 note from his pocket and handed it to her, which she had taken and left.

The Counsellor had immediately informed me, and we, along with Seema, had gone to the healthcare centre and spoken to the manager. The manager called in the Technician, and Seema identified him; his innocent face registering shock at the allegation. Turning to me, he pleaded in Hindi, “Look at me. I am a retired military man with a family; do you think I will do something of this kind? Since she is a Transgender person, I gave her ₹10.00 in sympathy.”

I replied, “Look at me, do you think my looks give you an idea that I am Gay?” He did not quite understand me. “*Mai samalingi hu. Mere chehere pe dikhta hai kya? Nahi na? Dikne par kuch nahi hota*” (I am a homosexual. Can you read that from my face? No, right? That's because looks mean nothing) I spelt out. Not knowing how to respond, he turned to his manager, hurt in his voice. “Madam, you

will have to decide whether you want to believe this Transgender person or me". The manager believed in him and rounded on me, "Why did your Transgender take ₹10.00 from him?"

Seema should not have, but I have known many, whose occupation is *mangti* (asking for alms), who just cannot refuse offered money, even in such unsavoury circumstances. "She shouldn't have, that was her mistake, but why did your staff give money to her, during working hours?"

So it became a battle between whether her staff member was a liar and a sexual predator or my client was a liar and an attention seeker, with no way of ascertaining the truth. In the end, she asked me to request my Counsellor and Seema to step outside and also asked the Technician to step out. As the door closed, she said, "Do you really trust these people?"

After the meeting, I spoke to Seema. She was not out as PLHIV to anyone. She was also in no state of health to pull any attention-seeking stunt. She did not want to file a police complaint. So the next best thing was, I wrote a letter to the NGO stating details of the incident and my meeting with the manager and advised them that they need to modify their policy and have a female person in attendance during diagnostic procedures carried on Transgender persons. I couriered the letter to them, received no reply, and that became the last time I referred my clients to them.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Seema used in the chapter is a pseudonym.





## INTEREST-FREE LOAN

As I answered the knock on the door, I saw Transgenders Avni and Payal standing in the darkness of the passage; I was expecting them. Payal, as usual, was wearing a Punjabi dress and Avni was in a yellow-brown saree. "I wasn't sure whether you would be in the office, so I had called to confirm", Avni said huffing, a sure sign that the lift was again out of order. I gestured them to sit on chairs but they, as usual, preferred to sit on the floor and I too joined them sitting cross-legged, my back resting against the wall.

A staff member brought a water bottle. After quenching her thirst, Avni pulled out a large wad of notes from a purse she had kept in her blouse. She had come to repay the money she borrowed from me three months ago. She used the money to build a small room adjacent to where she stayed. Smoothing out the crumpled notes, she studiously counted them and then requested Payal to re-count them, lest an extra one was given to me. Payal started counting briskly.

*"Bai, maazhe pai tutaichi vel ali"* (My legs are giving me hell.) For the past three months, Avni had been doing *mangti* every day to repay the borrowed money. *Mangti* was Avni's only source of income, and she had kept her word to repay me on time.

Those Transgender persons who had known me for long knew the advantages of borrowing from me; the Trust did not lend money to individuals. One, they did not have to provide any collateral (their gold ornaments) and secondly, I did not charge any interest.

There were a few Transgender people who played the role of the moneylender, but the rate of interest they charged others (yes, even members of the Transgender community) was exorbitant; in some cases, it was as high as 30% per month. I knew one Transgender person who charged 40% interest per month, and if the borrower did not repay her on time, she would hire a few of her one-night-stand playboys-cum-thugs from her slum, on a commission basis, to recover the money.

Many of the Hijra Gurus were good-natured individuals, who looked after the general welfare of their *chelas* (protégé) and loaned money when required. But there were also instances where the *chelas* considered their Gurus completely untrustworthy. Some *chelas* used their befriending sessions with me to vent their frustration and anger on their Gurus.

Such Gurus patiently bided their time, waiting for the *chela* to borrow money from them. Once in their debt, the Guru made the *chela* repay the loan, and as if that was not enough, they expected the *chela* to do more, in various other ways. So all in all, it was a rotten deal to borrow money from them. Since such Gurus also kept a close eye on the savings of their *chelas*, I came across *chelas* who had taken great efforts to hide their bank passbooks from their Gurus. Those who stayed separately (away from the Guru) found it relatively easy to do so; the challenge was for those who stayed with Gurus who were exploitative.

Compared to their moneylender sisters, I was a soft target. They knew I would not hire thugs to recover the loan; they also knew that I could be a bit lenient on the repayment schedule. All in all, whether it was Gay men or Transgenders or Straight men (who were my employees or ex-employees) most conscientiously repaid. There was no evidence that Transgender people were less trustworthy than others, as was the general speculation when it came to the repayment of a loan.

But, generally speaking, compared to Transgender persons, Gay men in financial need were very shy to ask for a loan or a dole. (During the COVID-19 crisis, I had to work much harder to get them to open up about their financial difficulties.)

In 2018, at a personal level, I set up a small corpus fund and started the initiative called *Kharicha Vaata* (The Squirrel's Share.) I let it be known to my close Gay and Transgender friends and colleagues who came from a lower-income background that they could avail a loan with no interest and pay it back in instalments.

Although I generally gave loans to those people I knew well, I still

ended up writing off amounts borrowed by a few stray Transgenders, Gay and Straight men, who despite repeated reminders, refused to repay. Every time they had the misfortune of seeing me on the street, they would quickly cross over to the other side, darting in a nearby lane pretending not to have seen me at all. Or, unluckily for them, if they ran into me at an event, they would vociferously tell me that they would definitely repay me next month and as I searchingly looked at their earnest faces, I knew, that month would never arrive.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Avni used in the chapter is a pseudonym.

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## LONGING TO BELONG

The restaurant manager smiled and nodded approvingly as we followed him to our table, to be seated. Simmi was leading the way. “*Mi yancha kade kaam karte*” (I work with them) she proudly told the manager, displaying her ID badge hanging around her neck. He knew her; she came to his restaurant on *mangti* rounds. But today was different; she was a customer.

Simmi, a Transgender person, was a simpleton, who resided in the area and had started working with us as a Peer and distributed condoms. Today after a health camp in the afternoon (afternoon health camps were rare), she along with a few staff members and myself had decided to have lunch together.

The waiters were extra courteous, and while presenting the bill, the head waiter made it a point to announce that the manager had given us a considerable discount. The discount was not due to the superstitious nature of the manager. It was because he approved that Simmi was doing part-time work; liked that we were treating her as an equal; happy that she was revelling in the attention she was getting.

The desperation for acceptance and respect is entrenched deeply in all of us, yet consistently denied. Seeing Simmi content, reminded me of another Transgender person, Sheila. She worked on our project for a while, as a Peer.

Sometimes, I would take Sheila to the location where she plied her trade at night. Riding pillion on my bike, she would wave and shout greetings to people she knew along the way so that they would see her with me; on a motorcycle, sitting with both legs on one side, the way women wearing saris sat, one hand resting on my shoulder.

On reaching her destination, Sheila would, at times, insist that I have fruit juice at one of the nearby restaurants, which was one of her regular haunts. She wanted the waiters to see her with me, her eyes searching their faces for a momentary sign of respect and acceptance and satisfied, she would get up to leave, leaving me to pay the bill.

Having an election voter ID card with the correct gender was also a part of that longing; the power to identify oneself as one was, have a say on who bats for you and so, was high on the list of demands of the

Transgender community. Many did not have Voter IDs or had them with gender Male.

I wrote to the Collector (Pune) stating that many from the Transgender community did not have documents for Voter IDs. I got an encouraging reply[1], and subsequently, with the proactive assistance of *Tahsildar* (Chief officer entrusted with local revenue administration) Seema Holkar Mam, Parikshit (Manager of *Pehchan* Project) started filing applications for voter IDs for Hijras and Jogtas.

The evidentiary documents provided were letters of their Gurus stating the age of the applicant and that they lived at the Guru's residence.[2][3] The initial attempt got mixed results; Payal who applied for a change in gender from 'Male' to 'Other' received a Voter ID without a change[4], but the glitches got fixed, and things continued to improve.

But on the job front, there was no progress. Over the years, I worked with quite a few Transgender community members on our projects, some who worked as Peers or as ORWs (Lachi became a Trustee of *Samapathik* Trust for two years), but none of them made enough to live solely on these earnings. As of April 2015, a Peer received a meagre ₹3,000.00 honorarium and ₹300.00 travel allowance per month for the part-time post; an ORW received ₹7,500.00 honorarium and ₹750.00 travel allowance per month for the full-time post.

Before the NALSA Judgment of 2014 (Refer Book III- Shadows at Dawn. Chapter: Travesty of Justice), outside of MSM & TG NGOs, no one was willing to hire Transgender persons, and they continued doing *mangti* whenever they could and a few, also, hustled at night, arousing my middle class morality to make efforts to provide them income opportunities.

Initially, I offered resources, funds and office space, to set-up a business for the members of the Transgender community. The plan was to buy flowers, in bulk, from Mandai (which was very near the Trust office), make *gajras* (a garland of flowers worn in the hair by women), and sell them to female sex workers in Budhwar Peth red-light area. They could also make bouquets or flower decorations for pandals, and wedding venues. One Gay man (a staff member in the TI project for a while) knew how to make these decorations. I

encouraged him to take the initiative and train others. All to no avail; he eventually left the job, spent his entire time borrowing money from suckers, drinking all the time and getting laid by anyone and everyone willing to touch him.

I had then come up with the idea of getting sewing machines in the office to train Transgender community members to stitch so that they could make children's clothes or women's garments- Fall, Piko, Skirt, Blouse etc. The occupation was reasonably safe; they could do the work in the Trust office. My Mom was willing to support the initiative financially. Alas, not a single Transgender person we contacted showed interest.

With no takers, the idea of making literate Transgender persons computer savvy so that they could do data entry work got consigned to the dustbin.

I made zero progress, and the Transgender community's lack of interest in jobs would continue till the NALSA Judgment, after which, almost every Transgender I talked to, demanded a reservation quota for Transgenders in government jobs and desired only a government job. Still, I continued my efforts to find private employment opportunities for them.

The first private employer to approach me post-NALSA Judgment was Mr Rahul Wautre with the offer of hiring Transgenders.[5] He ran a small garment manufacturing unit, making children's clothes at Narhe (which would later shift to Hadapsar-Saswad Road.) Since I had never met him before, I visited his factory and checked it out. Depending on willingness to learn, there were four types of jobs available- stitching, ironing, garment folding and packing/inventory. Mr Wautre offered each worker a stipend of ₹5000.00 for the first three months. After that, depending on the number of pieces worked on, each worker would have earned around ₹8,000.00 to ₹10,000.00, per month. He was aware that hiring a single Transgender person would make her very uncomfortable working in the Straight setup and was willing to hire up to four Transgenders. I reached out to the Transgender community; there were no takers. Two other manufacturers approached, with the same result.

After a debate I was part of, on a Marathi news channel, a staff member of the channel approached one of the other panellists-



Transgender social worker. The staff member stated that he had a friend who was interested in Transgender inclusion at workplace and wanted to hire a Transgender community member at his Petrol Pump. The Petrol Pump was in the city and would the panellist kindly assist his friend in recruiting one₹

The Transgender social worker, immediately, enquired about the salary. The TV channel staffer replied ₹10,000.00 per month, assuming that, it was a good start for anyone who had a tenth standard education.

Pat came the reply, “*Aaj kaal Punyat daha hajarat kai hota?*” (These days, you don't get anything for ₹10,000.00 in Pune.) Yes, *mangti* in Pune was rewarding. With no responsibilities and obligations, it paid atleast ₹12,000.00 per month, and for those who practised the oldest profession, the amount earned was significantly higher. The face of the TV staff member took on a stony expression. (For other facets of LGBTIQA inclusion at workplace refer Book III- Shadows At Dawn. Chapter: Corporates.)

I turned away pained; thinking of my staff from out-station, who were grateful to start their jobs as ORWs; they were ecstatic if they secured the position of a Counsellor with ₹12,000.00 honorarium and ₹600.00 travel per month (the figures are as of April 2015), with a Masters in Social Work degree under their belt. And three to four of them staying in one room, with just two to three pairs of clothes to make ends meet.

Eventually, after observing these disparate lifestyles and tempted with additional income and thrills, two part-time staff members of my Trust, who were educated (one a degree holder) and had jobs elsewhere, gave up their jobs and became sex workers. The wife and children were unaware that the 'man' of the household, under the pretext of work, headed for the Highway at night, to ply 'her' trade. The two would visit a rented room to cross-dress and apply make-up; addictively seeking the thrill of subversive revenge on a perverse society.

Upset about the way things were going, I resigned myself to the inevitable. It's a free world; if it's *mangti* or sex work they (and quite a few others) wanted then so be it; I will have to work with those few who were willing to learn skills and try their hand at work. But, there is

no denying that my failures on the topic of Transgender employment swayed my thinking and left a bitter taste. For a while I stopped working on the employment front. After I calmed down, I realised that I was being inconsiderate, because, although for a few it was about easy money, I had seen too many for whom it was not so.

Like me, all the manufacturers who were eager to help, had a middle-class morality mindset. In our concept of dignity and self-respect, begging had no place. But, quite a few of the Transgender community members had long lost such a sense of morality. They had been disowned by their own; these terms were now a liability which prohibited them from a life free of all inhibitions and societal norms. Hence, they sought refuge with their adopted kin, learning and imitating the way they lived. Many of them too hurt and mentally exhausted to willingly break the set patterns of *mangti* or sex-work, as happened with one of my ex-staff- Meenal a Transgender person who was well educated.

Due to the financial woes of her employer, Meenal had not been paid by the company for a while. She was closeted at work. She gave up her job and started doing *mangti*, turning down my offer of providing her with a subsistence allowance for the next quarter until she sorted out her issues.

I reached out to my Gay friend Souvik who pulled some strings and arranged a job for her, but Meenal refused. While going home I sometimes see her, in an old sari, doing *mangti*. I have no doubt in my mind that her trajectory had a lot to do with her well-to-do family which had disowned her a year ago, when she had come out to them, forbidding her from coming to the house again.

Or... the juvenile Transgender person whom I was willing to train and provide a subsistence allowance till she got a job (that I was ready to search for.) In 2015, the Hon'ble Principal Magistrate of Juvenile Justice Board (Pune) K. G. Chaudhary had written a letter to me; asking me to evaluate a delinquent Transgender, who had been caught on CCTV stealing from a vendor, for rehabilitation. I spoke to her; she lived with an uncaring mother. No amount of encouragement and material support from my side was sufficient to entice her to get into the mainstream. She perceived herself to be unwanted and so preferred to live as an outsider, whatever the consequences.

Or...

Or...

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individuals, the names Simmi, Sheila and Meenal used in the chapter are pseudonyms.

[1] Note by Bindumadhav Khire: My letter to the Collector of Pune is dated June 26, 2014, Ref. No. 003/06/2014. It was received by the Collector office on July 01, 2014, and received by the Election Branch on July 02, 2014. Reply from the Collectorate Office (Election Branch) to election officers, with a cc to me, is dated July 22, 2014, Ref No. PEE-3/kavi/1391/2014, directing the election officers to work on assisting Transgender persons in enrolling for Voter Identification based on two letters of the *Election Commission of India*, namely No. 22/2/2009/ERS, dated November 6, 2009, written by Director Yashvir Singh, to The Chief Electoral Officers of All the States and Union Territories regarding 'Registration of Eunuchs/Transsexuals in the Electoral Rolls', and No. 23/2012-ERS/Vol-IV, dated August 08, 2012, written by Ajoy Kumar (Under Secretary), to The Chief Electoral Officers of All States/UTs regarding 'Documents to be submitted by the elector as proof of the date of birth and proof of place of residence'.

[2] In a first, 17 Transgenders with no documents apply for voter I-card. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 1. September 1, 2014.

[3] Voter cards for transgenders: 'Guru's' residence is proof enough for 'chela'. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 1. October 24, 2015.

[4] Poll office disappoints, transgenders back to square one. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. October 1, 2014.

[5] Factory stitches up opportunities for transgenders. By Archana More. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 6. May 19, 2017.





## SEARCH AND TORCH

It was around 10.30 pm, and as I picked up the phone, I heard a composed male voice at the other end of the line: “Can you send someone to my place ₹ I will give you directions.” The confident voice told me that this was not the first time he had demanded an escort from someone. I curtly pointed out that we did not provide this service. Still, he was persistent, “I am willing to pay you and him for this. He needs to be.... ” and, before I could get a word in, unsolicited measures of preferred anatomical dimensions followed. Again giving the same reply, this time testily, I terminated the call. The number of callers who assumed that my helpline functioned as a pimp-line was astounding. Most of them tentatively enquired and realising their mistake gave up, but a few like this guy did not get it the first time.

By now, I had become used to such calls, but the fact that most of them came very late at night when I was sleeping did make me testy. But knowing I could get a crisis call, I could not switch off my cell phone or put it on silent mode.

I had experience in dealing with such calls during the initial days of running the helpline and had learnt to deal with them by discussing these calls with Dr Vijay Thakur. I also received such requests at the one-on-one befriending sessions and had gotten used to it.

I distinctly remember an older man in his seventies, bald, most of his teeth missing, casually strolling into my office. He was wearing a starched white Nehru shirt and pajamas. “*Namaskar*” (Hello!), he said. I was about to respond with a “*Namaskar, Basa*”, (Hello, please sit), when, still standing, he stated without further ado: “I am interested in having sex with men of any age. If you or any of your clients are interested in twosomes or threesomes, do let me know. I have good stamina, I don't have a phone, but I will be back to check.” And then he was gone.

The one-sided 'befriending' session lasted slightly less than a minute; his stamina not very much on evidence there. Dear reader, I am aware of your curiosity, and the answer is, no, he did not come back.

Another category of callers were the drunk ones who called after midnight, and I would groggily get up flaying around to pick up the cell phone. The voice at the other end of the line would invariably be of a male, and the slurring tone would indicate that he was drunk—another futile call.

The problem with drunk callers was:

- a) their preferred time to call was midnight to 1.30 am. Only in a couple of cases did a drunken call come at 4.00 or 5.00 am, no doubt at the fag end of an all-night binge.
- b) they slurred a lot, and so I had great difficulty in making sense of what they were saying but,
- c) they had a LOT to say at this ungodly hour and,
- d) talking to them or giving them an appointment was pointless; they were too intoxicated to remember the appointment or the philosophical conversation they had with me a few hours before, on the deeper meaning of life.

But, what was most astonishing to me was that even in that inebriated state, they remembered that they had my number. I suspect, it was after they had a couple of drinks or probably quarters down their gullet, that they got the courage to call and talk to me about their sexuality. And no, I don't think their need for a booster drink before calling me had anything to do with my anti-social persona.

And then there were a few callers who thought I was a male sex worker, as I found out when my cell phone rang at the ungodly hour of 1.30 am.

*“Kya kya karte ho?”* (What all do you do?) The male voice from the other end did not seem sleepy.

*“Huh?”* I was groggy with sleep.

*“Service me kya kya dete ho?”* (What services do you provide?)

*“Ye Trust ka number hai”* (The number belongs to a Trust) I said testily, and the caller terminated the call.

Muttering a few expletives under my breath, I tried to get back to sleep.

The next day at around mid-night I got another call. Another male.

“Male sex number?”

“*Nahi. Ye Trust ka number hai*” (No, the number belongs to a Trust) I snarled and the caller terminated the call.

Over the next couple of days, the frequency of such calls rose to an alarming frequency, and I became irritated and frustrated, unable to figure out how to handle it. I knew there was some hanky panky going on, but who was playing it? Some disgruntled staff member I had fired? Since that list was a long one, I doubted whether I would be able to pinpoint anyone. Or was it some infantile community member excitedly playing this game or some disgruntled soul or group? Here too, I could visualise a long list. Staff from a rival NGO? It was also a possibility, but again, what evidence did I have? More importantly, how was I to put a stop to this?

I would have to find out from where the caller got my number; it was not easy. Whenever I asked, “Where did you get the number from?” they would get suspicious and terminate the call. Initially, I thought that was because of the testy manner in which I asked the question. But even when I tried to ask the query politely, I got no success.

For a temporary respite, I started switching off the phone at 10.30 pm; 10.00 pm was beat closing time for the Peers and ORWs. (After calling me from the nearest coin box, as many did not have mobiles during the early period of the TI project, they could leave the site.) It enabled me to get a few hours of peace, but that was hardly a permanent solution.

Then I decided to try another tactic and kept the phone on. As usual, sometime during the night, the phone rang.

“*Abhi aaoge?*” (Will you come right now?) a male voice.

“*Ha, lekin kaha pe ho?*” (Yes, but where are you?) I asked, trying to sound (not very successfully, I admit) excited.

“-----” he replied.

I feigned reluctance, “*Bahut door hai*” (It's too far) and terminated the call; I had found what I had sought. The gents' urinal was a popular cruising spot in PCMC area and was a site covered by us.

Late afternoon, the next day, I summoned my team who worked on the PCMC TI project. I asked the ORW and Peer, who looked after the site, to visit the urinal during their beat hours and carefully read all the matter on the walls; they were bound to find my contact number and name there. I asked them to scratch out at least the last two digits of the number. They took a torch with them, used by the Doctor for patient examination. The torch was necessary as many such cruising sites had their lights broken by the enterprising community so that they could go about their business in pitch darkness. The staff left, excited at doing this detective work, a welcome break from their monotonous routine.

I was right. My staff located the number with 'homo sex' written next to it. After scratching out the last two digits with a piece of rock, they jubilantly called me to announce success. I was relieved, but with a nagging doubt in my mind, I told them to proceed to another Hot-Spot a couple of kilometres away where there were two sites, at which cruising took place. I asked them to check those out and off they went and located my number at one. From that day onwards the horny nocturnal calls ceased for many years ...

... till around 2018 when someone put my number as 'available' on some FB post. Déjà vu. Similar call pattern... After a couple of months, they ceased as abruptly as they began, without any intervention from my side, but till date, I do not know who the perpetrator was.





## RAUNCHY CALLERS

In 2005, I unexpectedly received an invitation from Dr Madhu Oswal about starting a helpline on HIV/AIDS. The initial name of the helpline was *Muktaa* (under *Maitri* Organization) which was later changed to *Samvaad* (under *Muktaa* Charitable Foundation.) They had got funding from a private enterprise to run the helpline, and Dr Madhu and Dr Rupa Agarwal wanted to know whether I would be willing to train the volunteers since I had practical experience. I was more than willing to do so, and we prepared a schedule. If I remember correctly, there were only female volunteers, and one was a LGBTI friendly Doctor- Dr Anuradha Tarkunde.

Initially, a bunch of speakers taught the theoretical part. The practical sessions were to be conducted by me, which comprised of role-plays. I was happy to be able to put to good use my experience of running a helpline and with daily role-play practice the volunteers became very proficient.

Before the launch of the helpline, we had trial runs where I told them that I would have my friend callers call them during predefined times and they were to take the call. Lastly, someone from *Muktaa* helpline management roped in a person who was a trainer at a call centre. The consultant was to listen to the calls and give inputs. I was not around then, but he came up with only one issue, namely, that keeping up energy levels of the volunteers, especially during high volume calls, would be a challenge. I don't know the remedy suggested by the consultant because by then, my involvement with the project was almost over. I met the team of volunteers, once in a while, to deal with practical problems that cropped up. Eventually, they started a branch in Patna (Bihar), and I trained two batches of male volunteers from Patna, who had come to Pune for the training.

In one of the early sessions that I had conducted for volunteers, I had them list and then speak aloud all the slang words for sexual acts and organs so that they achieved a comfort level in hearing them and if need be, in using them. For example, if the caller was using the word



*zavna* (slang in Marathi for 'fucking') they were to respond to the query using the same word and not use an equivalent scientific name in Marathi.

Initially, this was very embarrassing for them, but they got used to it; they had to. The reason was, during the operation of my helpline, I learned that many who called from rural areas knew only the slang words and phrases for sexual organs and acts (e.g. *hastamaithun* meant masturbation, but many used the slang *muthlya marna*.) So if a volunteer was to use scientific words for organs and acts, the caller was likely to lose rapport and also get confused.

Later, in 2006, I used a similar exercise in an inclusive school in Pune that had a full-time Counsellor and used innovative teaching, learning strategies. They had invited me to talk to adolescents who had started teasing each other, with words, *chhakka*, Hijra, Gay. The adolescents were embarrassed and then delighted at the exercise in which they had to list each and every cuss word they knew on the blackboard.

Expectedly *chhakka*, Hijra, Gay had cropped up, and I had then set about explaining the meaning of the various words; many did not know the meaning of a lot of the cuss words they were using. In the end, when I mentioned that the 'bad word' Gay applied to me because I was one, there was pin-drop silence. After the session, a couple of students approached the teacher inquiring whether 'that Sir' was just giving an example or was he 'REALLY GAY' ₹ I got very good feedback of that session from a student of that session, around 12 years later, when she wrote a Blog about that session and sent me the link.

I also trained the helpline volunteers to become aware when the caller was shifting focus from information to titillation and how to politely but firmly terminate the call. Although I trained the volunteers on handling sex calls, the all-women volunteer team faced far more problems on this front than I had.

On the pretext of seeking HIV-related information, clients would intentionally, repeatedly call and question them on the technique of putting on condom, fellatio etc. The volunteers were professional in

taking the calls and learned to handle these questions impersonally, but eventually, they got frustrated at the number of sex calls they received. It drained a lot of their energy and also affected their mental health. I was not in favour of installing Caller-ID, but the agency nevertheless decided to do so. They installed a Caller-ID system and provided the Police numbers of a few habitual sex callers. Unfortunately, there were too many sex calls, and it was simply too cumbersome to track all such numbers.

One way around the problem was to have male volunteers. Still, in addition to the unfairness of the biased solution, the practical problem was finding male volunteers to operate a HIV/AIDS helpline; it is a big challenge.

And my personal experience is that this solution does not always work either. In fact, in some cases, when the male caller hears a male voice, there is an instant rapport with the volunteer. The caller feels that he has found a kindred soul and starts to discuss sexual experiences freely, in unnecessary detail. It needs a lot of skill to bring him back to the point of the call.

On one occasion, a guy from out-station called my helpline and described an incident, wherein after coming to Pune for some work he had decided to pay a visit to Budhwar Peth (red-light area) for a quickie with a female sex worker. Not knowing the area well, he had landed in a lane where Hijras ply their trade. He was accosted and seduced by a beautiful *akhwa* (un-castrated) Hijra, naïvely assuming all the while that the seductress leading him to her creaky bed was a woman. As he became fully aroused and coitus was to begin, she had adroitly raised her legs and offered insertion in her rear. The realisation had dawned too late, and the hot-blooded male that he was, backing off at this stage was impossible, and so, the deed was consummated, happily with a condom on.

I could not resist a broad smile, which mercifully he could not see, as he regaled the incident. Halfway through the story, I had given up asking him to come to the point, as his rural accent, the play on words and the wonder in his voice of his remarkable experience had seduced me completely. Enthralled, I listened and visualised his

experience. At long last, as the narration ended, I struggled to assist him to come back to the *res*, which simply was, “I am calling you because you have to warn people. I am sure many like me are getting fooled in this manner” and have done his bit for the social cause he politely thanked me for listening and the call ended.



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## AVICTIM OF CASTE

*"Tumcha barai. Tumchi loka swikartat, amchat ajiyat chalat nahi"* (It's good that 'your community' accepts your sexuality, my community absolutely does not.) That was the youth's defense for not coming out- his caste. He had taken an appointment for a befriending session. As I looked at him, I thought- if I had a dime for every person from 'my community' who had faced virulent homophobia from parents and relatives...

In this context, 'my community' meant my caste, Brahmin; my last name hinted at it. Quite a few people who came in for befriending had my caste on their mind, and it was always a barrier between me and a non-brahmin visitor who interacted with me.

This caste awareness seemed to be especially true for those from Pune who came to meet me. Since most gave an alias, some picked a Brahmin name. *"Mi Apte, tumhala phone kela hota"*. (My name is Apte (a Brahmin last name), I had called you.) His tone stressed the surname, underlining the caste. The real or alias Brahmin name was earnestly announced, without being asked. For some of those who were Brahmins, it was a way of underlining, 'we are from the same community'; sadly they regarded caste as a more powerful and sturdier bond than our queerness and its common tribulations.

For those who used a Brahmin surname as an alias, I wondered- did they feel that it would be easy for two Queers to build rapport with a common caste? Or did they consider their sexuality a stigma? And hence avoided its association with their caste lest the association sullies the caste? Or did they harbour a doubt that I may be casteist and would consider their caste a stigma? And so unable to carry a burden of multiple stigmas of caste, sexuality, gender, did they suppress those stigmas which were inconvenient at that moment? I do not know, but the stress on the caste factor was (and is) tragic and it continues to remain an unbridgeable divide. On a similar note, Muslims who visited me, barring a couple of exceptions, took on a Hindu name. In the aspects of caste and religion, there has been little

change since the day I started work.

Gay and Transgender visitors from outstation were a little more secure. Most were in Pune to study for MPSC, UPSC examinations. I met quite a few who were here just to get away from their villages to live life independently in a city, in a culture far less oppressive. And sensing the freedom, they sought an opportune moment to visit the Trust, attend events. Most had already made a call that, when the time came, they would get married to a woman. But interacting with me and like-minded friends was essential for them because regardless of the decision they took, it helped them to get rid of at least part of their self-hate.

Coming from far-off towns and villages, most did not need to give themselves fictitious Brahmin names, assuming, correctly, that caste played a lesser role in the cities than villages. But make no mistake, they were aware of caste. And at times like these, where the youth, sitting before me, staunchly believed that it was all roses for the Brahmin Gay community, it figured prominently in the discussion.

It took clients a while, to realise that I did not care a hoot what caste or religion they belonged. Many realised this after interacting with my staff which came from diverse religious and caste backgrounds and eventually, some of the clients would, seeking an opportune moment, smiling embarrassedly, reveal their real names and surnames (giving an inkling of their caste or religion.) Still, some never got over their insecurities; their real identities are hidden forever or stumbled upon either accidentally or through our mutual contacts.

In addition to caste and religions, gender too, at times, was an issue. Quite a few Transwomen initially approached me as CIS gendered Gay men; their Gender Identity locked away in a closet. Eventually, when they came across some of my Transgender staff and realised that my team and I harboured no transphobia, they revealed their gender to one of my staff members, who would then exasperatedly explain to me as one would to a dim-witted child, *"O Sir! To, 'to' nahie, 'ti' ahe ani Kulkarni nahi, Pawar ahe"*. (Sir, The 'he' is a 'she'- Transwoman, and her last name is not Kulkarni (Brahmin surname name) but Pawar (Maratha surname name.)

And so, the poison of caste nurtured by Brahmins and other upper castes for thousands of years has marked everyone, not just the Straights, playing a subtle and not so subtle role even within our ostracised Queer minority. It necessarily followed that the Queer community was well attuned to mainstream discrimination based on caste, religion and reverse discrimination against Brahmins and at times, willingly used these weapons against their own.

It was these thoughts that ran thru my mind again, a few weeks later, as a Guru vehemently stated “*Nahi baba, chee... mai usko 'na' boli. Bamman murat mai kabhi na lu*” (I said 'no' to her, eee... I would never accept a Brahmin Transgender person as a protégé) as she continued to count her *mangti* earnings, along with her sisters, in the Trust Drop-In-Centre.

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## INSTANT UTOPIA

“Can you give me a certificate, under your NGO letterhead, which says that my life, as a Gay man, is in danger in India?” The caller was from the USA and felt a certificate such as this would assist him in seeking asylum there. The last time I had got a call, from another Gay guy, for this kind of a certificate, was to convince his dad of why he could not ever return to India.

I told the caller that we did not issue such certificates as there was no threat to anyone's life. I gave my example; I was living a life of an out Gay man and, till date, I had not faced any attack or assault for doing the work I was doing. My monologue fell on deaf ears; the problem lay with the youth; he did not have the balls to confront his family.

The call had come just after my session with a 'jerk my chain' type of Gay youth. There were a couple of clients who got off by playing perverse games with befrienders/Counsellors (who provided services for free) by using counselling techniques on them, judging them, assessing them as the befrienders/Counsellors naively tried to assist the client with his imaginary problem. The first couple of times, I had been taken in but had quickly learned to identify the types, and I had shown this guy the door within ten minutes.

And just a couple of months later, on this side of the world, in a befriending session, I heard the refrain, “One way or the other, I have to go abroad where it is absolutely safe to be Gay; this is a hopeless country”. Not having the courage to come out, he was seeking a way out, to migrate to a foreign land, an imaginary land far, far away where there was no discrimination of any kind, life was gay, Gay marriage legal and so on and so on. He refused to accept that each of his preferred destinations could have its peculiar issues.

In this case, the youth's first destination of choice was the USA. He believed it was the safest place on earth and a paradise for Gay men! I immediately thought of Matthew Shepard. I was in the USA, in 1998, when two homophobes pistol-whipped Matthew, tied him to a fence and left him to die in the freezing night near Laramie, Wyoming. I tried

to tell him that there is no such thing as Gay paradise; homophobia was everywhere, but he had convinced himself otherwise.

That did not mean that the USA did not have a vibrant Gay rights movement; in fact, I owed my work to it, was forever indebted to it, but this obsession for a ready-made utopia, where there was no struggle, did get on my nerves. Now with a solid win in the Delhi High Court, in the Sec 377 IPC case, things were not that bad. He had to just look at the Islamic countries to know how fortunate we were, but he had made up his mind. Could I assist in getting him in touch with the best Universities in the USA where he could apply? Nope, sorry, that was not part of my job.

Wherever he is now, I hope he has found his utopia. I hope at least some do, I know many who have not, here or somewhere-there.

This desperate search for this elusive heaven was seen in some Lesbians and Transmen too, albeit in a different dimension, with a typical scenario going-

"I am in love with a girl; I want to run away with her. Help me."

"Are both of you over eighteen years old?"

"Yes"

"Are you out?"

"No."

"Is she out?"

"Sort of"

"What do you mean by sort of?"

"Her parents are very conservative. They won't accept this."

"Can she call and talk to me on the phone?"

"No. I won't allow her. I am the decision-maker on her behalf. You have to trust me. She will do whatever I tell her to do."

"Sorry, I can't help you," would be my answer.



I remember the first time, where a Lesbian in her early twenties had approached me with a similar story and a greenhorn that I was; I had foolishly gone to her girlfriend's house to talk to her family. I had failed not because the mother challenged my *locus standi*, but because when I asked the girl what she desired, she did not say a single word. Not one word! I could understand that she may have been too petrified to do so. Still, in such situations, there was nothing to be done. The family drew the convenient conclusion, "*Thicha manat tasa kahi nahiye, tichi maitrin vait ahe*" (She has a clean mind, it is her friend who is rotten), and tail tucked firmly between my legs, I departed. What would happen if the girlfriend succeeded in persuading this girl to run away with her? Would they be happy together? Would the parents file a kidnapping case? Would the girl have the courage to oppose her parents in denying the kidnapping charge in front of the Police? Or in Court?

Or the variation, "*Ticha lagna tharat alai, maazha kimva ticha aivadilanna na kalta, mala urgently operation karun mulga banun tichashi lagna karaichai. Ya mahinyat*" (Her parents are close to finding a match for her. I need to undergo Gender Affirmative Surgery urgently to become a man, without my or her parents knowing about it and get married to her. This month." Add to that, another parameter: in a couple of cases, neither had jobs.

Or the other variation where people requested assistance in finding 'the perfect solution'- an arranged marriage between a closeted Gay man and a closeted Lesbian—a definite NO.

Expectedly, I had no success with clients seeking instant utopia. Fortunately, such clients were few. I would not survive if I only got such cases. I thrived through my work on the courage of youngsters who came out. I thrived on their thank you emails, for assisting them in their journey: 'Sir, I saw your *PICT TEDx* Talk and have written to thank you.' [1] I thrived on their calls mentioning how my books helped them prepare to come out to their parents or how the anthologies I had edited, played a role in their parents becoming comfortable with their sexuality.

"Sir, you remember me? I met you once at the *Advait* Film Festival two

years ago ₹ I have convinced my company to start an LGBT support group, all thanks to you..." I confess, I do not remember, and the response is, "It's Ok, I will never forget you". Well, it's not ok. If someone is thanking me, it would be nice if I knew them by name and face, but I am aware that practically, it is simply not possible. I listen to them, grappling with the abstract of having played an important role in their lives, all done unknowingly. Wherever possible, time willing, I try to interact with them and praise them for their courage and initiative.

I suspect they are too generous in their praise; nevertheless, I am deeply grateful. I am surrounded by a destructive, hateful and jealous LGBTIQA world, and it is such feedback that makes it all worth while for me.

At times, when a youth has shown exemplary courage in coming out, but his parents have let him down, I have staunchly sided with the child, facing my share of abuse at the hands of his parents.

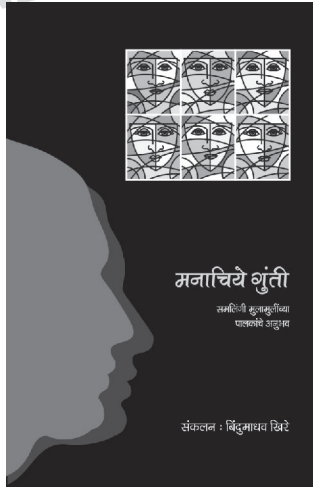
*"Changle pratap lavtai tumhi he asla lokanna shikvun, office suddha kai naami thikani ghetlaj, tumcha ai-bapanni hech saunskar kele ka tumchavar"* (A lovely job you are doing teaching such things to others. Your office too is located at such an 'appropriate' place (red-light area.)! Is this how your parents have raised you ₹); a father railed at me as his courageous son quietly sat beside him, avoiding my eyes, ashamed of his father. My role as a befriender forbade me to rage against his Dad, but it hurt. It hurt like hell!

Again, not all coming out stories are sob stories, though. I have been lucky to know parents and siblings in Pune who are very supportive of their Gay child family, if not initially so. Amongst them are my Mom, Omkar's (founder member of *Prayatna* group) mother and brother, Zameer Kamble's mother and sister Rani, Priyadarshan's father Dr Vishwas Sahasrabuddhe, Sameer Ghunkikar's father and his sister Vaishali Ghunkikar-Kambli to name a few. I am in touch with parents from out-station too- Nitin Karani's parents, Tinesh Chopade's parents etc. who have accepted their Gay son and generously support the work we do.

It takes time for parents to come out of the shock but many slowly but surely do come to terms. Even if most do not accept their child's sexuality a full 100% (that would be too much to expect in the current scenario), they continue to love and support their child and give up their insistence on heterosexual marriage. That acceptance level of 69.69% is utopia.

A few of them like my Mom, Omkar's Mom, Dr Vishwas Sahasrabuddhe go all out to support my work in whatever way they can. Omkar's mother has on more than one occasion, spoken openly, in support of Gays and Lesbians. Dr Vishwas Sahasrabuddhe has been an outstanding support for us- at an event organised by my Trust, he delivered an hour's talk, to the audience, of his journey of acceptance of his Gay son.[2] He also anchored some of our events, notably, *Mooknayak*- Annual Marathi LGBTIQA Literary festival.

And lastly, even if I were to forget my Trusts' anniversary, I can rest assured that I will be reminded of it through a 'Best Wishes' SMS or call from a very supportive mother of a Lesbian daughter. She had met me, along with her daughter, when her daughter had come out to her. For me, professionally, that is utopia.



Cover of *Manachiye Gunti*

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] TEDx PICT. Gay and proud, but why?

[https://youtu.be/TDLqA4\\_FZpU](https://youtu.be/TDLqA4_FZpU)

Date September 30, 2017.

Note by Bindumadhav Khire: Later, I did the second TEDx talk for *St Mira's College (Pune)* titled 'LGBT Kyu?'.  
*St Mira's College (Pune)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61pAhuqCNzo>

Uploaded on youtube.com on June 6, 2018.

- St Mira's College hosts TEDx event on 'the elephant in the room'.  
*The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 3. March 05, 2018.

[2] Journey to acceptance takes the stage. By Kaumudi Gurjar. *Pune Mirror*. Page 4. May 12, 2014.

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## MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

*"Ithech (laingikatetach) kiti wel tumhi adaknar ahat? Yacha pudhe jaichai ki nahi?"* (How long are you going to be stuck at this stage of sexuality and desire? Don't you want to overcome that?) The caustic response from the lady indicated that I had touched a raw nerve.

I had started work on *Manavi laingikata- Ek prathamik olakh* (Introduction to Human Sexuality), and I was going around, trying to understand issues related to body image, sexuality and sexual expression of persons with learning disabilities. It was turning out to be an incredibly enriching experience, making me aware of issues related to sexuality I had never consciously thought.

The lady I was talking to was deeply into religion and spirituality. She ran a spiritual centre and had a family member with a learning disability. With reference from a Psychiatrist, I had gone to meet her to understand issues related to children with developmental disabilities, their understanding of sexuality and their sexual expression. She mentioned that she had written about it in a magazine (she provided details) and clammed up. As I persistently tried to probe further, her caustic remark had followed.

Resignedly, I got up to go, and she called one of her disciples to show me books they had on spirituality and rituals that were important in Hinduism. The disciple proceeded to show me a book on the importance of *Agnihotra*. As I pretended to show interest, the disciple ran a commentary of religious mumbo-jumbo, and when I turned to leave, he insisted that I buy a copy. His beseeching stance suddenly transported me to a book exhibition I had visited some years back. A gaggle of leftist students were operating a stall and one of their volunteers, catching me off guard, had more or less dragged me to it. As I pretended to seek something of interest, I could see the same shining eyes of the devout, the same belligerence. Only the running commentary was different: "Buy this... this is good, this is how Capitalism is destroying..., buy this, how ----- company is... buy this... how...". The fervour of a leftist's dogma is an even match to the

passion of a religious zealot.

Apart from this one-off experience, I received exemplary support from persons and institutions I approached. My understanding of sex, gender and sexuality-related issues of developmentally challenged persons, hearing, visually and physically impaired persons and persons affected by diseases like Leprosy, Cancer (e.g. Mastectomy) grew immensely from these interactions.

Sharmila Raje of *Muskaan*, an NGO working with child sexual abuse survivors, provided me with valuable assistance for my chapter on child sexual abuse.

Dr Deepak Khismatrao of *Pathfinder International*, who periodically guided us in our work and was sensitive on sexuality issues, went through the drafts meticulously and rightly suggested trimming the book. I had gotten carried away with all the information and a few chapters of the book had strayed from its original path.

The show stopper arose when, at the behest of Dr Arun Gadre (who was then working with *Pathfinder International*), I approached the same publisher, I had a bad experience previously (Refer Book I-Shadowland. Chapter: My Garbage Novella.) Why did I make the same mistake again? Frankly, I had no distribution network, and so the reach of the books I had published was very low. This publisher was renowned; I was desperate to reach out to a broad audience, and that turned out to be my weakness, and as life teaches all of us, you have to pay for your weakness, with a hefty interest.

The publisher approved the book after I consented to remove some sketches depicting various coital positions. After the contract was drafted and signed by me, the wait began. Their priority was for another book, and it would be many months before work began on my book. The entire manuscript was re-typed in the publisher's proprietary font.

At the last stage of production, when the book was about to go for publishing, they invited me for a meeting and suggested that the chapter on Sex Toys be deleted.

I bristled at the suggestion and refused as they had not suggested this significant change initially. I have no regrets about my decision. I wonder whether, they intentionally held back till the end, betting that, weary of waiting, I would readily consent to the changes. They did not know me, and that backfired for them and me; on April 15, 2011, I wrote a stinker to them and backed off from the contract.

In reply, I got a letter, dated April 16, 2011, from them stating that the publisher had the right, till the last moment (stage of tracing), to suggest changes blah blah blah. I discussed the issue with Chandrashekhar Begampure (the designer of the cover of the book); he agreed to assist me in publishing the book. And after reworking on the original script (I could no longer use the proprietary font and DTP work done by the publisher), the book was eventually published under *Samapathik* Trust, way behind schedule.

After this sordid experience, I did not approach a single Marathi book publisher for the next three anthologies I edited and a book on Intersex that I subsequently wrote. I published them through *Samapathik* Trust by donating the publication expenses to the Trust; I simply did not have time to speculate and experiment on who would be professional and ballsy to publish books on sexuality and LGBTIQA.



Book Cover: *Manavi Laingikata*



## ONE-ACT CIRCUS

Twice my call had gone unanswered. Finally, on the third try, someone picked up the phone. On inquiry, I was kept on hold until the relevant papers were located, and told that they had dispatched a letter to me. I had not received it. The Post Office misplaced the letter.

However, I say that the Post Office was less likely to be at fault. The *Marathi Rangbhumi Parivekshan Mahamandal* (Maharashtra State Performance Scrutiny Board), used to send letters in envelopes made of such low-quality recycled paper that you could barely read the address scrawled on it. So, in all probability, their letter had landed in some other letterbox.

My call was with regards my application for censor clearance for my Marathi play *Purshottam* (The Ideal Man), my second script.

I wrote my first theatre script *Daivat* (Deity) in 2002. I had read it to college experimental theatre enthusiasts, and they made quite a few suggestions. I had been unable to do any further work on that script, and later on, after trying my hand at writing a couple of other theatre pieces, I decided to write a Marathi screenplay. I had learned screenplay writing at University of Santacruz's San Jose Extension Course and B&W and Colour filmmaking at University of Berkeley's San Francisco Extension Course, during my stay in the USA.

That screenplay was *Tatabandi* (Ramparts.) In March 2009, after completing storyboarding, finalising the director, actor, character actors, scouting for locations, at the last moment, the main actor, citing university assignment and exams had backed off.

I had to cancel the project and by industry standards, pay part of the honorarium to all other actors and director. The unprofessionalism of the actor hurt me financially. This experience was my first ugly brush with the film making industry but tragically not the last. I abandoned the idea of making the film and rewrote the screenplay for theatre; it was for that play *Purshottam* that I had decided to apply for a Performance Scrutiny Board certificate.



I made enquiries with theatre personalities on the workings of the Performance Scrutiny Board. Their gentle advice was that I should not file for clearance as the Board was not a very enlightened lot. And since my play was experimental, which meant it would be staged only a couple of times at best, before its demise, I should stage it without the clearance; the Board would not be any the wiser.

The theatre personalities, with years of experience, were right. And as usual, it was very tempting to take the easy way out. But I believed that the process, plays as much an essential role as the end; it gave me a chance to engage with the powers that be on LGBTI themes and not wanting to deny myself that opportunity, I decided to follow due process.

Instead of going to Mumbai and losing a whole day to apply, I approached an agency in Pune, which handled such matters, and they filed the application on my behalf. Anxiously I waited for months expecting problems, as the play had a Gay theme. Receiving no response, I called them up to realise that the letter had got lost in transit.

I requested the person who I was talking to, to send it again, but instead, he stated that he was willing to dictate the objectionable words and sentences. So, after grabbing a pen and paper, I spent the next few minutes listening to page numbers and the objections. I was requested to file a reply in writing.

After the call, I sat for a while, staring into space. The Board objected the use of cuss words: *gandu* (fag), *madarchod* (motherfucker) and dialogue on manhood "I will show you... I will bring *pedha* or *barfi* (sweets) to you every year until my wife becomes barren or goes mad having babies year after year." I decided to file a written reply stating that I did not want any changes to the script and was willing to settle for an 'Adult' certificate. In response, I was invited to Mumbai to 'discuss' the matter.

Taking the early morning train, I walked to the Mantralaya. The office of the Performance Scrutiny Board was nearby (Backbay Reclamation), but multiple enquiries at different stalls revealed no

clues. Finally, I was able to track down the decrepit office, which I had passed a few times, not knowing that these rundown hutments wielded power over the theatre universe.

The office space was over-flowing with desks, computers and stacks of papers. The person I had spoken to on the phone was very cooperative and polite and asked me to wait. There was no place to sit, so I stood outside the door, sweltering. I wondered how long I would have to wait before being called in for the meeting. A group of college youths came to inquire about submitting some script of a street play they wanted to perform.

Eventually, I was escorted to an official. I explained the purpose of my visit to him, and as the interaction started, I realised that I was doomed to fail. He began with, "Why do you want to use bad words?" I explained that the character generally does not swear but, at this point in the play, driven by anger, the words used by him made sense as it underlined his rage. My explanation fell on deaf ears.

"No. You change those words to something else". Not a suggestion. An order.

"Sir, I don't want to change anything, just give me an Adult certificate".

To my surprise, my response made him livid. His eyes bulged. "Who are you to decide that? I will decide it. Either you provide me with alternate words, or I am not granting you a certificate." He shouted.

I had a choice; I could refuse to alter it and then go in appeal and make as many trips as needed to present my case at Board meetings and continue the charade or give in. Knowing my limitations, I gave in.

Then began our back and forth on the acceptable alternate words. I replaced *gandu* with *bulya* (a milder word for 'fag'.)

"No! Why do you want to use such bad terms?" he was royally pissed off, as I was simply substituting one bad word with another.

While this exchange was going on, I was very well aware that his obstinacy for removal of the word 'fag' was not out of sensitivity for the Gay community. I wondered whether the Board considered it

their responsibility to keep the audience, whatever their ages, emotionally and intellectually stunted to kindergarten grade. So any word or sentence that was felt unsuitable for kids was to be replaced, no questions asked.

Retrospectively I realised, that was not the complete and correct explanation either. Because, curiously, the word 'Gay' used in the play has been retained. A sentence where the boyfriend indicates that he is the 'wife' of his male partner has also been left untouched.

The negotiations continued. Obviously, the word *madarchod* had to go, and in the end, I settled for a crummy word like *mahaneech* (scoundrel) a lame phrase, utterly bereft of the effect I wanted to convey.

The final humiliation was reserved for the 'manhood' sentence. "What rubbish! Who says a woman goes mad when she has lots of babies? That line has to go."

The exchange between us was getting on my nerves. And by now, I was thoroughly confused about the role of the Board. I had the right to write the worst play ever written in the history of playwriting, but why was the Board playing the role of the critique? Just as I opened my mouth to speak, the oracle thundered, "I have other work to do, you go outside, do the changes in the script and resubmit it again and I will give you the certificate." And indicating to one of his staff members, "*Yanna baher pathva*" (Send him outside), I was out.

Without a word, I got up. Just as I was about to step outside the cabin door, came the final dictat, "One more thing, take a separate page and give me an undertaking that you will not revert the changes to their original form when staging the play. I will hold you liable if that happens. I don't want a Karan Johar on my hands".[1]

At last, late afternoon, I had the mutilated play certified as 'suitable for audiences of all ages'. [2][3][4][5] As I trudged back to the CSTM railway station, emotionally exhausted, I felt relieved that I was finally done with the Board, having no clue that just a few months down the road, I would be bitten by the playwriting bug again.

The next play was *Jaswand* (Hibiscus), the first play in Marathi based

on an Intersex theme, and the Board surpassed themselves in absurdity when they asked me to remove the word 'Intersex' and the definition of the term from the play.[6] Like many others, I continued to be a victim of the scissor-happy Board when, in 2016, they asked for 15 cuts in my third play *Freddy*[7][8].

In 2016, Actor and Director Mr Amol Palekar filed a Writ Petition in Mumbai High Court; it stated that Section 33(1)(wa) of the Bombay Police Act, 1950 and Rules 138 and 139 for Licensing and Controlling Places of Public Amusement, (other than Cinemas) and Performances for Public Amusement including *Melas* and *Tamashas* (1960.) violated Articles 14 and 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India and amounted to the vice of excessive delegation.[9] Mr Palekar and Sandhya Gokhale inquired whether I would like to be joined as a party to the Writ as I was an affected party (regarding the plays mentioned above.) I accepted. The case continues at a leisurely pace.



Parikshit Shete in the play *Jaswand*

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] AIB Roast: On December 20, 2013, *All India Bakchod Knockout* (AIB *Bakchod*) organised a celebrity roast event in Worli, Mumbai. The video recording of the event was uploaded on 'YouTube' on January 28, 2014. The moral brigade alleged the content was obscene and FIRs were filed against the host Karan Johar and other participants. Apparently, 'Tardeo police found discrepancies in the script submitted to the *Maharashtra Stage Performance Scrutiny Board* and what was actually enacted.'

- Seven months on, Mumbai Police to call Ranveer Singh, Arjun Kapoor and Karan Johar for questioning. *The Indian Express*. Mumbai. By Rashmi Rajput. October 15, 2015.
- <https://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report-aib-roast-mumbai-police-to-summon-ranveer-singh-arjun-kapoor-and-karan-johar-2134881>

[2] Maiden stage act by city's LGBT face gets censor's chop. By Kaumudi Gurjar. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 1. November 29, 2014.

[3] Play on same-sex couple receives letter from Theatre Censor Board for cuss words. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. November 29, 2014.

[4] *Purshottam. Rangabhumi Prayog Parinirikshan Mandal, Mumbai*. DRM 225/2015. February 13, 2015.

[5] I never did get to stage the play. Of all the theatre plays I have written, only *Jaswand* was performed twice.

[6] *Jaswand. Rangabhumi Prayog Parinirikshan Mandal, Mumbai*. DRM 954/2015. September 03, 2015.

[7] Theatre Censure With Gay Abandon. By Anurag Bende. *Pune Times Mirror*. June 24, 2016.

[8] *Freddy. Rangabhumi Prayog Parinirikshan Mandal, Mumbai*. DRM 363/2016. March 15, 2016.

[9] In The High Court of Judicature of Bombay, Civil Appellate Jurisdiction

WP No. 24043/2016

Shri Amol Palekar v. The State of Maharashtra, The Principal Secretary- Home department of the State of Maharashtra, The *Maharashtra State Performance Scrutiny Board*, The Chairman-*Maharashtra State Performance Scrutiny Board*, The Commissioner of Police.





## EXAM STRESS

The most irritating aspect of helpline callers was, without giving any kind of reference, they called and started from where they had left off, weeks or even months ago. "Hello Sir, he called just now, and has threatened to slit his wrists if I don't meet him right now." "Who is this?" I asked annoyance evident in my tone.

As the caller, in panic, hurriedly summarised the context, I remembered. The caller Shiv had been dating a guy for some time. Not wanting to settle down with one partner, Shiv had decided to break up and move on. The other guy had been deeply in love with Shiv and had started calling him at all hours, and if the 15-20 calls went unanswered, he would corner Shiv at any place and time, refusing to accept that the relationship was over.

Shiv had sought my appointment and met me once; the partner was unwilling to meet me, and one of the options discussed was informing the Police to issue a warning to his obsessive partner, but as Shiv was not out, he did not want to take that route. And a while later, here we were.

Closeted Gay youths were extremely vulnerable and liable to take their first Gay relationship with a fierce intensity, hitherto never experienced by them. It was understandable as the object of their love was probably the only person in the world who had accepted them and loved them.

The closeted Gay youths confined their world to their loved ones to the exclusion of all else, and they became utterly dependent on their partners. For some, it worked out; eventually, they came out to their families and settled down in a steady, loving long term relationship with their husbands.

In my experience, quite a few Gay youths found partners who identified themselves as Bisexuals. After living together for a few years the Bisexual partner would decide to terminate the relationship and get married, leaving the youth desolate. Sometimes, their

partner, tired of the monotony of monogamy, would move on to greener pastures after a couple of years. The youth, feeling jilted would end up with suicidal depression, losing his job, losing touch with reality, losing friends who could give a 'gloves off' assessment of the scenario, all his energy spent in singlehandedly dealing with the unbearable pain of loss and betrayal.

Complicating matters was the fact that, most Gay men, when in a relationship, never associated themselves in any way with an NGO or a support group who could be at hand to assist in the crisis. They wanted to be in a world completely detached from their surroundings, away from prying eyes and jealous friends.

On tenterhooks all the time that Gay friends would jealously try to create a rift in the relationship or seduce their partners, they zealously cocooned themselves feeling secure in their small lover's world; until a crisis loomed and their world fell apart. Having no safety net, they had to deal with this doomsday all on their own, acting on ill thoughts, frenzied decisions with no one to objectively assess their calls. The scenarios became challenging to handle in cases where the partner refused to come for couples counselling. Generally, the one who wanted to hold on to the relationship didn't want to face the truth, despite seeing the writing on the wall.

In a few cases, the partner decided to get married and would insist that my client simultaneously continue his 'close friendship' with him even post-marriage; leaving my client torn between love and wanting to break free from this dead-end relationship.

“Where is he now?” I asked. He named a hotel (in Pune) and room number. “I am just about to leave my office and am heading to the hotel... Will you please come?”. Luckily I had free time on my hands and immediately agreed. I met him at a predetermined spot, and I followed him, as he knew the hotel. I warned him that we would not talk to the receptionist but directly head to the room.

Knocking on the door and getting no response, we tried to open the door- thankfully he had not locked it from the inside. We rushed in and froze. The boyfriend was lying on the bed, a dazed look on his

face, a paper cutter in his hand, his wrist slit, blood oozing, the white bed sheets soaked with blood. On seeing his lover, he smiled, "Oh! You have come!"

Shiv and I stood petrified, though, for obvious reasons, I was much better off. We quickly took away the paper cutter from Shiv's boyfriend and I asked Shiv to give his handkerchief to tie it on the cut wrist to staunch the flow of blood. The boyfriend was weak and could barely sit. The cut was deep, and we would need to take him to a hospital, at the earliest.

As Shiv cradled his partner making cooing sounds, I paced around the room wondering which hospital to take him to. I tried to call Dr Kaustubh Joag, but there was no mobile signal in the room. Asking Shiv not to let his partner out of sight, I went down to the street where I got a signal and called Dr Joag. 'Oh! Please, please pick up the phone', my heart was thudding wildly, and rivulets of sweat were running down my armpits. My forehead was dripping sweat, the handkerchief soggy. He picked up the call, "Yes, Bindu, tell me" I quickly narrated the scenario to him. "I am at ----- hospital for the next two hours; you can bring him to emergency and give me a call; I will come down". I rushed back to the room. I bundled all the blood-stained sheets and crammed them in the boyfriend's bag, zipped it shut. I did not want the housekeeping team to see this mess; they could always charge for new sheets.

We got the boyfriend up and holding him, one on either side, took him down to the lobby and out the door. For onlookers, we were just a couple of friends, perhaps a bit drunk, going for a walk, hands around the waist or shoulder. I hailed for an auto-rickshaw and Shiv took the boyfriend to the hospital while I followed on my bike.

On arriving at the emergency wing, I asked Shiv to fill in the details on the admission form while I called Dr Joag. The doctor on call took one look at the slit wrist and knew. "What happened" he asked. I evaded the question, mentioning that this is Dr Joag's patient and he should be here any time. "What happened" he insisted, pointedly looking at me. "He fell on a glass table, and the glass gashed his wrist".[1] He contemptuously looked at me. As I embarrassedly looked away



hoping that Dr Joag would arrive, a nurse came out, asking “What happened?” I replied, “Dr Joag is on his way, he will tell you” I replied curtly and left, ostensibly to look for him.

Eventually, Dr Joag arrived, the patient was stitched up and advised admission as he had to be under twenty-four-hour observation. That was a sensible call, but the patient was reluctant to get admitted as he did not want his parents or relatives to know, and the hospital policy mandated that one relative had to be informed. I understood the patient's predicament. He came from a conservative background, was not out and with the breakup, he was emotionally a wreck. But neither Shiv nor me were willing to shoulder the risk of accepting his responsibility under the circumstances. Fortunately, the patient, realising that we had our limitations, considerably agreed to get admitted. With his consent, Shiv and I called one of his relatives in Pune (the rest of his family were from out-station.) We mutually decided that we would not disclose the real reason to the relative, but attribute the event to, if I remember correctly, 'exam stress'.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Shiv used in the chapter is a pseudonym.

[1] In those days, Sec 309 IPC- Attempt of suicide was an offence. It was only in 2017 that the Mental Healthcare Act section 115 (1) overrode the section, stating that- *the person who attempts to commit suicide shall be presumed, unless proved otherwise, to have severe stress, and shall not be tried and punished under the said Code.*





## LONELY HEARTS DINNER

Festivals equalled depression. I had got to know that first-hand, before I got in touch with *Trikone*, when I faced that monster in the USA during the Christmas holidays. *Informix*, which had its headquarters at Menlo Park, had a shut down for a week, I was alone and all my roommates had gone to their friends to spend their holidays. You could sense the festival in the air from mid-November. People got busy, making plans, moaning unavailability of flights, my Indian roommates jabbered away on the phone with friends planning for the holidays.

Malls were full of merchandise, and as Christmas neared, I could see people all a bustle with their last-minute shopping. During the holidays, all I could do was watch movies, read, go out to eat and sleep. In the stillness of the night, I roamed the streets in Santa Clara; Santa Claus and reindeer cut-outs on lawns and the Christmas lights adorning houses were a beautiful sight to behold.

It was at night, after returning home, as I tossed and turned in my sleeping bag (during my entire stay in the USA, I never bought a bed), I felt the most miserable. I saw the gaiety and happiness all around, yet I was all alone; a lonely man in the closet. Hating myself for being Gay, knowing that I would always be a freak- in the USA, in India, in my city Pune and even in my own home and so, alone in the apartment, I would cry myself to sleep, the agonising holidays lasting for eternity.

Later on, I read that suicide rates amongst the LGBTI community shot up during Christmas holidays and also the contradictory articles that this was not true. But I would not be surprised if it, indeed, turned out to be true. I hated the Straight world which was responsible for this unbearable cruelty. Then and today, I continue to regard all LGBTI deaths by suicide as murders. Yes, murders. I cannot think of a milder word— murders committed by heterosexuals with a callous disregard to the basic human need of belonging, murders done in the name of religion and culture.

Perhaps it was this view of being an outsider, although not articulated

explicitly, that had made me disdainful of heterosexual festivals like *Diwali*, before my travel to the USA. I would refuse to accept gifts from my Mom. Every *Diwali* whenever she bought me clothes or gave me money to buy clothes, I quarrelled with her. I guess somewhere I felt I did not deserve it, although I was not conscious of the relation between my being Gay and my surly attitude around *Diwali*. Finally feeling guilty, I would gracelessly accept the gift. Writing this, I feel deeply ashamed of my behaviour then.

Things changed when I came out. As my Mom began her slow and painful journey towards my acceptance, I began to take an interest in what was happening around me. I began to look forward to the *Diwali* festival and started loving it immensely. Shopping for clothes in *Diwali* became bearable although I dread doing it; it's the worst possible nightmare, other than being in the closet, to befall me.

After a couple of blissful *Diwali* festivals, the sheen of the newfound interest in festivals started wearing off. The blind faith in performing of rituals, many embedded in a patriarchal society, whose relevance had long ceased, began to weigh me down increasingly. And it was not just the Straight ones who followed these rituals blindly. I heard of Indian queens, in the USA, observing *Karva Chauth* (a woman fasting for her husband's wellbeing- one of the many patriarchal traditions.) I heard about *Haldi-Kunku* (a patriarchal tradition in Maharashtra, practiced by married Hindu women whose husband is alive) events in Pune and PCMC, organised by, and for, some of my Queer friends. Happily, till date, no one has extended an invitation to me for these events but, the gossip mill, taking delight that such events irritate me, ensures that I am kept abreast of such things.

I was reminded of my misery during *Diwali* holidays in the USA while introspecting on these festivals and events. It was then that I got the idea of organising an annual dinner in *Diwali* for those lonely hearts who did not celebrate *Diwali* or have been unable to go home for *Diwali* for one reason or the other. I knew that my friends Suresh and Pushkar were not into patriarchal festivals, and so, I sounded them out on the idea; they were game. We agreed that lonely Straights could also join. I decided to call it- *Lonely Hearts Dinner* which as usual

attracted a few trolls, one denouncing me saying he would never attend a dinner with such a sad name. I picked *Padva* (a day of *Diwali* festival) for dinner.

There was a bit of grumbling from my Mom, who wanted me to spend the festival time at home. But it was easy to convince her that going away for a few hours was no cause for complaint. The 'few hours' was not strictly true; getting bored at home, I generally worked a few hours in the office even during the holidays or went to movies. Once, I had attended an early morning Hindustani classical session (*Diwali Pahat* event)— a vocal performance by the great Kishori Amonkar at *Bal Gandharva Rang Mandir*. To attend this event, I got up, reluctantly, in the early hours of the morning, when the first burst of firecrackers had shattered my sleep. But it started a full hour late and disappointed, that was the last time I went to such early morning programs; I preferred the evening/night *Sawai Gandharva Music Festival* instead.[1]

I organised the first *Lonely Hearts Dinner* in 2012, in my office and about nine people showed up. I remember Abhishek (Tinesh' boyfriend), Suresh, Pushkar and my Straight friends and colleagues Amol and Umesh. Since the office policy forbade alcohol on the premises, I could not serve drinks, and the dinner turned out to be a bit of a drag. The formal office atmosphere made matters worse. We, then, decided that next year onwards we would hold this event at some resto-bar.

The payment policy was, drinks had to be paid for personally by drinkers. As far as the dinner payment was concerned, if the Trust could afford to, it would partly fund it (but never more than ₹2,000.00) and the rest would have to be equally shared by attendees, else it would be 'TTMM' (*tuzha-tu mazha-mee*) i.e. soldier's contribution.

Suresh, Pushkar and Bhuvan had picked up a resto-bar on Shastri Road, and that is where we continued to have our annual *Lonely Hearts Dinner*, attended by about eight-ten people. We would meet at 7 pm and then languorously drink, smoke and eat till late into the night. (Since the start of *Lonely Hearts Dinner* event, I have a policy of

drinking, only on this occasion, two small pegs of Vodka or if Vodka was not available a substitute; the rest of the year I don't drink, no, not even beer.)

At the end of dinner, a noticeable time elapsed figuring out the payment of the food and alcohol bill, our collective numbed brains screwed-up the calculations a couple of times before getting it right. We would then step out of the restaurant, in the winter cold, smokers would light their cigarettes, and we would stand chitchatting, reluctant to depart.

Over the years, as my parents' health deteriorated, I made it a point to leave the event by 10 pm, so I could be home before they went off to sleep. The others carried on as usual. And that was how things lasted, until 2017, when the drinkers sobered in a flash on seeing the astronomical bill, goading Bhuvan to find a less expensive place, for the binge next year.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] When I was in college, the annual *Sawai Gandharva* Music Festival of predominantly Hindustani classical music would be held at night, before the Supreme Court noise pollution control directive in 2005 that public/outdoor events should wind up by 10.00 pm.





## UN-NATURAL OPINION

When Dr Arvind Panchanadikar informed me that the *Annual National Conference of Indian Psychiatrist Society (ANCIPS)*, was to be held at Balewadi Stadium, Pune, from 16 to 19 January 2014, I seized the opportunity. I discussed two ideas with him- addressing the delegates on LGBTI issues and a survey with the Psychiatrists on reading down Sec 377 IPC. He was enthusiastic and asked me to approach Dr Vidyadhar Watve then chairperson of the Organising Committee. I would have to do this urgently as I had barely a couple of weeks left before the conference.

I had met Dr Watve a couple of times at *Poona* Hospital, where he practised. Per his instruction, I submitted a letter of intent and a draft questionnaire to the conference organisers. They rejected my request to address the delegates on LGBTI issues, as I was not a member of *Indian Psychiatrist Society (IPS)*, but they were willing to consider granting permission to the survey.

After a few discussions with Dr Watve and Dr Sameer Kulkarni, we agreed that the questionnaire would have only one question: 'Should IPC377 be read down to exclude intercourse, done in private, between consenting adults (irrespective of their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity)₹' There were four choices of answers: [Yes / No / No Comments / I don't wish to participate in the survey]; having just one question would enable Psychiatrists to quickly fill-up the form.

There was a cause of concern that, the survey may not be approved, by the outgoing President, Dr Indira Sharma, as her stand on LGBTI issues was questionable. But the workaround had been to seek approval of the President-elect, Dr Asokan, who was LGBTI-friendly.

The evening the conference started (January 16, 2014), I went to meet Dr Watve at a hotel near the venue. He had stationed himself there, for co-ordinating the conference and despite his busy schedule, he gave me some time and I got his final approval on the questionnaire. That meant that we had just the remaining three days

of the conference to conduct the exercise.

We agreed that my staff would stand at various entrances of conference rooms and distribute forms for the surveys and politely interact with doctors to request them to take a minute to fill the form and drop it in one of the survey boxes. Since my staff and I were not members of IPS, we were not allowed to attend sessions.

Rushing back later in the evening, just before our usual photocopy shop closed, I instructed the owner to photocopy 2000 copies of the survey, which I would collect early next morning.

In the meantime, my staff had taken some empty, bulk distribution condom boxes and covering them with white paper had converted them into survey-drop-boxes. They made a slit at the top of the box for depositing the completed survey forms. We were to place these boxes at strategic locations around the stadium near the doors of the conference rooms.

I chose ten staff members and divided them into two shifts, one group handling the morning shift and the other the afternoon shift. Project Manager Tinesh Chopade and I were to do the rounds and supervise the survey.

Every day, early in the morning, the staff working first shift had to collect the boxes from the Trust office (at PCMC) (In those days the PCMC TI Project had an office in Akrudi, PCMC) and install them at the venue. After the last session, the staff working second shift was to carry the filled boxes back to the Trust office, take out the filled forms, count them and again seal the boxes.

For the staff, conducting this exercise at a national level conference was a first of its kind experience, and they were expectedly, very excited. I told the team not to touch the ample freebies that would be available.

By the time I arrived at the venue in the morning, the morning batch had stationed themselves at various posts, and the boxes were ready to receive filled-in forms. Film buff Omkar Joshi spotted Dr Mohan Agashe and rushed to him with a survey form. Dr Agashe took the

survey form, but despite Omkar's endearing words, he did not fill it then and there but carried it away with him; morosely Omkar turned back.

At the start of the conference, Dr Watve introduced me to Dr T. Asokan, and during the day I had a surprise in store for me- meeting Dr Dinesh Bhugra, president of *World Psychiatrist Association (WPA)* who was attending the conference. When Dr Arvind Panchanadikar introduced me to him, and I informed him about the survey, he was visibly excited. I handed him a survey form, and he immediately filled it and dropped it in a box nearby, though not before grumbling, "It's difficult to get acceptance here". I was unsure whether he meant India or Indian Psychiatrists or both.

Although I was not a doctor, he insisted that I attend his session and at the beginning, announced to the gathering, pointing at me, that some organisation is conducting a survey on Sec 377 IPC and would they kindly oblige by filling the survey form. The announcement over, I waited for some time, and as the session proceeded, I quietly stepped out. (Later, I came to know that he had come out as Gay a long time ago.)

After the conference, back at the office, we tallied the responses of the survey:

- we distributed a total of 1712 survey forms,
- we collected a total of 262 completed survey forms; i.e. 15.3% of those distributed.
- 83.59% (219 respondents) were on the side of reading down Sec 377 IPC;
- 12.21% (32 respondents) were against;
- 1.53% (4 respondents) ticked 'no comments';
- 0.76% (2 respondents) ticked 'Don't want to participate';
- 0.38% (1 response) was invalid (had both- Read Down- 'Yes' and 'No' options ticked);
- 1.53% (4) were blank forms stuffed in survey boxes.



Of those who supported reading down of Sec 377 IPC- one respondent wrote, 'homosexuality should be called a disorder that needs treatment.' Another one wrote 'It is also likely that the first sexual experience is likely to shape mind/sexual orientation to sex'.[1]

It was clear that many Psychiatrists had not participated in the survey. Was it to be considered that they did not care? Or that they did not think it important enough? Or found the issue distasteful? Or did not have the time, though looking at the crowds around the pharmaceutical stalls distributing freebies that did not *prima facie* seem to be the case.

The survey form and methodology could have been much better, but at short notice, that was all we were able to do. Despite the methodological issues, for instance, a Psychiatrist could take multiple forms and fill it, and one of the responses which supported reading down of Sec 377 IPC did write a comment questioning the survey methodology, it gave a lay of the land. The terrain was definitely not LGBTI friendly; there was no reason to interpret '83.59% Psychiatrists favoured reading down of Sec 377 IPC' in a positive light and unknown to me a storm brewing right under my nose, would bear witness to the fact.

In an interview, during this conference, Dr Indira Sharma, the outgoing President of ANCIPS, said 'Homosexuality is unnatural'[2]. The media reported this scandalous statement widely. They added another illuminating insight about her worldview- a comment she had made some time ago, that 'early marriage of boys could help channel their sexual desires and curb crimes against women'[2].

Shocked, I approached Dr Watve, who dismissed it as her personal opinion and not to be considered the official position of IPS. I told him that nevertheless, I would be arranging a press conference to protest her stand, and he was welcome to present the IPS position on the issue.

The press conference was held at 4 pm on January 24, 2014, at *Patrakar Bhavan*, which was close to *Poona* Hospital where Dr Watve practised. He requested me to call him ten minutes before the

conference began so he could come for a brief while.

At the press conference, I expressed shock and outrage at the statement; Dr Watve reiterated that it was Dr Sharma's personal opinion and IPS did not consider homosexuality to be a disorder.[3][4]

I was happy that Dr Watve had supported my stand and that the IPS perhaps for the first time had openly stated at a press conference that homosexuality was not a disorder but a natural variant of sexuality. Alas, the episode left a bitter taste in my mouth, as it underlined, once again, that the medical profession continued to live in medieval times.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] IPC377 Survey Conducted at ANCIPS 2014. Report by *Samapathik* Trust (Pune.) January 2014.

[2] Homosexuality unnatural, says leading psychiatrist. By Malathy Iyer. *The Times of India*. Pune. Page 1. January 21, 2014.

[3] Clarify stand on homosexuality, LGBTs urge psychiatrists. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 1. January 24, 2014.

[4] *Samalaingikatebabat bhumika spashta kara*. (Clarify your stand about homosexuality) *Sakal*. Pune City. Page 5. January 26, 2014.





## MEETING WITH CP, PUNE

The constable accompanied by Mr Prakash Yadav, President of *Akhil Budhwar Peth Devdasi Sanstha* (ABDS), handed me an invitation letter of a meeting being organised on March 17, 2011, by the Commissioner of Police, Pune Dr Meeran Chadha Borwankar Mam. She had taken over as Commissioner of Police (CP), Pune in 2010, and this innovative measure initiated by her was for better coordination between the Police and the NGOs. The venue was a conference hall at the Police Commissioner office in Camp.

It was striking that we received a notification a few days in advance so that we could schedule our time accordingly. The general practice of intimation of meetings with the concerned Police department was to inform one of the NGOs in the area just a day before. For us, this meant some of us were not able to attend or had to send whoever was available as a representative. If the representative was not a decision-maker or was unlikely to understand the nuances of the issue discussed, it became an exercise in futility for the NGO.

The conference hall had yellow, cushioned chairs behind desks arranged in rows in front of the dias. The right-hand side wall had windows with shades. Small bottles of mineral water were placed on the desks, in front of each chair. By the time I arrived, a couple of representatives from other NGOs had already arrived and were seated. As I came in, I was greeted by Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge Sir who was then In-Charge of Social Security Cell of the Police.

The meeting scheduled at 11.30 am started a bit late but saw good attendance. I remember seeing representatives from *Saheli Sangha*, *John Paul Slum Development Project* (JPSDP), ABDS, *Vanchit Vikas*, *Rescue Foundation* all of them working on issues of female sex workers. Sanyogita Dhamdhere had come from CFAR (an organisation which worked on proper representation of social issues in the media) and Anuradha Sahasrabuddhe who managed *ChildLine* helpline was also present. There were a few others whom I did not know.

In the front, on the left-hand side, sat Police representatives; Pune

Station Railway Police In-Charge, Faraskhana Police Station In-Charge and DCP (Crime) were present.

CP Dr Meeran Chadha Borwankar Mam started the meeting with an initial round of introductions; I said that I worked for the LGBTI community and implemented HIV/AIDS TI Projects. The Commissioner did not comment then. But at the next quarterly meeting, during the initial round of introductions, she asked me in a non-judgmental manner: “So how are things for the Gay community in the city?”, a reassuring signal that here was a CP who did not harbour any ill will against the community.

The Commissioner, with her no-nonsense approach, stated at the first meeting, that such meetings scheduled quarterly, would ensure efficient co-ordination between the Police and NGOs.[1] NGOs were free to present any Police-related issues and concerns they faced in their work; she wanted to know the problems first-hand.

A discussion of individual cases on trafficking, deportation issues related to female sex workers from Bangladesh, problems faced by NGOs working with child beggars etc. followed. There was no pending LGBTI related case to discuss. Periodically she gave directions predominantly to the Social Security Cell and the Railway Police. At the end of the meeting, she requested various Police Officers to share their contact numbers with NGOs.

Eating snacks and drinking coffee after the meeting, as we milled around getting introduced to Police Officers and other NGOs, I bumped into Sr. PI Barge Sir. As I was about to introduce him to my work, he responded, “I have read about you on the internet.” As I started my spiel on the problems faced by the LGBTI community, I realised that he was aware of them, had done his homework and had come fully prepared. As I finished, I requested whether there was a possibility of collaborating with the Police on LGBTI issues. “Sure. What do you have in mind?” I requested his assistance in two initiatives:

1. A session of the Social Security Cell with LGBTI community to help build the community's confidence in the Police.

2. Networking with the Police and assisting them in whatever way possible to set up a Special Cell to address crimes against LGBTI communities as confidentiality and sensitivity were of paramount importance.

He immediately responded, “You organize a session of the Social Security Cell. I will personally address your community and dialogue with them.” I was, to say the least, dumbstruck. It was a dream come true, and I jumped at the opportunity. “ss.. ss... sure, Sir.” I stuttered nervously. And he moved on to chat with someone else. It would be the first time, a session like this was being conducted in Pune, and I was enthralled at the prospect.

As I drank coffee, my mind was all a tizzy, feverishly planning the outline of the workshop.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] CP Dr Meeran Chadha Borwankar Mam continued to hold these meetings quarterly. After her transfer, the meetings continued for a year or so and then discontinued for some unknown reason. In January 2020, DCP Bacchan Singh Sir held a similar meeting with NGOs. In that meeting, I requested that with the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2019) in place, the Police *Bharosa* Cell which handled cases of domestic violence on women should consider handling domestic violence cases of Transgenders. There was a plan to have such meetings periodically, but the COVID-19 crisis threw a spanner in the works.





## THE CURSE OF THE SARPANCH

“Make sure that the session starts on time” (6.30 pm), Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge Sir (In-Charge of Social Security Cell, Pune) warned me. I knew he was a stickler for discipline, and I passed on the warning to my staff.

Sensing the lack of trust of the LGBTI community in the Police, we had, on April 9, 2011, arranged a dialogue between the Police and the community at *Pune Sarvajanic Sabha* (the hall just below our Trust office.) Sr. PI Barge Sir arrived on time but... except for a few participants and my staff, the remaining chairs remained embarrassingly unoccupied. The LGBTI community had not dared to show up for a dialogue with the Police.

Despite the low turnout, the session went well. I introduced Sr. PI Barge Sir, reading out snippets of his long and illustrious career- he was awarded the President's Police Medal for Meritorious Service on August 15, 2009.

Sr. PI Barge Sir outlined the role of the Social Security Cell, gave examples of the kind of cases that the department handled, took questions from the audience and made it clear that he would take action against those who harassed feminine Gay men, Transgender persons. “Take down my personal number. If someone harasses you or if the Police do not extend cooperation or you need to consult me on a Police matter, just call me.” For me, that occasion arose, just a couple of months later.

The crisis call could not have come at a worse time; I was going through a bad phase of depression, and I was in a low mood, anxiety-riddled and with very low self-confidence.

“Sir, my Mom has started arrangements for my engagement, but I don't want to marry”. It transpired that the caller, a youth, did not want to marry, had come out as Gay to his Mom, but she would not take no for an answer.

“Can you talk to my Mom?” he pleaded, his desperation coming

across, as he whispered into the phone. “Sure”, I had wearily replied. Since he was staying in one city, his Mom in another and I was in Pune; we decided that he would give her my number and she would call me. Soon after that, she called me.

His mother was the *sarpanch* (head) of the village and right from the first sentence, kept on reminding me of the power she wielded. My supporting her only son had infuriated her no end. As we spoke, it suddenly dawned on me that her son had not mentioned her that I was Gay. I corrected her misunderstanding. Predictably she had lost it; her screeching harangue deteriorated to curses. And finally, a threat, that she would file a complaint against me with the Police for abetting her son in 'such things' (*Ya aslya goshti*), and that I would be hearing, soon enough, from the Police.

Stunned, I sat in my office, brooding over the conversation. I replayed it, again and again, wondering whether I had in any way threatened her in return. I had not done any such thing, but my anxiety levels were shot sky high.

I called the Gay youth and told him what had transpired. He had nothing to say, and I did not rebuke him for not warning me that his Mom was not aware of my sexuality. Many of my clients did this, for fear that their parents would otherwise never agree to talk to me or meet me.

After quietening down a bit, I called up Sr. PI Barge Sir. He answered the call, and I asked him whether I could come to his office to talk to him about a case. He was busy and asked me to narrate the matter on the phone.

In a rush of words, I haphazardly described the conversation. “You can't stop her from filing a complaint. But since you don't even know her son and he was the one who called you, there is no way in which she can prove that you are an 'abettor'. If she is forcing her son to get into an engagement without his consent, ask him to come to Pune, bring him to my office, and I will give him proper guidance”. Heaving a sigh of relief, I thanked him profusely.

As I was just about to call the youth, I received an SMS from him, the gist of it being- 'I am going to disappear for a while, till after the

engagement date'. I panicked. His mother was sure to file a missing-person report, and since she was sure to suspect that I had a hand in this, she could also vindictively file a kidnapping case against me. With a lump in my throat, I frantically tried calling the youth; the calls went unanswered. Was he checking his mobile phone? Had he left his cell at home or office and walked away? I paced up and down my office, my mind all in a tizzy.

Finally, I sat down for a while, head in my hands and then as I quietened down, I sent an SMS to the youth, (paraphrased)- 'If you don't call me within the next five minutes I am going to give your cell number to the Social Security Cell of Police, and you will have to answer to them'.

Within a minute, he called. I told him that if he was to disappear, I would be held responsible and face Police questioning for no fault of mine, and I would not know where he was hiding. Under no circumstance should he do that. Chiding him for this rash step, I told him that I had spoken to the Social Security Cell and indicated my willingness to take him to the Cell for guidance and assistance. Tersely, he replied that he would think about it and disconnected.

I slept fitfully that night, suddenly waking up in the early hours sure that the cell phone had rung. No call came from the youth or his mother, not that night, not ever again. I have no idea how it turned out for him.



Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge Sir addressing the LGBTI community.  
Session organized by *Samapathik* Trust. April 9, 2011.







## DIALOGUES WITH POLICE

The office of the Social Security Cell of Pune Police was at the back of the main building of the Commissioner of Police, close to the canteen. In front of the Social Security Cell, dozens of Police vans stood parked with a few drivers loitering nearby. A couple of Police personnel sat on chairs that were laid out in the passage, outside the entrance of the canteen, chatting, sipping hot beverages.

Outside the Social Security Cell, the signboard on the top right announced Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge as In-Charge. Through the double swing half door, I could see him speaking to a person sitting across the table. Looking around, I saw a door at the side leading to an adjacent room. A couple of Police personnel, all in plain clothes, sat at work. I went to the door, introduced myself, and was asked to sit as saheb was busy with a case.

After one of the quarterly meetings organised by CP, Pune, Sr. PI Barge Sir suggested that *Samapathik* Trust arrange a session on LGBTI issues with Police Station representatives in collaboration with the Social Security Cell. "We will invite representatives from all Police Stations. They all need to know these issues". He further added, "You can conduct it in this conference hall, so you don't have to rent another hall for the session". All I could do was thank him profusely, and after planning the session, I shared the schedule of the session with him via email.

And here I was, at his office, to finalize the schedule. After some time, I was ushered into his cabin. The room had a large desk with a portrait of Shivaji Maharaj, a LED TV, a small bookcase next to the table and a couple of deities on a shelf. Several chairs for visitors were placed adjacent to the desk, and another set of chairs lined the wall facing him.

As I sat down, he went through the schedule again and approved it. He told me that I was under no obligation to provide snacks, but I insisted since we had the budget. So we agreed that the Police canteen would provide the snacks and the Trust would foot the bill.

He asked me to get the canteen manager to his office and after introducing me to him asked him to supply snacks as per my request to the conference room.

I started preparing for the session in earnest. I selected the team, gave them topics that they would talk about, and asked them to prepare detailed notes, rehearse it and do a presentation for me so that I could suggest changes or edit it, to fit the time allotted. And so the rehearsals began. All of us were nervous; this was a one-time opportunity, and we could not afford to botch it up.

The night before the session, I could hardly sleep. Early in the morning of November 6, 2012, we gathered at the office and after a quick final rehearsal, trooped off to the venue.

The conference hall was full; we had representatives from twenty-seven Police Stations in Pune and PCMC. The session started precisely on time. Sr. PI Barge Sir welcomed everyone, and I was invited to start the session.

I gave a brief introduction to LGBTI, defined terms, stated the current medical stand on Homosexuality & Gender Dysphoria, the current status of Sec 377 IPC and presented issues of harassment and blackmail. This was followed by experience sharing by Tinesh Chopade and Vivek as Gay youths, Santi as a Transgender person and lastly, Sachin Wagalgave who spoke about the HIV/AIDS TI Projects we were implementing in Pune and PCMC.

In the end, the Police asked two questions:

1) "What assistance do you seek from us?"

I stated that my community was afraid of going to the Police and hence suffered blackmail and harassment in silence. I requested for a non-judgmental and non-discriminatory approach.

2) "What do you have to say about Hijras who extort money and behave obscenely in public?"

I dreaded this question; it was the one question that would be asked at almost every dialogue with the Police. I stated my position that we do not support criminal activity by anyone, whatever their Gender

Identity or Sexual Orientation; every criminal must be dealt with, in accordance to law. Like the Straight community, we too had our share of rotten apples amongst us, but the stereotypical attitude that all Transgender persons misbehave or are criminals need to change.

At the end of the session, snacks were served. As per our agreement, we gave a small amount to reimburse for travel expenses to the participants. Some of them politely refused, stating that coming to the session was their duty. As Tinesh and I approached Sr. PI Nitin Jadhav Sir who was then In-Charge of *Lashkar* Police Station, he said, "I don't want this (travel expense)". "Sir, it's ok, we have a budget for the same", I politely replied. "No, no, I know NGOs have a lot of expenses, you can use this money for some other expense.... and one more thing. It is good that you have arranged this session. We are not taught these issues in our training. But I feel it is more important that our staff at the Police Station, who works the beat, is knowledgeable about these issues. So my suggestion to you is to arrange short sessions with staff at Police Stations. Give me a letter, and I will grant permission to hold this dialogue at my Police Station".

"Thank you, Sir. I will arrange for an auditorium..." I replied. "No, no, we don't have time to come to an auditorium, we have too much workload, what you should do is, we have a roll call once at 9 am and once at 9 pm. You schedule your talk at 9 am roll call. I will give you 20-30 minutes. Consider this done". I tried to find words to express my gratitude, but no words came. Overwhelmed, I just nodded mutely.

And so one of the outcomes of the quarterly meetings was a session on LGBTI issues with Police Station representatives from Pune and PCMC in collaboration with the Social Security Cell[1][2][3]. One of the outcomes of this session was meeting Sr. PI Nitin Jadhav Sir, who invited us for a dialogue with the Police at *Lashkar* Police Station on LGBTI issues.[4]

After this dialogue, we were on a roll, and in 2013, with funds from *Alliance India* and MSACS, we conducted dialogues on LGBTI issues at fourteen Police Stations in Pune and PCMC and one for the Traffic Police. Tinesh Chopade, Parikshit Shete, Milind Palaskar, Omkar Joshi and Vivek divided their work of canvassing Police Stations amongst

themselves.

In 2015, Deputy Collector Manjiri Manolkar Mam who was Project Director at *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute (BARTI)*, visited *Samapathik Trust*. She was so impressed with our work that she asked me to conduct a session for BARTI staff and to also, submit a small grant proposal to BARTI for funding another round of these dialogues at Police Stations.

And so, funded by BARTI, we conducted another round of dialogues in 2015-2016, covering a total of thirteen Police Stations, meeting many supportive Policemen and Policewomen who assured us, “*Kahi madat lagli tar jarur sanga*” (If you need any help, do let us know.)[5][6]



LGBTI session at CP office, Pune. November 6, 2012.

On the dias: Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge Sir

On the right: Bindumadhav Khire introducing the session

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] City police seek guidelines to deal with LGBT cases. By Shushant Kulkarni. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newline. Page 1. November 24, 2012.

[2] City police plan to frame rules for dealing with LGBTs. *The Times of India*. Pune. Page 4. November 24, 2012.

[3] *Tyanchasaathi honar swatantra police niyamavali*. (Separate Police guidelines will be prepared for them) By Aabid Sheikh. *Punya Nagri*. Page 7. November 25, 2012.

[4] The awareness workshop at *Lashkar* Police Station was conducted on June 21, 2013 at 9 am.

[5] The letter to various Zones from Assistant Commissioner of Police Ram Mandurke Sir, informing them of *Samvad* project (a collaboration of *Samapathik* Trust and BARTI) and directing them to arrange these dialogues is dated December 15, 2015. Outward No. 905/2015.

[6] Better Times Ahead For The Community ₹ *The Times of India*. Pune Times. By Anup Satphale. November 7, 2016.

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## OF ROSES AND BRICKBATS

“*Samapathik* Trust should take the initiative to organise Pune’s first Pride Walk”, Zameer nudged me as we walked on F.C. Road towards the *Ranade Institute of Journalism* canteen. Ordering snacks we sat down, surrounded by a gaggle of chattering journalism students.

His words triggered a rush of mixed feelings. I wanted to organise it, it was one of my dreams; I knew I would eventually get down to it, but at the same time, I dreaded taking the ownership. I had attended a Mumbai Pride March (one of the years before the Delhi High Court judgment) and remembered one guy who walked with his jeans and underwear sagging, exhibiting to all and sundry half his rear, another swayed with a beer bottle in his hand. A Transgender person frequently dropped her *sari pallu* to generously display most of her boobies (newly installed₹) to interested passers-by. Outraged, I stopped attending Mumbai Pride March. (I am well aware of the amount of hard work and grit that goes in organizing a Pride Walk. So my complaint is not about the organizers, but the spoilsports.)

The subsequent year (I think) a woman walked in Mumbai Pride March with a dildo sticking under her skirt. As usual, the diehard liberals defended her freedom of expression. Having played no role in organising the Pride March, she had displayed her myopic ambition to grab some attention. In another Mumbai Pride March, one of my friends was groped inappropriately by a Transgender activist. The list goes on...

Every year, I read and heard these stories I felt blessed that I had stayed away from it all, and now Zameer was pushing for such an event in Pune. I do not remember the reply, but the idea kept nagging me, and I started thinking on it half-heartedly, dreading the day I would pick up the gauntlet. And one fine day, around mid-October 2011, I called in Tinesh and Milind for a private chat. “How about having our first LGBTI Pride Walk in Pune₹” The suddenness stunned them, and they were understandably wary, no one, including me, knew anything about organising one.

In a series of meetings, we discussed the route and all felt that, for the sake of convenience, we should start the Pride Walk from *Samapathik* Trust office and end it at the same place. We decided to use *Pune Sarvajanic Sabha*, the hall on the second floor of our office building to gather pre and post the Pride Walk.

The issue of Police permission was the most important one. Tinesh and Milind did a recce of the route and came back with the information that it passed through two Police Station jurisdictions: *Faraskhana* and *Vishrambaugwada*. We then decided to pay a visit to the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Zone 1 office (the two Police Stations were under Zone 1.) No one else in the Trust knew our plans.

Next to the *Dagdushet Ganpati* Temple, very near our Trust office, the destination building housed the two Police Stations and the DCP Zone 1 office. We met Police Officer Shirole and informed him of our Trust located in their jurisdiction and the work we did. He was incredibly supportive. On expressing our wish to organise a Pride Walk, he gave us all the relevant information and asked us to file the application with him.

In fact, three years down the line, when we decided to shift the venue of the Pride Walk to J.M. Road, and had to approach the *Deccan* Police Station for permission, Police Officer Shirole, on his own, took it upon himself to accompany my team to the *Deccan* Police station to ensure that things go well.

Elated, we rushed back and eagerly started planning for the event. We decided to arrange the Pride Walk in December. Since I was unsure of whether the Police would allow an LGBTI Pride Walk, I decided to club it with a HIV/AIDS awareness rally since December was HIV/AIDS awareness month. It was the first Pride Walk, I was unsure and wanted to take it one slow step at a time.

I ended up drawing flak for that, the trolls vehemently protesting the clubbing of a stigmatising illness like AIDS with Pride Walk. (It was while planning the second Pride Walk that we delinked LGBTI Pride Walk and HIV/AIDS awareness campaign.) The worrying aspect for me

was that some of their messages underlined a vehement denial of HIV in the Gay community as if delinking the word HIV from the word Gay would somehow rid us of the virus. I remember Vivek Raj Anand supporting us, “One step at a time. They have made a good beginning, let's support them”.

The Police had asked us to give options of a couple of dates for the Pride Walk so that they could choose one where no other events, political gatherings, religious processions etc. were scheduled in their jurisdiction. So we decided on a couple of dates in December, all Sundays so that it would be convenient for all. We also decided that unlike the Mumbai Pride March, Pune Pride Walk would be in the morning. There were many reasons for that, the chief one being, those from Mumbai who wanted to attend could come by the early morning train and leave for Mumbai after the Pride Walk.

We drafted a letter and excitedly rushed to the Zone-1 office to inward it. Reading the letter, Officer Shirole pointed out mistakes. The primary issue was that our route while returning to the Trust office, involved going through a no-entry road, so the route had to be modified. A secondary issue was, we had failed to affix a ₹2.00 Court fee stamp to the letter.

Since there was a possibility of the President of India coming to Pune on December 4, 2011, Officer Shirole stated that they reserved the right to cancel our Pride Walk if that date got finalised for the President's visit.

So, we settled for December 11, 2011. We knew that it would give rise to a lot of angst amongst the Pune LGBTI community as *Open Space*, *Prayatna* and some other groups had organised a two-day Film Festival on the same weekend, and we would be stepping on their toes. The saving grace was that since their Sunday session was to begin at noon, they could, if they desired, participate in the Pride Walk at 10.30 am and rush back to the auditorium. So knowing full well that I would be accused of being a saboteur of their Film Festival, we finalised the date. We made the appropriate corrections to the letter and the route map; Tinesh and Milind submitted the application and got one copy of it stamped and signed, in



acknowledgement, by the Police.

Then, began an anxious period of waiting, hoping that our excitement would not give us away. We decided to invite Dr Darshana Vyas, the Project Director of *Pathfinder International* as Grand Marshall. It was courtesy of her guidance and support that we had been running our TI Projects in Pune and PCMC. I also met LGBTI friendly Psychiatrist Dr Devendra Shirole at *Kamala Nehru Hospital* and invited him to flag off the march, which he graciously agreed to do. We allocated some funds of the project for serving a simple lunch for Pride Walk participants at the *Pune Sarvajanik Sabha* hall, after the Pride Walk.

Every few days Tinesh and Milind would visit the DCP office to check on the progress of the application. After the fourth visit, as Tinesh was leaving, a constable gently advised him, "*Damana ghya. Ghai karu naka. Kahi zhala tari parvangi shivai padayatra kadhu naka*". (Take it slowly, don't be impatient. Don't organise the Walk without permission.)

As the D-day drew closer, the staff were told of the imminent event and unnecessarily instructed not take leave in the week leading to the Walk; they would not have missed the excitement for anything in the world. Sachin, Ramesh, Tinesh, Milind and their associates divided work amongst themselves. One team came up with the idea of the entire *Samapathik* Trust team wearing *kurtas* and had gone shopping. The second team went to get Rainbow Flags stitched; a third team had gone to obtain quotations for lunch that we would serve the participants; the rest were busy preparing placards.

The night before, I could not sleep, neither could the staff, and we were at the Trust office early in the morning jittery with excitement.

Many members of *Prayatna* group attended; harbouring no ill will for the clash of dates; I remember Omkar, Mayuresh, Nilesh, Jaydeep and Manoj. TK Jayarajan, the Deputy Director of Communication of *Pathfinder International* and my friends and colleagues- Dr Manisha Gupte, Meghana Marathe, Dr Nitin Sane, Sunita Wahi, Zameer Kamble and others were there in full force.

After the lamp lighting ceremony, Dr Devendra Shirole addressed the

crowd before the Pride Walk. He highlighted that it was significant that Pune's first Pride Walk was starting from *Pune Sarvajanic Sabha* (Estb. In 1870 by G. V. Joshi) which had illustrious social reformers as trustees.

After Dr Devendra Shirole flagged off the march, Dr Darshana Vyas, our Grand Marshall carried the Rainbow Flag, and we headed to *Shaniwar Wada*, going around it and came back, creating history. The pride was a success, 93 people attended, none wore masks, and we received an enormous amount of press coverage.[1][2]

Over the subsequent years, the number of LGBTIQ community members and allies participating in the Pride Walks steadily increased.[3] NGOs working on women's issues and sexuality, a few corporates working on LGBTIQ inclusion became regulars.[4] We made a point to invite a diverse representation of people as Grand Marshalls.[5][6][7]

The first few years of the Pune Pride Walk are full of happy memories. Later on, it became a thankless job and a painful chore with a few of the new generation LGBTIQ community members hell-bent on intentionally sully Pune Pride Walk image[8]. Their ideological differences with me were a flimsy mask which did nothing to hide their jealousy and hatred for my work; work that I had done without their aid or support (you cannot blame me for that; many of them were in diapers or not born when I started my work), rendering them irrelevant in the process. All they could do was viciously denigrate my work, goaded by their like-minded compatriots from other parts of the country. And so, for some LGBTIQ persons, criticism of my work continues to be a hobby and a substitute for real, hard work. Eventually, the harmony that my team and I painstakingly tried to maintain in organising Pride Walks in Pune would be irreparably destroyed when.... but I am getting ahead of myself.

Let me go back to happy times. The initial few years had many beautiful moments which are engraved in my mind.

- My Mom, sitting in the chair with a rose in her hand before the lamp lighting ceremony. She was nervous but had come to the

first Pride Walk, knowing it would mean a lot to me. She was given a fawning welcome by my staff and had relaxed; I remember a Transgender community member, Surekha, gushing “She looks so good” and getting a photograph clicked with her.

- Manoj dancing *fugdi* (a traditional Maharashtrian dance played generally by women in pairs) in front of NMV School on Bajirao Rao road, with another guy. Manoj had gone to school here and was bullied mercilessly in his tender years for being a sissy. And so, he had specifically requested me to pause the Walk outside the school so that he could finally have his revenge by playing *fugdi* in front of the school.
- Grand Marshall Vivek Raj Anand waving the Rainbow Flag outside *Shaniwar Wada* during the second Pune Pride Walk. (Amma had been invited as Grand Marshall and living up to her reputation, she had cancelled the visit at the last moment.)
- Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge Sir and Police staff distributing roses at Pune Pride Walk of 2013. I had received a call from him, “*Belbag chaukat pride kiti wajta pochnar ahe?*” (When will the Pride Walk reach *Belbag* intersection₹.) He had been recently transferred from the Social Security Cell to *Faraskhana* Police Station as Station In-Charge. The Pride Walk route fell under his jurisdiction. He had come with his staff and distributed roses to the Pune Pride Walk participants, stating to the participants and the media present there, that the Police were there to protect all citizens and the Queer community had nothing to fear. It was the first time in the history of India that the Police had taken the initiative of distributing roses at a LGBTIQA Pride Walk.[9][10]
- My colleague Dr Hema Pisal tying on my wrist, a colourful friendship wristband, one of the many she had painstakingly weaved for participants.
- My friend Nandita Ambike watching raptly, as the crowd collectively sang, “*Hum Honge Kaamyab*” (We shall overcome) at the end of a Pride Walk.

And last but not the least most precious moment for me was Tinesh,

at the first Pride Walk, looking 15-years-old, in a kurta, blowing the whistle as he directed traffic near *Shaniwar Wada*, gambolling with joy. That image, for me, is symbolic of the many youths who, over subsequent years, would coyly approach me at the end of the Pride Walk and thank me profusely stating, "It was my first Pride Walk". Their shining eyes said it all; the Pride Walk had altered them for the better, forever.

It was these young Gay/Bisexual men, women and Transpersons, who royally ignored the hate-filled campaigns against this annual event that gave me the strength to continue organising the annual Pune Pride Walk till the Supreme Court Sec 377 IPC judgment of 2018.



FOR P...UTION

First Pune LGBTIQ Pride Walk. December 11, 2011  
 From Left: Grand Marshall Dr Darshana Vyas and Dr Devendra Shirole



From Left:  
 Grand Marshall Vivek Raj Anand,  
 Milind and Tinesh



From Left:  
 Tinesh, My Mom, Tinesh'  
 boyfriend Abhishek

Second Pune LGBTIQ Pride Walk. December 9, 2012



Sr. PI Bhanupratap Barge Sir distributing roses



Police personnel distributing roses. In the center (in white shirt) is TK Jayarajan (*Pathfinder International*)

Third Pune LGBTIQ Pride Walk. November 24, 2013



Grand Marshall Tinesh Chopade Holding the banner.  
From left: Omkar, Payal, Parikshit, Chetan, Shruta (HST)

Fourth Pune LGBTIQ Pride Walk. November 09, 2014

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] LGBT community stages maiden march. By Pupul Chatterjee. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newline. December 12, 2011.

[2] City's first Gay Pride parade inspires many people. By Natalie Devlin. *DNA*. December 12, 2011.

[3] From 93 participants in 2011, the strength crossed 800 in the 2019 Pride Walk.

[4] NGOs: MASUM (including their rural staff and community youth), *Tathapi*, *Nari Samata Manch* and its representative Preeti Karmarkar, *Samyak* etc.

Corporates: *ThoughtWorks*, *IBM*, *Symantec*, *BNYMellon* etc.

[5] Grand Marshalls: Darshana Vyas (Director *Pathfinder International*) (2011), Vivek Raj Anand (CEO *The Humsafar Trust*) (2012), *Umang* a Lesbian, Bisexual, Transmen group from Mumbai (2013), Tinesh Chopade (Gay representative) (2014), Soumya (Transgender representative) (2015), Souvik Ghosh (Gay representative) (2016), Parents and siblings of LGBTIQ (Dr Vishwas Sahasrabuddhe, Vaishali Ghunkikar-Kambli, Sameer Samudra's father etc.) (2017), Feminists from Pune (Vidyatai Bal, Sadhana Dadhich, Dr Manisha Gupte, Dr Geetali V. M., Achut Borgaokar) (2018), HOD of Psychiatry *Bharati Hospital* (Pune)- Dr Jyoti Shetty (2019.)

[6] Pune's Pride March to be led by non-LGBTQ supporters. By Dean Lobo. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. May 30, 2017.

[7] '*Baghtay Kay? Samil wha!*'. By Dean Lobo and Zainab Kantawala. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. June 12, 2017.

[8] We had defined the policy that participants had to dress and behave decently, which riled some new generation LGBTIQA community members. We had also created a policy where corporates, LGBTIQA community members or allies could not use the event to distribute freebies or market their wares.

[9] LGBT Parade Gets Support From Cops. By Priyankka Deshpande. *Mid-Day*. Pune. Page 2. November 25, 2013.

[10] LGBT community gets support from this 'policeman with a heart'. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. The Sunday Newsline. October 26, 2014.





## THE VIRTUOUS JOURNALIST

I was at the *Samapathik* Trust office at PCMC, going through monthly account reports and HIV testing records when a friend of Sumit (ORW) called. “*Sir, aika na. Ithe jara matter zhalela ahe*” (Sir, we have got a problem here.) The 'here' was a distant place which we covered under our PCMC TI project. As he narrated the incident, I told him to calm down and wait as it would take me at least an hour to reach the concerned Police Station.

Some time ago, Sumit had taken charge of the sites and became the one-person contact for our registered MSM & TG population in that conservative area. Someone, most likely a closeted community member, jealous of Sumit's work, had pasted a handwritten advertisement at a prominent spot at the ST station of the place, effectively stating, 'Male sex worker services available' followed by Sumit's contact number.

Most passers-by would have read it and moved on; some adventurous ones might have noted the number and called him later. But, one of the readers was no ordinary passer-by— he was a journalist and one of the 'moral, cultural brigade' at that. He had immediately photographed it and off he had marched to the Police Station and as the Police Officer told me later, demanded an explanation, “*Aaplya gavat tumcha naka khali he kai challa ahe?*” (What's going on here, right under your nose?)

The Police acted with alacrity and obtaining Sumit's address, immediately dispatched a Police jeep to Sumit's house. Mercifully his mother had left for her job, and he was alone. The Police had barged in, checked a couple CD's (of Hindi films) they could lay their hands on and had taken Sumit to the Police Station. He had informed another friend of his who had then called me.

Sumit and his friend were waiting for me, sitting under a tree in the premises of the Police Station. Sumit had explained to the Police that someone had played mischief on him; told them he worked on a HIV/AIDS TI Project and that his boss was on the way to vouch for him.

The Police had asked him to wait.

I had come fully prepared. I was lucky to have been in the PCMC Trust office when the call had come in. I had taken with me the documents file of the Trust and the passbook of the PCMC TI project account which was evidence of Sumit's employment at the Trust, his name present in the passbook drawing honorarium and travel from us.

After waiting a couple of hours, it was late evening when the Police Officer called us in. I gave my introduction, information of the Trust, the kind of work we did and showed him documents. I reiterated that someone was playing a dirty prank on Sumit. The Officer went through the papers and was satisfied. "*Mala pattai, pan yachi reetsar statement ghaila lage!*" (I understand, but, as per the procedure, we will have to record his statement.) He told us to come the next day.

The next day Sumit and I arrived at around 10 am as requested only to find out that the Police Officer had gone to the *tanta mukta gaav* (quarrel-free village) initiative meeting and we waited and waited and waited. At noon, we went out for lunch, and by the time we came back, the Officer had come in. We were again told to wait. Finally, at 5 pm, we were called in to meet the Officer. He took Sumit's statement, and as we were about to leave, he stated, "*Thamba, mi tya patrakarala bolavla ahe. Tyacha samaksha tumhi bola, mhanje itech matter sampel... Mala mahit ahe case maddhe kahi dam nahi, pan he patrakar kase astat mahit ahe na.*" (Wait, I have called the journalist. You speak to him, so that the matter will end here and now. I know this isn't a big matter, but we all know how these journalists are.)

And so finally, his uprighteous lordship arrived. With enthusiasm, the Police Officer ordered tea for all of us and courteously introduced the journalist to me. The journalist looked me up and down and launched into his long winded spiel. After he had finished, I showed him the documents of the Trust and obsequiously provided information on the HIV/AIDS TI project, emphasising the importance of having upright journalists like him on our side for the success of the project. Eventually, he got off his high horse, "*Theek ahe, pan amcha gavat asla kahi mi khapvun ghenar nahi*" (Ok, but I will not allow such things (sex work) here") and the matter concluded.



As Sumit and I stepped out and walked towards my bike, I saw the journalist leaving. Looking at his receding back, I thought, if he only knew what went on in his area...

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Sumit used in the chapter is a pseudonym.

  
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## THE AMRAVATI STING

Although the number of journalists, who display sensitivity in reporting LGBTIQ news, is increasing, it is but a drop in the ocean. Many media professionals and editors continue to be virulently homophobic and transphobic. For all their breast-beating about freedom of expression, their biases, prejudices and self-censorship resulting therein, is rampant. They, time and again, suppress Queer topics, denying our voice a space, in the hope that thereby they will vanquish our very being. And for a few media persons, journalism, under the garb of uprighteousness was simply a weapon to be used, as a threat or for scandal.

I remember the time Pradeep (Project Co-ordinator) called me to a site in PCMC, where my Peer had screwed up. During work hours, he had sat on a wall watching a few youths play cricket and taking a liking to one of them a bit too much, had approached him after the match and proposed him for a quickie. Yes, it was wrong of the Peer to do so, not knowing whether the person was from the community, it was doubly wrong to do so, during work hours. The youth had slapped him, got his friends together, confined him and had him call Pradeep, who had, in turn, called me. As I reached the site, Pradeep was trying to defuse matters.

I apologised for my Peer's misbehaviour and told them that I would take appropriate action. (I fired the Peer the moment we left the site.) We were about to leave when one of them piped up, "You know, I know you, I have heard of you...". "Yes" I eagerly replied, mistakenly hoping that my name would get me some sympathy. "You know I am a reporter. If I write about this tomorrow, your name will be dust... you understand that right?"

Wrong. Bad, bad move on his part. I was already in a foul mood. "You want to report this?" I rounded on him. Not expecting such a reaction, he mellowed a bit. "I am warning you, *leknicha joravar mi tuzhi vaat lau shakto*" (I can destroy you with my pen.) "Go ahead, I can't stop you. I am willing to face the consequences" I picked up the gauntlet.

As I left, he kept on hurling threats, mostly for the benefit of his audience. For a couple of days, we scanned newspapers for the bad news, but nope, not a word.

Later on, I would get a similar threat from a TV channel reporter. He brought his crew to cover the second or third Pride Walk. He insisted that I, the Secretary of the society, where the Trust office was located, allow him the use of the terrace of the building for his interviews. I refused as I could not do so without approval from the society board members.

The reporter, habituated to sycophantic behaviour of people always angling for media coverage, took affront at my refusal. He threatened that he would carry out a sting operation at our work sites; saying he knew the goings-on of my community. I gave the same answer; he was free to do what he wanted to do. I did not hear of any such sting operation from him.

It was in the backdrop of the threat by the journalist in the Peer episode, that, a few months later, I received the call from Vivek Raj Anand, "Can you please go to Amravati and lead a protest rally? A reporter from *Lokmat* newspaper has done a sting operation."

The details of the sting operation had been splashed in the newspaper, the first day carrying a front-page headline '*Samalingi Purush Sambandhancha Deshpatalivaril Adda*' (National level den of homosexual male relations.) The three-part sting operation report listed cruising sites in Amravati and photographs (e.g. a gay couple in the dark, bikes parked at a site etc.). The headings were, to say the least inflammatory.[1][2][3] Pavitra, the Project Manager of *Samarpan*, the NGO working in Amravati had approached HST for assistance.

HST had immediately written to *Lokmat's* Amravati office to seek dialogue on the issue, as the news was bound to severely affect the HIV/AIDS TI project in Amravati. There had been no response and the next day *Lokmat* had carried another part of the sting report.

I did a rough translation of the sting operation news in English, and it was widely circulated on social media by Pallav Patankar (Director HIV

program, HST.)

We decided that we would organise a protest on August 19, 2013, at *Lokmat's* Amravati office and hand over a protest letter to them; I was to lead the protest rally. The night before, my colleagues Parikshit, Amol, Mai a Transgender person and I took a private bus to Amravati, landing at the *Samarpan* Trust office early morning and freshened up. By then, Anand Chandrani (from *Sarathi* NGO, Nagpur) and Hemangi, Sowmya, Sonal from HST had arrived.

The news had reached Commissioner of Police (Amravati) Ajit Patil Sir, and that morning, Police Officer Deshmukh came to visit us. As the head of the delegation, I met him, and he put in a request. "The Commissioner has requested that instead of having the protest at *Lokmat* office, can you lead the protest participants to the CP office? A couple of representatives from your side can then meet the Commissioner. We are inviting the *Lokmat* journalist too, and the media can cover the story."

The Officer was polite; there was no threat or intimidation of any kind. I regarded it as a good sign that the Commissioner considered the issue necessary enough to intervene and arbitrate. I was willing, and so after speaking with Hemangi and addressing those present, we changed the destination and decided to head to the new venue.

And so, around forty LGBTIQ community members and allies, wearing black bands, carrying Rainbow Flags and protest placards silently marched to the Commissioner's office, the Police walking alongside and the media in tow. At the CP office, the participants waited outside as I, Hemangi, Soumya, Anand and Hemant Toksha (Trustee of *Samarpan*), Pavitra and a couple of other representatives of *Samarpan* went inside.

The CP's office was a huge room. We sat on the chairs lined in front of his massive desk along with *Lokmat's* journalist; the media personnel around us. CP Ajit Patil Sir was wearing black goggles (I think he mentioned a cataract surgery, I forget.) After introductions, he asked each side to present our views.

Our protest was on the following grounds:

- 1) the Journalist had presented news about a highly vulnerable population, insensitively and provocatively,
- 2) the mention that 'homosexual interactions are unnatural', 'influence of western culture' were completely inaccurate,
- 3) this kind of yellow journalism under the guise of public interest will increase the stigma of being Gay; it will increase incidences of violence and blackmail against the community; drive the community underground,
- 4) the news will adversely affect the HIV/AIDS TI Project run on behalf of MSACS and
- 5) reinforce the stereotype that all Gay men are sex workers.

The reporter countered that:

- 1) he had the freedom to express the truth,
- 2) he was not against Gays but against sex in public places, paid or unpaid and,
- 3) he had called the Manager of *Samarpan*, for a quote, but the cell phone was switched off. (Pavitra denied having switched off the cell phone.)

Technically the reporter was right, about telling the truth. Yes, there were sites where cruising happened: people met and went to isolated spots to have sex. It was the way he had presented it, that had caused untold damage.

As I presented my side, a heart-stopping statement made by a representative of *Samarpan*, complicated the issue further, "Where will we go to have sex? If not in open spaces and cruising spots?" The Commissioner, who had so far given us a patient hearing, glared at him, "*He kasa chalel? Mhanje koni kahi hi, kuthe hi karaicha ka?*" (How can we allow this? Should anybody be allowed to do anything in public places?) Shushing the representative, I tried to undo the damage, Hemangi supporting me.

Thankfully, CP Ajit Patil Sir played a very constructive role in the discussion and at the end, asked “So now that you have come all the way from Pune and Mumbai for this protest, what do you want?” I stated that the damage was already done and could not be undone, but 1) We would like to have our view printed in *Lokmat* tomorrow, including affirmative content on Gays, Lesbians and Transgenders and 2) The journalist should accept our protest letter.

The CP summarized the meeting stating that Gays have the right to be who they are. But they should understand that sex in public places, sex without consent and sex with minors are crimes. As long as the LGBT community works within the boundary of law, the police will support them. He also added that laws like Sec 377 IPC are being challenged. The world outlook towards this issue is also changing. *Samarpan* should actively work to spread awareness on these issues amongst the public.

Finally, he directed *Samarpan* to nominate a spokesperson to dialogue with journalists, arrange a workshop for media in Amravati on LGBTIQ issues and invite the journalist who had conducted the sting operation and other *Lokmat* staff to the workshop. He concluded by stating that he would send a Police representative for the media workshop to be planned by *Samarpan*.

The next day, *Lokmat* carried our view of the matter (not on page 1, but page 6.)[4] A couple of newspapers also reported the protest.[5][6]

Having a couple of hours before our bus departed for Pune, I called one of my ex-staff, who had given up his job and moved back to Amravati his hometown, to get directions to the Ambadevi Temple. Back in his hometown, the ex-staff member had gone back in the closet. As I told him the purpose of my visit, he expressed shock and surprise, pretending not to know about the sting operation that had publicly raged around him for days.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Pradeep used in the chapter is a pseudonym.

[1] *Samalingi Purush Sambandhancha Deshpatalivaril Adda* (National level den of homosexual male relations) By Ganesh Deshmukh. *Lokmat*. Nagpur. Front Page Headline. August 11, 2013.

Excerpt (Translation by Bindumadhav Khire. Site name has been intentionally left out by the translator)

The situation is horrible. You will feel the foundations crumbling under your feet. Amravati, the cultural centre of Vidarbha, has seven active commercial sites. One of the dens is famous among Gay people nationwide. For many days, the *Lokmat* team has roved through the Gay crowd and exposed it with proof, through the sting operation. That the city of Gods, also known as Indrapuri– Ambanagri has this Gay commercial sex racket on such a big scale is a worrying aspect for youths. It is also fearsome and dangerous.

Aren't you shocked? But this is the unfortunate and painful reality of our city. As the night descends, romantic interactions between homosexuals increase on XXX school ground. Looking at the hordes of people who gather here, you will wonder whether this is the same Amravati. XXX ground is a known national den for Gay relationships.

#### **Other large and small headings:**

*Chadte Ratra ani Purush hotat nirvastra* (As the night descends, men take off their clothes)

*HIV bachavapasun 'chocolate' hi!* (Chocolate (Condoms) for playing safe)

*Sarayit ani addicted!* (Professionals and Addicted)

[2] *Shalesamor sauda ani mage pranay* (Deal in front of school and sex at the back) By Ganesh Deshmukh. *Lokmat*. Nagpur. August 13, 2013.

Excerpt (Translation by Bindumadhav Khire.).

XXX school is the pride of Amravati! And right in front of this school which has shaped many eminent personalities, Gay men negotiate terms for sex at nighttime. Once the terms are settled, they enjoy intimacy with abandon, around three sides of the school, in pitch darkness.

[3] *Amravatit ankhi saha 'gay' adde.* (Six more 'Gay' dens in Amravati.) By Ganesh Deshmukh. *Lokmat*. Nagpur. August 14, 2013.

Excerpt (Translation by Bindumadhav Khire. Site names have been intentionally left out by the translator.)

In addition to the XXX ground, which has national fame, there are six more Gay dens. *Lokmat* has proof of the same.

Gay men take two precautions when deciding such spots. The place has to be extremely crowded or extremely quiet. In both of these cases, it is difficult for others to notice Gays. In overcrowded areas, it is easier for Gays to meet each other. In addition to XXX ground, there are six more sites- AAA, BBB, CCC, DDD, EEE ground and FFF which are active. These sites are usually in crowded or quiet areas.

[4] – *Tar kuthe bhetave amhi, 'Gay' cha saval.* (Then where should we meet? Gays ask) *Lokmat*. Hello Amravati. Page 6. August 20, 2013.

#### **Other Heading:**

*'Gay' nna udhbhavalaya adchani. Khulasa: 'Sting operation' nantar 'Gayn'cha nivedan.* (Gays face issues. Clarification: After sting operation, Gays present their viewpoint)

[5] *Amravati Navbharat Plus.* (Hindi) August 20, 2013.

[6] *Vrutta Kesri.* August 20, 2013.







## DEVIDAS

“It’s over”, I said to Mom amidst tears. “Such things never last”, my Mom tersely replied and left my bedroom. No sympathy there. Although Mom accepted my sexuality, she was very uncomfortable seeing me with a male lover. Not that he had ever slept overnight in my bedroom; in fact, I had got him over only once for dinner before it was all over, barely lasting a couple of months.

The breakup hit me hard because it was my first love with a Gay man, though, to date, I do not know whether he reciprocated my feelings. On the wrong side of forty, I was quite desperate to be with someone and had fallen head over heels with the youth who was working in my NGO. Yes, extremely unprofessional of me. I had gone to the extent of financially helping him set up a shop which I trashed in anger after the breakup. Knowing my uncontrollable fury, I can take some credit that I did not touch him in anger, ever.

The next few months were a nightmare. My depression and pain drove me crazy with grief, wondering where I had gone wrong. I became the lovelorn Gay teetotaller *Devdas* (a famous character from the Indian film of the same name in which a jilted lover becomes a drunkard and wallows in self-pity. There have been multiple films devoted to the theme.) During those days, it was my staff members at the Trust- Tinesh and Sachin who took care of me. I would call them at any time, meet them and cry my heart out (very unprofessional of me.) I guess they pitied me, an older man making a fool of himself for a youth. They had known all along that this was a dead-end street; I was, as is generally the case in such matters, the last one to figure it out.

Unable to bear the pain, I approached Dr Bhooshan Shukla. He took one look at my hunched posture and could see what I was going through. Sitting in front of him, crying like a baby felt good but was not enough, I had to go on medications. I knew that despite the side effects, the sooner I started the medicines, the better, as they would take their own sweet time to take effect, but till they began blunting

my emotions, two-three weeks down the road, it was hell. I started seeking S&M partners who could inflict pain on me. On one occasion, I remember that I nearly got laid without a condom wishing that I got HIV and died of it; at the last moment, better sense had prevailed. One part of my mind wondered why I was doing this to myself, and the other wondered why should not I? Pleasuring myself for relief from the stress was of no use, the result was anaesthetic orgasms.

It was a few months before I got out of it. The progress was slow. I wonder whether my staff lost their respect for me; I guess so, at least to some degree. Well, it could have been worse. And the experience did make me stronger. As I struggled to come to terms with the loss, I surmised that I was a success when I was into activism and the world's biggest loser when seeking love. So it made sense for me, to focus on one, where I was ahead of the game and let go of the other (the reader is welcome to disagree with my decision.) Since then, I have never sought out a relationship. No, I can't say I am happier for that, but I can definitely say that due to the absence of cupid's complications, I can focus on my work without distraction.

Lastly, it gave me an invaluable insight into my clients' feelings when they sat desolately crying in front of me in befriending sessions. On a couple of occasions during these befriending sessions, I caught myself getting transported to that unbearable longing and pain of being in love. The long, languorous drives in the rains, at night, on my bike, him snuggling close to me, his hands clasping my waist, to the warmth of his room and his welcoming arms. Been there, done that, done in.





## THE TOP

It was during my vulnerable moments that I had met the youth. Being a well-known Gay activist had made it difficult for me to find sexual partners; after my painful breakup, I became wary of meeting someone, lest I get emotionally involved. But at least the physical, if not the emotional needs, had to be satiated once in a while. My hunger for a male touch increasingly gnawed at me. My language had taken a turn for the worse, becoming increasingly lewd. I had once thought that a few tops might consider me a conquest worth boasting to other colleagues, but that was not so, probably my age did not make it worth it. So staring hungrily at beautiful men in public and pleasuring myself in privacy had become the only means to address my physical needs.

I had briefly been on *Planet Romeo* (PR), but the meat market was so full of chicanery, that it was a complete turnoff. Later *Grindr* and *Blued* arrived on the scene, but by then I had given up, leaving it up to random chance to hook up with someone. Knowing that, as I aged, it would be impossible to find love and only a slight chance of finding a casual (and sexually compatible) partner, I had grown used to the fact that when it came to the pleasures of the night, I was a loser.

I had been told so, in quite a few befriending sessions, I had with my clients. "Sir, I don't want to be like you, all alone and old... you know what I mean". I was never quite sure whether the emphasis was on 'alone' or 'old', but I suspect it was 'alone' and the 'you know what I mean' was crystal clear- sexual starvation.

I could not disagree with them, though they did not realise a fundamental difference. Considering my 'Lone Rider' situation, I was reasonably content. In contrast, they felt getting and holding on to a boyfriend, the only achievement worth living for; which meant that they ignored everything else, their education, their hobbies, career, support structures, the lot. The failure to cultivate and nurture these support structures, inevitably led to their decay and the more these disintegrated around them, the more obsessively they clutched at the

dream of finding the greatest of all loves. Having nothing to attract a partner, they sought everything in him. So, despite being a loser in my personal life, there was no doubt that I was far better off than many.

So, here I was, talking to the youth, aware of a premonition of what lay ahead, but untouched for a long, long time, I was desperate and refused to heed the warning signs, hoping against hope that, for once, the vain boasts of the youth would turn out to be true. As I pulled him close, I realised disappointingly that this would be another disastrous encounter with a bottom pretending to be a top.

As I made a move for foreplay, a wave of frustration welled in me, that despite a surfeit of men around, very few knew how to make love. I suspect quite a few had not accepted their sexuality, their desires. They did not want any foreplay; they were not comfortable being nude in the presence of another man; they did not understand the importance of communication in sexual encounters. In the beginning, they all seemed excited to be with a man, but once they found him, all they wanted to do was to reach climax, almost as if wanting to get over with the act as soon as possible.

As he lay limp, arousing him had been a painful task, which did not do my ego any good; my mind was desperately busy finding a reason to finish this off quickly and leave. Finally, as I took out a condom for him to put on, I realised that he was not confident of putting on a condom. Has he been having sex with others without a condom? I watched with alarm.

Mercifully, he finished off in less than a minute. As I turned over, I saw that he had already put on his underwear and was zipping up his pants. As with many others, he was insensitive to whether I had come, which I had not, and as I tried to pull him close, he, embarrassed at my move, said, "I am done. What's the point in being naked now?" Without a word, I got up and dressed.

On the drive home, a feeling of dissatisfaction and irritation gnawed at me. My defeatist thoughts that maybe I was better off pleasuring myself, than finding partners who were clueless about pleasure were interrupted only once, on the ride home, when I snapped at a biker

who had stopped next to me, at a traffic signal, too close for my comfort.



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## INTERVENTION

I was back again at another HST conference. In those days, HST organised many of its conferences at Royal Garden Hotel in Juhu; the beach, on the other side of the road behind a few buildings, beckoning in the evenings.

In the second half, one of the sessions had participants divided into groups, and we discussed what preparations we should do to bolster the Sec 377 IPC case in the Supreme Court. Each group had about half a dozen participants, and they discussed and wrote their ideas on drawing sheets with marker pens. One of the ideas that came up from our group was approaching LGBT friendly Psychiatrists to intervene in the Supreme Court on our behalf; I felt that it was very doable. In the end, each group presented our ideas to all the participants. Sadly nothing further came of the exercise.

But, sometime later, in March 2011, I received a call from, I think, Adv. Arvind Narrain with the idea of filing a Psychiatrists' Intervention in the Supreme Court. *Alternative Law Forum* (Bengaluru) along with other individual lawyers, were spearheading this initiative. They were going to act fast and Adv. Siddharth Narrain of *Alternative Law Forum* was coordinating with a Supreme Court Lawyer Adv. Jawahar Raja. Siddharth was going to send me the draft of the Affidavit for the Intervention, and he would be my point contact. I eagerly took the initiative of canvassing Psychiatrists from Pune.

With a letter giving the background of the case and inquiring about their interest in becoming part of the Intervention, I decided to use my personal contacts, to reach out to Psychiatrists. The schedule was too hectic, as I had to find out days/times of hospitals/clinics where each Psychiatrist worked and try to call and meet him/her during that time. Time was running out, and I was able to reach out to only twelve to fifteen Psychiatrists in Pune. During these visits, a few Doctors being busy did not have time to discuss the issue with me, so I ended up just handing over the letter to them.

Of those I approached, Dr Raman Khosla, Dr Bhooshan Shukla,

Dr Kaustubh Joag, Dr Arvind Panchanadikar, Dr Devendra Shirole and Dr Soumitra Pathare agreed on the spot. The only query a couple of them had, was whether they would be required to depose in the Supreme Court. I said, no, and that was that. Later, Dr Soumitra Pathare also played a very crucial role in drafting the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 which included section 18(2) which dealt with non-discrimination (on the basis of gender, sex, sexual orientation) in accessing mental healthcare and treatment; this was before the Supreme Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC in 2018.

As for the rest, had I pursued the matter further, I might have gotten a few more, but I did not have time. Siddharth emailed me a softcopy of the draft of the Affidavit. I forwarded it to those who had agreed, for their perusal. Dr Arvind Panchanadikar jokingly said that he did not much understand the legal gobbledegook and he would trust me with the contents.

Siddharth then provided me with instructions on the colour of the paper, the colour of ink for signatures, etc. I then printed Affidavits and *Vakalatnamas* and carried them to each Psychiatrist, for them to read and sign two sets of each, lest one set got lost in transit, and couriered them to New Delhi.

I was thrilled with our work, and just as I was breathing a sigh of relief, came an urgent call from Siddharth. Since we had done a rush job in collating the documents, the instruction to notarise them had not been relayed to me. Siddharth couriered the papers back to me. Could I urgently get the documents notarised? And send them back with an overnight courier? The documents needed to reach Delhi within the next 72 hours.

It helped that I had another set. I immediately contacted each of the Psychiatrists and profusely apologised for this oversight. They were not impressed by this lapse, but thankfully they were patient.

Since the next day was April 14, 2011 (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Birth Anniversary) a holiday, I had difficulty finding a lawyer who would assist me in getting the documents notarised. In the end, I found one; he was a devout Muslim (he was just ending his *Namaz* as I

landed at his place) and I wondered whether he would agree to undertake a task which opposed Sec 377 IPC. He went through a copy, did not comment on it, and agreed to help notarise the documents; provided I paid a fee of ₹300.00 per copy.

By then, I was in panic mode and did not have the patience or the time or options to negotiate. I agreed and one by one, the Psychiatrists came to the lawyer's office, and then, off they went to the Notary. I would wait for the next Psychiatrist at the lawyer's office, lest they arrived while the notarisation work was in process for the previous one. Some of the Psychiatrists notarised the documents on that day, and I sent one overnight courier with the first lot of documents. I couriered the remaining ones over the next couple of days. Dr Pathare said that he would get his document notarised from someone he knew and that saved time as he stayed in Nigdi about twenty-two km from where I was getting the notary work done.

An unexpected problem cropped up when I saw Dr Devendra Shirole waiting for me at the pre-appointed place. I told him to hop on my bike so that I could take him to the lawyer. But because of a hip problem, he could not sit on a bike or walk to the lawyer's place. So he kept standing and waiting as I went around looking for an auto-rickshaw. To my distress and amazement, it took about twenty minutes of me frantically driving around on my bike, before I found one and finally the last the documents were notarised and couriered.[1][2]

During this hectic period, I was approached by Siddharth for canvassing parents for filing an Intervention of *Parents of LGBT*, which turned out to be an easy matter. I spoke to my Mom about it, and without batting an eyelid, she agreed. While I was in the process of receiving drafts of the documents for her signature, I approached other parents of Gays I knew, from Pune, to inquire whether they would be willing. In the end, from Pune, only my mother became part of that Intervention.[3]

In this entire bustle, I had forgotten to ask Siddharth a crucial question, “Who is looking into canvassing Psychiatrists in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra for this Intervention?” In retrospect,



that was a big mistake, because, in Maharashtra, to the best of my knowledge, outside of Pune, no Psychiatrists were approached. So, from Maharashtra, only six LGBT friendly Psychiatrists filed the Intervention in the Supreme Court, all of them from Pune.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Thirteen Psychiatrists from India became party to the intervention (6 of them from Pune.).

[2] Sadly, on December 01, 2013, Dr Devendra Shirole passed away. After inquiring around, I was able to get in touch with his wife. I obtained a copy of his death certificate and sent it to New Delhi for submission to the Supreme Court.

[3] Seventeen parents of LGBT from India became party to the intervention (1 of them from Pune).

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## JUDGMENT DAY

At the end of that sad, tragic day, I was dog-tired of putting up a brave front when talking to journalists and TV channel hosts; answering the same set of questions over and over. I was sitting at the final interview of the day looking at Madam host, thinking that the channel hosts spent too much time focusing on how they looked than what they said. Was it their vanity? Or the commercial realisation that in the end, the product sells only by its cover?

“Just give me a minute, *na*” she finally acknowledged me as the makeup artist dabbed her face with tissue paper. The looks of the makeup artist, an emancipated dishevelled youth, did not inspire any confidence that you were in able hands. I was sweating it out in a small studio in Pune as the harsh lights of a Marathi channel blazed around me. Taking out a small towel, from my rucksack, I dabbed my brow. The technical staff was loitering around, waiting for madam to spruce up. Madam was a good looking, well-endowed woman of mid-twenties who had grown up knowing that men automatically eyed her in a certain way. Today, I found it irrationally offensive that she felt the need to deck up when reporting the catastrophe of the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court judgment of 2013.[1] But then for her, it was business as usual and as I was to realise wryly, sloppy as usual too.

Finally, the technician, a reedy youth, came to me to attach a collar mike to my shirt. He knew I fancied men and his wary approach and posture gave away his discomfort in securing the mike. How many times had I faced this discomfort? I sighed, told him “Let me give it a try”, took the mike and inserted the wire from under my shirt and pulled it up to my shirt collar. Relief flooded his face, as he, maintaining a studious distance, perfunctorily changed the angle of the mike at my collar and backtracked.

At long last, having pressed her lips to a tissue paper smearing it with dark red lipstick, madam was done. She slowly got up and adjusting her dress, walked to her chair and daintily took the position. A genuinely concerned “How am I looking?” was directed at the

cameraman. His response evoked summons to the makeup artist, and more fuss followed. Finally, satisfied she turned to me, “So what exactly is Sec 377 IPC?”

I could barely contain my fury and instinctively knew the interview would be a disaster. And so it turned out to be. Even after explaining the section in detail and underlining the fact that it applied to both Straight and Gay people she kept on using the term, 'this Gay sex ban'.

I tried to correct her twice, but the goddess didn't want to be corrected; even if it was with the right knowledge. The first time I tried to do so politely, she ignored me completely and continued to pursue her pet theme, “Don't you feel that with issues like corruption and unemployment on the rise, Gay sex should not be your priority?”

The second time I corrected her, she shot back triumphantly, “Whatever the technical nitty-gritty, you have lost, haven't you?” Distraught, I blankly stared at her. She turned to the camera, summed up our discussion gleefully stating “...not only our religions and culture but even our legal system does not approve of Gay sex” and without a “Thank you for talking to us” note she wrapped it up.

Wearily I took the mike off my collar, got up, picked up my rucksack which seemed to weigh a ton and without a word walked out. Outside, as I put on my helmet and straddled my bike, I felt all my strength ebbing away from me. I just sat there, like a crumpled sack, under the single flickering light, the rest of the alley dark, staring blindly at the shadows of passers-by. At long last, I kick-started my bike and headed home desiring nothing but the darkness under the blanket where I desperately hoped against hope to close my eyes and be enveloped by the black void.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] In The Supreme Court of India

Civil Appeal No. 10972 of 2013 (Arising out of SLP(C) No. 15436 of 2009.)

Suresh Kumar Kaushal and Anr v/s Naz Foundation (India) and Ors.

Judgment pronounced on December 11, 2013, by Hon'ble Justices G. S. Singhvi and Sudhansu Jyoti Mukhopadhaya.



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## PROTEST

At short notice, we had formally applied to *Deccan* Police Station, for permission for a 10 am to 5 pm sit-in protest on December 15, 2013, outside Sambhaji Garden, against the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court Judgment of 2013.

We mentioned in the application that it would be a silent protest. I was rightfully worried that some of our easily excitable community members might get carried away and use language in contempt of Court. We would be wearing black bands and have placards and banners.[1][2][3][4][5] We would also be gathering signatures in support of a petition, addressed to the Prime Minister and the President of India, protesting the judgment and calling for a change in Sec 377 IPC through Parliament.

The Police accepted the application, but I did not get a formal letter of permission. I fretted, asking whether at the last moment we would be turned away from the venue. The Police assured me that that would not be the case. Hoping for the best, we started preparations.

My Straight, Gay and Transgender staff, wearing black bands of protest and carrying protest placards, sat on the footpath adjoining the Bal Gandharva Police *Chowki*, but the Police soon asked us to move across the road to the other side.



Protest against the Supreme Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC.  
December 15, 2013.

From the left: Souvik, Abhishek and Bindumadhav Khire

We collected only two hundred and forty three signatures and the journalists expecting a massive protest against the judgment were utterly disappointed. For me, this was hardly surprising; true to form, the community had quickly gone back into the closet. But despite the low turnout, a few moments of the protest fondly linger with me:

- The Diversity and Inclusion lead from a corporate attending the protest, disappointment written all over her face,
- Dr Ramesh Avasthi (co-founder of MASUM) patiently standing in the line to sign the letter of protest,
- A couple of closeted Gays and Transgenders, handkerchieves/scarves covering their faces sitting nearby to support us, but keeping a distance,
- Lacchi (our ex-Trustee) jabbering away loudly with someone at a distance for all to hear during the silent protest,
- And lastly, something I will never forget: a grandfather, walking his four or five-year-old grandson, casually approached me, quietly signed the petition and then pointedly looking at me in the eye, nodded in kinship and walked away. I kept staring at their backs, and suddenly it did not matter that the turnout was so low, it was all worth it.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] LGBT community to hold silent protest on Sunday. *The Times of India*. Pune. December 14, 2013.

[2] *Sarvochha nyayalayata dakhla karnar punarvichar yachika*. (Review petition to be filed in Supreme Court.) *Lokmat*. Page 2. December 16, 2013.

[3] '*Samapathik' chi muk nirdarshane*. (Silent protest by *Samapathik*.) *Samna*. Pune. Page 2. December 16, 2013.

[4] *Samapathik sanghatanecha shaharat mukamorchha*. (Samapathik Trust organises a silent march.) *Prabhat*. Page 5. December 16, 2013. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: It was a silent protest sit-in and not a

march.)

[5] Photos in: *Maharashtra Times*, Pune, Page 4, December 16, 2013; *The Indian Express*, Pune Newline, Page 6, December 16, 2013; *Pune Mirror*, Page 9, December 16, 2013.



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## EPILOGUE

It had been years after the setback of the Supreme Court Judgment on Sec 377 IPC, and I had still not come to terms with it. We relied on the Hon'ble Supreme Court as our saviour, and it had severely let us down. A Curative Petition had been filed, but I did not have much hope. With the conservative BJP government firmly in the saddle, there was not a ray of hope in sight, either on the judicial front or from the parliamentary front.

The impact of the Judgment was catastrophic: many out LGBT community members went back in the closet, a lot less number of Gay men came out, and the number of cases of blackmail and discrimination rose dramatically. Many corporates, cowardly at the best of times, became wary of working on LGBTI inclusion at the workplace. The start of the essential battles for affirmative rights like Marriage, a comprehensive Anti-discriminatory law for LGBTI had become a mirage. It had become increasingly difficult to give hope to the youngsters who had pinned their hopes on the ruling, their entire future now a question mark with a stroke of a pen.

On the personal front, I was aware of my poor mental health and wondered how long I would be able to carry on. Whether it be befriending, or running the helpline, I was past burnout stage, and as Vivek Raj Anand joked with me without humour, our burnout had also burned out.

And so, as it always happens to me during these vulnerable moments, my ancient enemy had crept upon me, stealing me of my well-deserved rest and sleep. I got into the habit of getting up at 2 am and lying wide awake for hours; my mind purposelessly flitting from one theme to the other.

Over some time, my pessimism worsened. While I took care not to pass on this defeatist attitude when I conducted awareness sessions or dialogues, there was no doubt that the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court Judgment of 2013 had sapped my strength. I continued to work like a robot and suddenly at times, an unimaginable rage would well up in



me, wanting to destroy everything in sight, leaving the world in smouldering ruins.

I knew I would have to deal with this my way- empty my mind of daemons by punishing my body through treks so that when I came home, I would sense only the ache and pains in my body as it struggled to replenish itself over the next few days. And then, for a few weeks, my enemy would patiently lie in wait, generously granting time to my body to gain strength so that the cat and mouse game could again begin in earnest.

This time the punishment was *Pandavgad* fort, built by Shilahar King Bhoj II, near the town of Wai. It was not a popular destination for trekkers, and a private entity owned the top part. I attempted a trek there about twelve-thirteen years ago but had given up halfway because I had underestimated the time needed to go from Pune to Wai and to reach the base of the fort to start the climb.

So it was noon, in the sweltering heat when I started climbing from the base village of Menavli and less than halfway on, I had realised that not only was the destination nowhere in sight, the route ahead was lost in the dry grass. Even assuming that I did not get lost, by mistakenly taking a *dhor wat* (animal track), there was no way I could reach the top and climb down before nightfall. I tried to sit on a rock for a while, but I could feel its searing heat through my jeans. Drinking from the fast depleting stock of water from the water bottle, I had wearily started my climb down—lousy planning.

This time, staying overnight at Wai after a session, I took a different route. Early next morning, going to the base village of Gundewadi, I inquired with a woman who was carrying a pitcher of water on her head, parked my bike at the village and started on the steep zig-zag climb, behind the village, just after sunrise.

The trek was easy but as usual, health-wise I was in terrible shape and soon I was drawing strenuous breaths, struggling to maintain balance on the scree. I lost my way once, but realising it quickly enough, I reached the first plateau feeling the heat even in the early morning. Going ahead, I again lost my way, and by the time I had backtracked the heat had drained me of all my energy.

My mouth was dry. I was rationing my water as I was unsure whether there would be any potable water at the top. Tired, I rested my hands on my hips and looked ahead and upwards, seeing yet another steep climb along a zig-zag path carved in the rocks. As I started walking towards it, dry twigs cracking under my shoes, a sharp pain stopped me short as I realised that a thorn had gone right through the sole of my shoe. Sitting down, I took off my shoe and sock, pulled out the thorn and to make doubly sure checked my instep; it had a small puncture and a bit of blood, but no broken bit of thorn in it.

I got up after putting on my socks and shoes; stepping away from the path, I unzipped myself. With difficulty, I found my organ which had shrivelled to the size of a cashew, my body urgently needing blood elsewhere, and as the concentrated yellow urine burning my urethra spurted at the base of a gnarled tree, I felt a cool breeze play with me.

Alone in the wilderness, I unbuckled myself, pulling down my jeans and underwear around my ankles, letting the cool breeze caress my loins. Closing my eyes, I stood there, relaxed and naked, long after the last few drops had dribbled on the dry twigs.

As I stood there, I felt strangely aroused. I fantasised this giant fort violating me, spanking me, taking me, humiliating me, taking me, slapping me, taking me, hurting me, wearing me down slowly and surely, grinding me into the ground. Repeatedly. And, all the while, a part of me kept watching this perverse fantasy, repelled, yet mesmerised; fearful, yet enjoying it. And simultaneously feeling the heavy, dull ache that I deserved all of it: the indignity of it all and the stripping of my soul in public, at will, by anyone and everyone, just as I had felt in adolescence when I first realised who I was, as the Hon'ble Supreme Court Judges sat imperviously inside the dilapidated bastion of the fort, their ink pens scratching tinnily as they wrote their learned Judgment.

End Of Book II



**BOOK III**  
**SHADOWS AT DAWN**

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## PROLOGUE

*The two lived in Vhaval village just a few houses apart, in the same lane; all houses on that road, belonging to people of the same caste. They had studied in the same primary and secondary school, always sitting next to each other in the class. Each assisted the other in doing homework in case the other one could not attend school. They both were good at their studies; each in friendly competition with the other; each winning a few rounds and losing some. They ate lunch together, under the old banyan tree, next to the janitor's house, away from the rest of their friends. Between them, it was Anjali who had her period first, and it was Meena to whom she first confided, sobbing in fear and embarrassment. It had been Meena who had helped clean her up and reassure her. Their friends had eventually given up on them becoming part of their larger friend's circle and sometimes joked that the two should get married. Even the teachers joined in the joke.*

*After matriculation, they both decided to study Arts and enrolled for the 11<sup>th</sup> standard studies in a college in the far off town. Early morning, Meena would walk by Anjali's house and together they would head to the State Transport (ST) stop. Squeezing into the jam-packed ST, filled mostly with male students jabbering away, was a daily ordeal but they became habituated to it. The Punjabi dress uniform had helped make the journey easier; saris would have made it a nightmare. Meena, the mentor, made sure that the demure Anjali got onto the bus before she did, offering her a seat to sit in the rare instance when one was available.*

*In the first semester, a student in the class had fallen for Anjali, and when Meena was sick and recuperating at home, he had seized the opportunity by handing over a letter to Anjali; it was a thoughtfully and painstakingly written poem singing paeans to her beauty. Anjali had opened the letter and after reading just a few lines, without uttering a single word, in a rare spirit of rebellion torn up the letter and carefully dropped the bits in the ditch near the banyan tree which served as the school dustbin. Later on, on two separate occasions, the lovelorn boy had tried to make friends with Meena hoping that she would aid his*

herculean task. Both times she had curtly told him, that Anjali had no interest in him. The second time he had tried to broach the subject, the abrasive language Meena had used, had put him off for good. He would hate her all his life.

After 12<sup>th</sup> standard, both, against the wishes of their parents, wanted to study further. Finally, Meena's parents relented after she had, in protest, starved herself for two full days. Anjali had tried to do the same, but a light slap from her Mom had ended that rebellion.

Since then, a pall of gloom had descended upon their relationship. Meena had found college life listless. She could no longer focus on her studies. She failed in two subjects in the first BA term.

Anjali, along with her younger brother would go out in the fields to help her Mom, vacantly staring at a distance, searching for some sign of hope. Her uncle had started searching for a suitable groom.

Coming to know of the search, Meena's mother too goaded Meena's father into action. Meena insisted that she would marry after she completed her studies. Her mother countered that they would look for a groom who would allow her to continue to study even after marriage. Meena would come up with various ruses to avoid marriage and her mother would astutely address each one. Meena became despondent as the hunt for a suitable groom began in earnest.

One evening, a woeful Meena beseeched Anjali to run away with her. Anjali said nothing. She had, of late, almost given up speaking, resorting to monosyllabic responses. They had sat down in a small clearing, in the lush sugarcane field, which had lately become their little cocoon. Meena lying down, her head cradled in Anjali's lap, was crying her eyes out. Anjali did not console Meena. Not with a loving word or a soft caress. Instead, as the sobbing ebbed, she had gently lifted Meena's head, had got up and parted with the dull words, "I will get married".

After that, things had moved quickly. Within three months, Supari Phodi (an event similar to engagement) took place, for both of them, a week apart. Anjali's groom was a tempo driver from a village near Solapur; Meena's groom was a teacher from a village near Osmanabad. The dates of the marriages got finalised, and preparations began in earnest.

*By the time, relatives and neighbours started visiting the town to buy basta (gifts for relatives) the two had stopped seeing each other. Each put up a brave front, expending all their energies in the pretence of being happy. But Anjali's efforts failed miserably; her tense face gave away the stress she felt which was misread by her mother. Her mother anxiously asked her neighbour's daughter-in-law to talk to Anjali who took Anjali aside and reassured her, about how everything would turn out all right, she was not to worry about the nuptial night, and the groom would take care of everything.*

*Anjali got married on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June at Solapur. Meena did not attend Anjali's marriage.*

*Meena got married on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June at Osmanabad. Anjali did not attend Meena's marriage.*

*In October, Anjali and Meena came to visit their parents for a couple of days, to celebrate their first Diwali post marriage. They received a warm welcome, their unmarried friends eager to elicit information about married life from them. The men of the house had painted their dwellings and decorated them with marigold and mango leaf garlands. The Moms had cooked ample delicacies and snacks: laddoos, karanjis, shev and chivda; some to be parcelled for their daughters' in-laws.*

*Early the next morning, as hazy shadows took firm shape, the school janitor's wife opened the door of her dwelling and sensing an unfamiliar visual out of the corner of her eye, turned and froze. The sight of Anjali and Meena, hanging from the banyan tree, would forever be ingrained in her memory. The ends of their sari pallus tied together in a knot went unnoticed. The neighbours rushed them to the Civil Hospital in the Sarpanch's jeep, but it was too late.*

*As their parents, grooms and villagers mourned and wondered what had gone wrong, the village in collective grief, and on the advice of the devrushhi, passed a resolution that henceforth no one in the village would get married in the inauspicious month of June.*







## FLIGHT TO SQUARE ONE

New Delhi- the city of tombs and babus. It must have been around 2002 that I went to Delhi for the first time; I had gone with a HIV positive man who did not share my penchant for men, to get introduced to various funding agencies which provided funds for projects on sexual health. I had returned, my bag heavier by about five kilos, bulging with the freely available survey findings, project reports and training manuals printed on glossy paper which I had picked up from funding agencies. After returning to Pune, I studiously started to read each publication. I was dismayed to realise that many were filled with colour photos with fancy tag lines and jargon. I would later learn that this strategy was typical of funding agencies- an expensive camouflage hiding their colossal failures. I cursorily leafed through them and retaining just a couple of them, consigned the rest to garbage.

During that first visit, having a day to myself (the other person had gone for some personal work), I took a tour of Delhi. A spunky young guide accompanied the tourists; he energetically started the tour by giving a history of Delhi. Eventually, he indicated Humayun's tomb from the bus (for some reason, it was closed that day); it did not seem to impress tourists. It was *Raj Ghat*, Mahatma Gandhi's place of cremation that got them excited; where they posed in front of the platform, their hands daintily touching the black marble in reverence, their faces turned delightfully towards the camera. As we passed by the airport where Sanjay Gandhi's fateful flight ended his ambition and life, we heard the details of the tragedy from the guide told inaccurately with ghoulish glee. And on. And on. That he could find any kind of pleasure at his job was to his credit. His glee climaxed at *Kutub Minar*; a 12th-century tower built by Moghuls. Where in 1981, more than three dozen tourists, many of them schoolchildren had died in a stampede on its stairs, after a power failure, resulting in the entrance to the tower getting sealed and locked up for good.

All in all, Delhi reminded me of tragedies and everything that was

wrong with India. As I again flew towards it, at night, after the mind-numbing setback of the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court Judgment of 2013, the view through the plane window aptly reflected my morbid outlook. Small islands of towns and villages looking like so many accidents scattered about, their lights like shattered yellow glass gleaming on intermittently connected highways in the night. The lights on the wing, on the left-side, pulsated as I stared down looking at the chaos below.

Eventually, the plane got enveloped in the clouds, and as the seatbelt sign came on, the plane started to bump and shake, making me feel as if I was sitting in a giant toy plane, so light and so fragile. My morbid mind was conjuring doomsday scenarios. Is this how it was all going to end? We hit a particularly deep trough, and I felt my heart in my throat as I gripped my armrest tightly. Will it end in a long scream of terror as we all plunged into that abhorred blackness?

After about ten minutes or so, the plane slowly steadied, and just as I again turned towards the window to dispassionately see the glittering accidents far below, the drone of the aircraft changed in pitch signalling the start of a long descent to the Delhi domestic airport.

The Delhi air had steadily got worse, it had nowhere been as polluted as I was experiencing now, and as I stepped outside the airport, I felt slightly nauseous inhaling the slow poison. In the taxi, I kept the windows shut, but that did not stop my eyes from smarting. The air was smoggy, and I felt as if I was travelling through a very noisy, tear-gassed riot-hit area. I got out a handkerchief and buried my face in it, but that did not help much.

Fortunately, the hotel where I had a reservation was a lovely place, elegant and quiet. I was half expecting to find someone who had arrived for the 'What Next?' kind of conference in the lounge, but there was no one.

Entering the room, I checked it and stripping, blissfully got under the shower. With my daily habit of showering in cold water, the rare occasion of showering in hot water was bliss. As I towelled myself, I

saw the mirror sadly reflecting a sagging potbelly and a few white pubic hairs of a mid-forties male. I quickly turned away, dismayed at what I saw.



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## PANIC STATION

“Hello Sir, we are all waiting for you”, the Co-ordinator of CYDA was on the line, impatience in his voice. For a second, my mind could not fathom the context of the call, and suddenly, in horror, it dawned on me, I was supposed to be at their office to conduct a session on LGBTIQ. Ashamed, I replied, “I will be there in twenty minutes, my apologies for the delay”. It would be almost forty minutes before I reached their office for the session.

Earlier that morning, while I had showered and soaped myself, I had detected a nodule inside my right scrotal sac. Suddenly alert, I examined it. It was painless, yet hard at the touch, almost like a small marble. How come I had not noticed it before? Like all men, I was extremely touchy about health issues related to my manhood. The more I thought, the more I fretted. Was it cancer? The mere thought sent me into a panic, and I decided to pay a visit to a specialist. Well aware that he would advise a Sonography, I decided to do one, before approaching him. As I waited for the Sonologist to come in, who was late by an hour, my mind was busy, mentally diagnosing the nodule, and coming up, repeatedly, with the worst prognosis possible. It was then that the Co-ordinator's call had come in; I had forgotten my day's schedule entirely.

It was the second time in twelve years that I was late for a session; the first time was while travelling from Pune to Kharghar (Navi Mumbai) for a session (I was one of the trainers at gender and sexuality workshops for female participants from various districts of Maharashtra, enrolled by *Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal* (MAVIM).) The State Transport bus had failed near *Panvel* and, post breakfast, two of my colleagues had kept the participants engaged until I arrived, about half an hour late.

In the evening, I showed the Sonography report to a specialist. He suspected it to be tubercular and suggested a biopsy. Since he was associated with a hospital, I asked him to book an appointment and casually enquired about the charges. In a daze, I heard the amount,

nodded and walked out. As I reached my bike, I stopped dead. ₹25,000.00 for a biopsy was extortion. Realising I was not in a good frame of mind, I went home and tried to relax. After I calmed down a bit, I called up the hospital and cancelled the appointment and called Dr Satish Puntambekar, a General Surgeon, I knew and asked him for an appointment.

I met him a couple of days later and till then, sissy me, spent the next two days, imagining the nodule growing and, every few hours, I would anxiously touch it and press it to detect changes. The surgeon examined me and advised me to do a test (I cannot remember the name) which involved an embarrassing business of lugging a plastic can to my office to collect my urine for twenty four hours and then send it for analysis.[1]

The test turned out to be negative. He advised me that since the Epididymis was grossly thickened, and especially since the condition seemed to be existing for a long time, it made practical sense to do an Epididymectomy. It would be best to remove the nodule and send it for biopsy (happily, the report ruled out TB related growth) rather than doing a biopsy first and then doing another surgery for its excision. Before the surgery, he asked me to do a series of tests, including HIV.

The hospital scheduled my operation in two days. My parents were too old to take care of me, and so I called Tinesh and Parikshit for support, and they agreed to look after me in shifts. I got myself admitted the night before the surgery and Tinesh came early the next morning.

The surgeon came in the morning to check that I had shaved my scrotum as advised and satisfied with the result, asked me to go to the operation theatre. It was the first time I was to undergo surgery under general anaesthesia, and I dreaded that I might not wake up again. As the anaesthesia did its work, I faded away and woke up after the surgery, feeling bright and bushy-tailed but thirsty and desperately in need of a pee. I got up, and as Tinesh tried to assist me, I confidently waved him away. I peeked at the site, all I could see was a cotton and gauze dressing with a small drain attached to it. As Tinesh stood at the

door of the washroom, I took a long pee and taking a couple of steady, confident steps back towards the bed, I abruptly and majestically fell consciousness, throwing Tinesh in a tizzy who hollered for a nurse and they together carried me to bed.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Curiously, when I requested Dr Satish Puntambekar to verify the content I had written, he could not remember asking me to do this twenty four hour urine collection test. Did I do this test at the advice of some other Doctor? I cannot remember.

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## CIAO TI!

“Sir, we have cancelled the health camp and have reached the office.” The Project Coordinator called from the Trusts' PCMC office. It was barely 8.00 pm, and just as I wondered what could be the reason, he continued “.... the community is threatening us that unless we pay them ₹200.00 per person to get tested for HIV, they will not allow us to organise a health camp there”. So, sometime in 2014-2015, we stopped organising a health camp at that site.

By March 2012, when *Pathfinder International* handed TI Projects to MSACS, and my Trust took over the TIs from HST, the dynamics on the ground was evolving rapidly, and soon the TI projects became a painful, thankless job, with no emotional satisfaction whatsoever.

During the past years, some of the MSM & TG community members had slowly but surely got pampered to being provided services at their doorsteps; be it condoms or health camps or being accompanied to ART centres. They had not only become lazy and uncaring, but had started, as in this case, demanding payment to avail our services, knowing full well, that the project's performance and hence the jobs of the staff depended on their getting tested for HIV- a classic case of the cart drawing the horse.

Finding staff for posts of Peer Educator and ORW had become increasingly difficult. With many of the Peers doing *mangti* or sex work or both, they were no longer interested in the pittance paid as honorarium and travel. The ORWs too, understandably, refused to work the full eight hours on the meagre honorarium and travel. As long as they achieved testing targets from the population registered years ago, I could not complain either.

The ORW & Peer complacency ensured that no new Hot-Spots got identified, nor new contacts from the community got cultivated. With various Apps becoming popular, the MSM & TG communities were swiftly migrating to the digital world, which afforded them anonymity and an illusion of safety.

Numbers at cruising sites were decreasing. It was partly due to the migration of the communities to digital platforms and partially because the old-style urinals were demolished by the Municipal authorities and replaced with new ones which had a supervisor on the lookout. We were registering fewer new community members and losing the old ones to the digital world.

With access to knowledge a click away on a website, the way the new generation community members looked at HIV/AIDS and STIs was changing too. I have lost the number of times Gay youths called me with a dialogue that went as follows-

“I have got Gonorrhoea.”

“How do you know you have Gonorrhoea?”

“I read the symptoms on the Internet, and they match with what I have got”.

They became smart enough to go on the Internet to find out the type of STI they were infected with but continued to remain dumb and obstinate when it came to using condoms. With Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) available, I started getting calls from Gay youths which went, “Sir, it's just one hour since I have bare-backed (anal sex without a condom.) Now I want a PEP. From where should I get it?” How should I respond? Should I be happy that they had the wherewithal to call me or be upset that they had barebacked in the first place?

On the Gay parties' front, with the use of alcohol and drugs on the rise the increased risk of acquiring HIV, STIs was bound to follow. I read FB posts by community members, ironically at times, by those very party organisers who were part of the problem, voicing concern over rising alcohol use and their solution was to organise support group meetings to address this problem. I was finding it difficult to resist the impulse to reply to the posts, stating that, maybe they should organise alcohol parties as fundraisers for working on the problem of increasing alcohol addiction amongst the Queer community.

The dinosaur TI Projects continued to function in the old style, and



the repeated highlighting of the need to change the TI project dynamics accordingly, to the powers-that-be, had fallen on deaf ears. NACO/MSACS continued to operate in the same old fashioned way, unaware or unwilling to adapt to the rapidly changing scenario.

As if all this was not enough, even after years of NACO experience in planning the HIV/AIDS intervention programme- condom shortages, HIV testing kit shortages, ART drug shortages kept on occurring, intermittently.

And lastly, we had to bear the brunt of a weird logic, which went something as follows: If we did not detect HIV positivity or very low HIV positivity in our registered population, it was assumed that HIV was under control.

If we came up with high HIV positivity, it was considered our failure and attributed to poor delivery of services. Failure to register a HIV positive person at an ART centre, because of the refusal of the person to register for ART, became our failure. If a HIV positive person, dropped out, after registering for ART, the 'Lost to Follow Up' (LFU) ensured that we got a call from the ICTC Counsellor, asking us why the person we had referred had not shown up for ART. This was considered our failure too.

With this approach, do you really expect corrupt, dishonest and lazy NGOs (and there are many of them), which worked with MSM & TGs, female sex workers, migrants etc., to find HIV positivity amongst the target population? If in future, the TI Project budgets are reduced citing low positivity, who should be blamed?

Once in a while, I would call Nitin (Trustee of *Samapathik* Trust) to complain about the TI Projects, and he would lend a shoulder to cry on, always patient and supportive. At times, I would call Vivek Raj Anand and have a bitch chat, each of us lending a sympathetic ear to the other, each experiencing the similar 'same here' feeling, though on a different scale- Vivek was handling a vast empire.

To add to my worries, my foster son Tinesh, who was the Manager of *Pehchan* Project and who had in the meantime become a Trustee of *Samapathik* Trust, expressed his desire to move on as the Trust could

no longer provide him opportunities to grow. After consulting me, he applied for the post of Advocacy Officer at The *Humsafar* Trust, got selected and resigned in October 2014. For his send-off, my team and I visited *Sonori Fort (Malhargad.)* He then, shifted to Mumbai, leaving his boyfriend Abhishek, in Pune, pining for him (Abhishek later moved to Mumbai.)

It was in this backdrop: the community transitioning from the real closet to a virtual one, the poorly paid staff at the mercy of the community and the government's less than satisfactory track record that the funding crisis occurred.

Before April 2012, we were accustomed to *Pathfinder International's* style of functioning: timely receipt of grant instalments and timely reporting from us. For the entire duration of the project from 2007-2008 till 2012, there has been a delay of two weeks or so, in receiving, just one of our grant instalment.

Working with the government was an entirely different ballgame altogether; a delay of a month or two, in payment of the instalment, was no delay at all. The delays meant that on occasions, I had no other choice but to break my personal Fixed Deposits (no, I did not charge any interest) so that I could pay the staff salaries on time.

A week before the end of the month, the Project Manager and Accountant of each project had to have a meeting to chalk out the approximate amount needed to take care of expenses, honorarium and travel. Based on their assessment, I had to juggle between funds available in the project accounts and my personal funds to take care of administration and staff expenses. Since some of the staff was from out-station, they needed to be paid on time, so that they could pay for their boarding and lodging, bus pass and send a few hundred rupees (if any remained) to their parents whenever possible.

In 2015, information filtered in from multiple sources that MSACS did not know whether the projects would continue and when (and whether) they would be able to pay the dues.

The MSACS Project Supervisor, District AIDS Prevention and Control Unit-Pune (DAPCU-Pune) Supervisor organised a meeting with NGO

officials, Project Directors, Project Co-ordinators of TIs in Pune, at *Aundh Chest* Hospital. The meeting turned out to be of no use; they were as clueless as any of us and had not a single answer to our pertinent questions.

The critical issue was, we did not mind if it took a couple more months to get paid, but we needed assurance from the government that the projects would continue and the staff would get paid for work already done and currently being carried out. No such assurance was forthcoming.

The next day, I held a meeting with my team and laid out the scenario for them. I had already given personal funds for payment of staff salaries to tide over the shortfall, but I did not know how long I would be able to do this. Paying even half the honorarium and travel to the staff was proving to be a hardship.

There were two key issues: if the government did not pay the dues, I would suffer heavily financially. Secondly, I was liable to pay my staff every additional day they worked. It would not be ethical to tell them that *Samapathik* Trust would not pay them for work done, because the government had terminated the projects.

I was in emotional turmoil. On the one hand, I had an outstanding and experienced staff that I did not want to let go. I had developed a good rapport with them. We had established good referral linkages, and our setup was more or less stable. On the other hand, I could hardly assure my staff payment security, knowing that I had no assurance from the government. Someone from the staff suggested that I make a call for community donations to sustain the TI projects; I had a good laugh out of it; even in this crisis, my staff had retained a good sense of humour.

On July 5, 2015, I wrote an email to Shri N. S. Kang (Additional Secretary to NACO, Department of Health and Family Welfare, New Delhi) on this issue, but received no reply. I spoke to my trustees, Nitin Karani and Tinesh Chopade. They knew it was challenging to take a call, but they trusted me and gave me full freedom to take any decision I felt was appropriate. I gave the whole scenario a good

thought, and all in all, it was with mixed feelings that I took the call to surrender the TI projects.

I organised a meeting with my senior staff; my sombre face gave away my decision; I put all the staff on notice. I unnecessarily kept on stressing that I would pay all that was due. As my team filed out of the room, in pin-drop silence, we all knew, it was not the dues that had them worried.

A family was breaking up. Everyone kept hoping till the end, futilely as it turned out, that there would be a last-minute miracle that would avert the crisis, and we would be back to being 'family'. At the end of September 2015, we surrendered our Pune and PCMC TI projects to MSACS.[1] There were a few well-wishers who had advised me to wait, but I have absolutely no regrets of taking the decision. It ended up opening other horizons for me.

The issue of shortage of funds for TI projects was already making the rounds of newspapers [2][3][4], and as I announced the surrender of my Trusts' projects, newspapers got to know of it, and one carried the headline that 'I was shutting shop'[5]. Some community members ecstatic at the news spread it like wildfire and even now years later, I still run into an odd one, who after my introduction, says, "*Pan mi aikla ki tumchi saunstha kadhich banda zhali?*" (But I heard that your NGO shut down long ago<sup>₹</sup>) My face takes on a pious, patient look and shaking my head politely, I say, "No, it's very much functional" and move on, muttering *sotto voce*, "Don't you wish, you bitch".



Tinesh' Sendoff- Tinesh and me at *Sonori* fort

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] We received dues from MSACS a couple of months after we surrendered our TI projects. Those NGOs who had not surrendered their projects eventually got their next instalments, and their projects continued as usual.

[2] *AIDS niyantran adakle nidhit.* (AIDS Control stuck due to lack of funds.) *Lokmat.* Hello Pune. Page 1. July 7, 2015.

[3] Centre gets tight-fisted, mission takes a blow. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express.* Pune Newline. Page 1. July 7, 2015.

[4] HIV project in city getting into deep freeze as funds from Delhi dries up. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express.* Pune Newline. Page 1. September 3, 2015.

[5] City's top LGBT activist to shut shop, after Centre pulls the plug on funds. By Anurag Bende. *Pune Times Mirror.* Page 1. July 4, 2015.

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## A TRAVESTY OF JUSTICE

The reporter wanted me to give a byte on a story I did not know. Somehow journalists assumed that I knew everything that was going on about the LGBTIQA community at the local and the national level. That would have been great, but the truth was far from it.

In my initial years of work, I was loath to comment on a story I had not thoroughly understood. I eventually realised that if I did not take the opportunity to give my say at that moment, I might lose the chance to talk about it forever. So I had to reluctantly learn the art of responding to news narrated to me by the reporter without having any time to understand the details or probing the accuracy of the story.

In such cases, I tried to keep my bytes as general as possible without relying too much on the minute details as I had no way of knowing the truth. I remember, a howler of a debate on a Marathi news channel, in which I had participated, on the controversy of the 'female' Beed constable desiring to be re-inducted as a male. All the participants, including me, remained clueless till the end on the gender and biological sex of the concerned party (the medical reports were not public.)

As the reporter narrated the story to me, it dawned on me, that I never imagined we would face such a scenario and I was reminded of a divisive statement by a couple of Transgender activists, made in the euphoria of the NASLA judgment.

In 2014, Hon'ble Justices K. S. Radhakrishnan and A. K. Sikri penned the watershed NALSA Judgment, giving legal rebirth to the Transgender community. A Transgender person's right to self-identified gender with no strings attached either of hormone therapy or surgery, reservations for Transgenders for admissions in educational institutions and for public appointments, were some of the highlights of the judgment, and it had brought about a paradigm shift. Although a stellar Judgment, it lacked in one crucial aspect; it provided no pointers on the sexual and reproductive rights of Transgender persons[1].

We celebrated the NALSA Judgment at *Pune Sarvajanic Sabha*, with a *Jalsa* (a celebration of singing and dancing by Hijras.)[2] Soon after, I came across a couple of Transgender activists who said, “*Hum ko sab mil gaya. Tum Gay logan ki abhi jarurat nahi hai.*” (We have got all we wanted, we no longer need you Gays), followed by “*Kya Gay*” (You Gay losers!) and a derisive laugh.

I knew that this was bound to happen someday; Lesbian and Bisexual women had differences with Gay men who had differences with Transwomen who had differences Transmen who had differences with... but I had assumed that the breakup would happen after winning the battle with the common enemy- Sec 377 IPC. Once that happened, I was sure that the fissures between the communities would widen to become unbridgeable divides. But, I did not imagine, it would start to happen so soon, so crudely. I would respond with a laugh, “*377 jaistovar tari dam dhara*” (At least be patient till we get rid of Sec 377 IPC.) Pat would come the response, “No. Now (*post the NALSA judgment*) Sec 377 IPC does not apply to us” which stung me no end.

As I heard the horrifying story from the reporter, it was this harsh statement that kept on playing in my mind. It was a big issue not only for the victim concerned but also the entire Transgender community. A Transgender person from Pune, aged 19 years, had been forcibly sodomised by four men. They were apprehended by the police and charged under Sec 377 IPC along with other sections. The defence counsel had argued that since the plaintiff identified as Third-gender, is neither male nor female. The defence counsel further claimed that Sec 377 IPC stated: *Whoever has intercourse with a man, woman or animal against the order of nature...*; hence his client is wrongly charged under Sec 377 IPC as it did not cover Third-gender persons and succeeded on technical grounds. The ramifications of such a colossal lacuna were mind-boggling. [3][4]

Later on, my mind in turmoil, I requested the reporter to give me the contact number of the Public Prosecutor (PP) and tried calling her; the call went unanswered. Deciding to meet the PP directly, I went to the court to the PP's office, but she was unavailable.

During the coming days, I got caught up in other work but later on as the workload slackened, I called Adv. Anand Grover of *Lawyers Collective* and sought his advice. He was willing to help if the victim was ready to approach the Supreme Court. Since I did not know the victim, I again contacted the reporter. She got in touch with the victim but, the victim was so disillusioned and demoralised that she refused.

As days went by, the unfairness of it all kept gnawing at me. I decided to file a complaint with the Hon'ble Supreme Court. I drafted a letter giving a brief background of *Samapathik* Trust, the present case and the plea that there was a dire need to change all the relevant laws of the country, especially IPC, CrPC and Evidence Act to prevent a repeat of such injustice. I photocopied the newspaper article of the incident and attached it with the letter and couriered it to the Registrar, Supreme Court and received an SMS, confirming the complaint had been lodged with the number 36547/2017.

As in such matters, all I could do was wait, since there was no way to know when the Hon'ble Supreme Court would consider my complaint. A month or so later, I received an email stating that since my complaint does not fit the PIL guidelines, it has been closed without action. I was back to square one. Frustrated, I blocked the case out of my mind for a while.

A long time later, in a whim, I shot off a courier to the ministry of Legal Affairs on the issue, hoping against hope that it would elicit a response. Nope.



Celebration of the NALSA Judgment by *Samapathik* Trust



### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] In The Supreme Court of India

National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v/s Union of India

Writ Petition (Civil) No. 400 of 2012

With

Writ Petition (Civil) No. 604 of 2013

Judgment pronounced on April 15, 2014, by Hon'ble justices K. S. Radhakrishnan and A. K. Sikri.

Para 18. ... A Division Bench of this Court in Suresh Kumar Koushal and another v. Naz Foundation and others [(2014) 1 SCC 1] has already spoken on the constitutionality of Section 377 IPC and, hence, we express no opinion on it since we are in these cases concerned with an altogether different issue pertaining to the constitutional and other legal rights of the transgender community and their gender identity and sexual orientation.

[2] Transgenders celebrate 'freedom', 'third gender' status. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 2. May 1, 2014.

[3] Transgender raped by four men, three nabbed. Anupriya Chatterjee. *Pune Mirror*. June 22, 2017.

<https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/pune/crime/transgender-woman-raped-by-four-men-three-nabbed/articleshow/59259927.cms>

[4] Loops in third gender law aid 4 rapists get bail. Anupriya Chatterjee. *Pune Mirror*. August 8, 2017.

<https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/pune/civic/loopholes-in-third-gender-law-aid-4-rapists-to-get-bail/articleshow/59960595.cms>





## CHAKRAVYUHA (LABYRINTH)

“Can I pass your number on to the *Tahsildar*? She is working on reaching out to female sex workers, Transgenders and PLHIV for their enrolment in *Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Anudan Yojana*.” It was Tejaswi (mentor of *Saheli Sangha*) on the line. Eager to liaison with the State Government on the issue, I readily agreed.

The struggle for securing identification documents and benefits for the Transgender community had been an on-going one, even before the NALSA Judgment. In 2013, the Maharashtra Government's Ministry of Family and Child Welfare had a Chapter (No. 24) on Transgenders in their draft *Mahila Dhoran 2013* (policy document for Women.) It stated that Transgender community members should have right of health, education, voting, right to run for election, inheritance, marriage, parenthood and adoption rights and listed a slew of welfare measures for them.[1]

I had some issues with the wordings and clauses and so sent in my suggestions. On May 10, 2013, I was amongst a dozen others invited to the *Sahyadri State Guest House* (Walkeshwar, Mumbai) to present our objections and suggestions to Hon'ble Minister of Family and Child Welfare, Varsha Gaikwad Mam. She and her team gave a fair hearing to all participants.

Soon after our meeting, to aid this work, we carried out a pilot ‘Socio-economic study of Transgenders’. It was undertaken by MSM & TG community members, whom we had trained to administer the questionnaire.

A total of one hundred and three Transgenders from the Hijra, Jogta and Aradi communities were interviewed at two fairs (*Mandhardevi* near *Bhor* and *Kasegaon* near *Pandharpur*.) We collated the data and sent a report to the ministry.[2][3][4]

All of this was in vain. Soon after, the Indian National Congress (INC) lost power in Maharashtra, and the policy document and our report got consigned to annals of history.

The demand for a pension for Transgender community members had been around for a long time. On Nov 18, 2013, Santi, a Transgender team member of *Samapathik* Trust, spoke about it at *Pension Melava*; a gathering organised in Market Yard (Pune) for the demand of pension for members of the unorganised sector. Dr Baba Adhav chaired the event.[5]

In December 2017, a drive was launched in Pune to enlist Transgender community members in the *Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Anudan Yojana*- a welfare scheme of ₹600.00 per month for the underprivileged categories: people with disability, widows, PLHIVs etc.[6][7] The scheme was an initiative of the Maharashtra State Government. One of the beneficiaries listed were Transgenders. It was in the context of this drive that Tejaswi had contacted me.

What follows, is a classic case of what happens when a government botches up a scheme for the welfare of a community; for want of proper homework and lack of inter-departmental coordination. The narrative is necessarily longwinded as it describes in detail why we spent so much time, energy and resources and have very little to show for it. It does not matter which party is in power or which Transgender activist is in vogue; the issues remain more or less the same at any given time.

Archana Yadav Mam, the *Tahsildar* looking after *Sanjay Gandhi Niradha Anudan Yojana* contacted me, and we along with JPSPD NGO, jointly decided to organise a meeting of Hijras and, Jogtas at my office. The *Tahsildar* and *Naib-Tahsildar* (Officer appointed to assist a *Tahsildar*) Vilas Bhanuse were very supportive and enthusiastic in implementing the scheme. We invited them as guest speakers.[8][9]

Since many of the Hijras who did *mangti* as a means of livelihood were notorious latecomers, Milind (who after we surrendered our TI projects had joined JPSPD), intentionally informed the potential participants that the meeting was to start one hour early. In all, 16 participants turned up, all of them 'on time'. The meeting went off well, but then that was as always the easiest part. Wary of working with government schemes, I decided to do a pilot run with just one Transgender person, Simmi, to understand the practical problems. It

turned out to be a wise move.

The first hurdle was that the scheme required the Transgender person to have stayed in Pune or anywhere in Maharashtra for at least fifteen years and needed proof of the same (e.g. electricity meter bill in their name.) Simmi had it, but I knew many who did not.

Many stayed in huts/shanties in slums or insalubrious neighbourhoods, where the owner signed no rental agreement, and all transactions were in cash. Many had left home a long time ago, did not have Maharashtra school-leaving certificate, which meant that few Transgenders would be able to avail of the scheme.

The second hurdle was that, their annual source of income had to be less than ₹21,000.00 per annum, which came to ₹1750.00 per month.) Considering that no Transgender person could survive on that amount, even in a small town, and most earned much more than that, by doing *mangti*, this was going to be a tricky issue. Still, after talking to *Naib-Tahsildar*, he clarified- the *mangti* would not be considered as part of their earnings.

Since Simmi, in addition to *mangti*, did odd jobs where she earned a few hundred rupees a month, we decided to list that as her monthly income. But that was not enough; the *Talathi* (Village accountant) had to certify that she earned less than ₹21,000.00 per annum. And so, after asking around, we located the *Talathi* for her area. We gave a background of the scheme to the lady Officer. She was very co-operative, and surprisingly we got the certificate in less than an hour.

We made a digital Affidavit, mentioning Simmi's place of residence, with a declaration that she was not a recipient of any other pension scheme. Having done that, we had to take all these documents to the office located behind Shivaji Nagar Court. Arriving at the office, we purchased the relevant form, filled in all the details and stood in the line for hours to have the documents scrutinised, scanned and accepted. Before that could happen, lunch break occurred and we again waited for another hour for the counter to restart. After the lunch break, the counter remained closed. Upon enquiring, it turned out that the officials scrutinised and scanned the documents only

until lunchtime. We would have to come the next day.

The next day never came. Simmi, frustrated at having lost the days earnings did not show up. I went to the *Tahsildar's* office and told her the practical problems I was facing. She assured me that they were working on organising a camp where all the paperwork could be submitted and verified on the same day.

And so the *Tahsildar* organised a camp at NMP+ office in Pune, for female sex workers, PLHIVs and Transgenders. Around ten to twelve Transgender community members, who had contacted us and JPSDP for the scheme, filled their forms and got them submitted. We thought that was it, but it turned out that it was only the beginning.

A week or so after the camp, I received a call from *Tahsildar* office stating that now only one document remained. The Transgenders would have to submit a certificate from *Sassoon* Hospital (a State Government Hospital) that they were Transgenders. (Although the NALSA judgment had been pronounced, there was no Act, and its corresponding Rules, in place to procure a Transgender ID card.)

I met the Superintendent of *Sassoon* hospital; he was co-operative and stated that I should make groups of four Transgenders and bring one group each day.

After discussing this with JPSDP, I selected four Transgender persons based on their willingness and sexual diversity. I selected one who had underdeveloped genitals, two who had undergone GAS and one who had not undergone GAS and asked them to come to the *Sassoon* Hospital at 9.00 am the next day.

After getting the case papers, we trooped to the Superintendent's office. He signed it, listing the department names and numbers we were to visit. After visiting Gynaecology ward, the participants got their Sonographies done and then visited the Surgical ward, and finally around 5 pm, we we trooped to the Forensic Department, which was in the building where the post-mortems were done.

The Police Officer on guard directed me to the Forensic Department, warning me. "*Tyanna davi kade gheun jau naka. Tithe body phodtyat*"

(Do not to take the left turn, it leads to the area where the post-mortems are carried out and not a sight that Transgenders would be able to bear.) Knowing my group too well, I almost smiled at the naïve statement and headed to the department office.

Associate Professor of Forensic Medicine Dr Abhijit B. was sitting discussing some notes with a medical student. He asked us to wait in the adjoining classroom having long wooden plank benches. After some time, he called me into his office.

I rushed through the routine in a hurry; I was getting late for an evening session I had to deliver and requested him to explain to me the final part of the process so that I could leave.

I received the following information about the Transgender person who had underdeveloped genitals. She had to undergo 'Karyotype' Test (a chromosomal test) before the doctor could suggest the next course of action.

Since the hospital did not have that facility, we would have to get it done in a private laboratory and bring the report to him. (Later on, on inquiry I found out that the test cost around ₹3000.00.) As far as the Transgender person who had not undergone GAS was concerned, she would have to visit the Psychiatry department and get assessed for Gender Identity.

The remaining two Transgenders who had undergone Castration and Penectomy got their certificates as 'Castrated Male'[10]. The doctor could not use the word 'Third Gender' or 'Transgender' as the government of Maharashtra had not issued any such directive stating that he could certify them as such. With no mention of 'Third Gender' or 'Transgender', the certificates were absolutely useless for enrolling in the scheme. And on that sorry note, the exhausting day ended.

The next day, I visited the Psychiatry Department and met the HOD. He suggested that a group of three to four Transgender persons would need to come and meet him/his colleagues every day for about three-four days for a couple of hours each day so they could conduct psychological tests. The Transgenders should, if possible, also bring a relative or a neighbour who had known them when they were young

so that they could get a better understanding of the Transgender's childhood traits. And in the end, the Doctor would issue a certificate of Gender Dysphoria, not 'Transgender' or 'Third Gender'.

With no State Government process in place for certifying a person as a Transgender and zero coordination between government departments, I was not able to procure the Transgender identity certificate for a single Transgender person. The welfare scheme remained on paper.

I thought that was the end of it.... well, not quite.

Sometime later, on a visit to *Faraskhana* Police Station, I saw a clipping of *Lokmat* newspaper pinned on their notice board. It stated that *District Legal Services Authority, Pune (DLSA)*, with the aid of *Faraskhana* Police, was making efforts to provide ID cards to Transgender community members in Budhwar Peth red-light area.

Seizing the opportunity, I visited Shivaji Nagar Court and met Hon'ble Magistrate Abhishek Bhagwat (Secretary of DLSA.) He was new to the post and was genuinely interested in the welfare of the Transgender community. Giving him a background of the scheme, I explained to him that our efforts so far, to get identification cards for Transgenders had failed. Still, if he could assist us in the matter, I would be able to enrol Transgender community members in the scheme. He asked me to submit a letter to him, and he took it upon himself to arrange a meeting with the Commissioner of Social Justice, and *Sassoon* Hospital. I remember his solemn statement, "Even if one Transgender person benefits from my work and gets enrolled in the welfare scheme, I would consider all the efforts worthwhile". My hopes soared.

But not for long. The next, I heard of the matter was that a Transgender person from Pune had sent a legal notice to DLSA and *Faraskhana* Police Station that what they were planning to do was against the fundamental rights of Transgenders.[11] And so, I reached another dead end.

I need to stress here that I knew the NALSA Judgment very well and the underlying theme of the right to self-determination. It meant that

there should have been no need for a medical examination and medical certificate from the State Government Hospital. But in Maharashtra, the schemes for Transgender persons were totally useless as there was no framework to get Transgender identification, which was mandatory for securing benefits for them. Had the State Government done its homework and had quickly formed some legal framework after the NALSA Judgment, we would not have spent so much time in looking for a workaround.

During this period, I heard that the Transgender Welfare Board of Maharashtra had been formed but later on heard nothing about it. What was its scope? Were they planning to issue identification cards to Transgenders? I had no idea.

In 2019, with the formation of the new coalition government of Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress, I read the news that they would create the Maharashtra Transgender Welfare Board within twenty-one days. But what happened to the old one? Was it dissolved? Did it cease to exist after the change of government? I have no idea. Finally, in June 2020, the Board of 14 members was formed, sadly with no representation of Transmen or Intersex persons in it.[12] So much for inclusion!

In a parallel development, The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (2019) was passed by both houses of Parliament and received the Presidential assent on December 5, 2019. The draft of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules (2020) with some severe lacune was released for review during COVID-19 lockdown providing procedures and formats for obtaining a Certificate of identity and Identity card from the District Magistrate (DM).

The interested party was to apply for Transgender Certificate and Identity card to the District Magistrate. The issue was, the application had to be accompanied with a report from the Psychologist from a State Government hospital which violated the guiding principle of the NALSA Judgment- a Transgender person's right of self-identification of gender. Happily, the finalised Rules issued in the Indian Gazette in September 2020 dispensed with the requirement of a report from the



Psychologist. The application was to be accompanied by an Affidavit of self-declaration as a Transgender person by the applicant, and that the applicant was currently residing in the jurisdiction of the DM to whom the application was being made.[13]



Transgender Santi speaking at *Pension Melava*. Nov 18, 2013.  
Chairperson Dr Baba Adhav sitting in the center.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

To protect the identity of the individual, the name Simmi used in the chapter is a pseudonym.

[1] Some of the measures were- a pink coloured ration card, scholarship in school education, 0% interest loans for higher education, a pension from the age of 40 years, the formation of State level Transgender Welfare Board, etc.

[2] First socio-economic survey of transgenders begins. By Paratha Sarathi Biswas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 6. January 4, 2014.

[3] HIV test not a norm yet with transgenders: Study. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 1. March 28, 2014.

[4] Some of the findings of the survey:

- 10% had no identification documents.
- 13% of the participants had been forced to have anal sex at least once.
- 30.5% had anal sex without a condom at least once with at least one man in the past 6 months.
- 22% of the respondents knew of an organization that worked for them. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: Only 22%. So much for NGO/CBOs outreach work.)

[5] *Ladhyat maran ale tari maghar nahi.* (Will not retreat even in face of death). *Lokmat.* Hello Pune. Nov 19, 2013. Page 3.

[6] *Samajik Nyay va vishesh sahayya vibhagh* (State of Maharashtra) documents:

- visyo-2010/prk.kra.175/visyo-2, dated October 26, 2010 and
- visyo-2010/prk.kra.127/visyo-2, dated October 31, 2011

[7] The scheme of *Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Anudan Yojana* was till the age of 65 years. From then on, the beneficiaries would continue to get ₹600.00 per month through the *Indira Gandhi National Pension Scheme* (₹400.00 per month thru *Shravanbal State Pension Scheme* of the State Government of Maharashtra and ₹200.00 per month thru the *Indira Gandhi National Pension Scheme* of the Central Government.)

[8] *Pension yojanesaathi trutyapanthiyancha melava* (Transgender persons meeting for the pension scheme.) *Lokmat.* Pune. Page 2. December 11, 2017.

[9] Special campaign on to enrol disempowered communities. (Sanjay Gandhi Pension Scheme) *The Indian Express.* Pune Newline. Page 3. December 12, 2017.

[10] The certificates are dated 05/01/2018, signed by Associate Professor of Forensic Medicine Dr. Abhijit B.

[11] Voices from transgender community get bolder and political, but struggle for social acceptance continues. *The Indian Express.* Pune.

By Anuradha Mascarenhas. March 9, 2019.

[12] Maharashtra Government Issues Resolution To Form Transgender Welfare Board. By Prachee Kulkarni. *Pune Mirror*. June 10, 2020.

[13] The Gazette of India. Extraordinary. Part II. Section 3. Sub-section (i). New Delhi. September 29, 2020. G.S.R. 592(E). Notification by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

  
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## PAIN AND LOSS

However much you may get trained on being objective, you cannot be, you are human after all, and the mewling on the phone suddenly transported me to another world. The other world was my young self. The same helplessness and despair, wondering what did I ever do to deserve this, lost, alone and reviled by this world. The crying went on for a long time, and as I patiently waited for it to subside, a lump rose in my throat, aware that I was reacting unprofessionally.

The heart-rending sobs went on for a long time. The Gay boy was a brilliant student studying in 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> standard, a topper in the class who was incessantly ragged and bullied by his classmates for being feminine in voice and manners. The ragging had been so extreme, that a couple of years ago, he had tried to die by suicide; he had survived, but this time it seemed he was tired and wanted to finish this once and for all.

His parents were not supportive; they wanted a rough-n-tough kid and having a sissy son had hurt their ego. I have no clue how he got my number; he was calling from a state in South India. He spoke English well, and it took me a better part of an hour of listening and talking to him, to get him to a stage where I felt reasonably assured that, he would not do anything rash. I had to find someone, in his city urgently: someone he could talk to, in person. Till then, I had told him that, he was to call me at any time day or night if he felt the urge to end it all.

After the call ended, I sat emotionally drained. How many times do I have to burn out so that I would reach a stage of not feeling anything at all? It took a while for me to calm down, and then, I called up a couple of Psychiatrists. Fortunately, Dr Kaustubh Joag personally knew a Counsellor from a non-LGBTIQA NGO working in that city and seizing upon the urgency, he spoke to the Counsellor and then gave me her number.

I called her, gave her a brief background and informed her that the caller was a minor. I was very happy that she agreed to see the boy

without the guardian's consent. Did she do the right thing? There could be different views, but I think she did the right thing. During all this, in anguish, the boy called me a couple of times; I was the only support he had. Finally, at my behest, he went and met the Counsellor, and she then invited his parents to meet her. Did it all work out, in the end, for the boy? I do not know. I sincerely hope so.

When the callers have suicidal ideation, 'not knowing the outcome' state can be extremely stressful, especially so, if it's the first time you are handling such a call. For me, the first time I had got such a call was, many many years ago, from a youth who spoke in Marathi and was from Maharashtra.

After talking to a person, if I gauge that the risk of his dying by suicide is high then, if the person is from Pune, alone or living with an unsupportive family- (a) I ask him to go to his friend's place or (b) I get his close friend's number from him and call his friend and ask the friend to rush to the caller's location or (c) I ask him to come to my Trust office immediately or (d) I take him to a Psychiatrist/Hospital.

But this caller was not from Pune. He had not provided details of his town/village, and from our interaction, I inferred that he had travelled some distance from his home and was intending to jump (From a hill or Into a lake I can't remember.) My body tense, all my senses alert, I spoke to him for an hour or so knowing he was just a step away from that fatal jump and... abruptly the call got cut off.

Did he terminate the call? Was there a network problem? Did his battery discharge? Was his talk time over? I was on tenterhooks and wondered whether to call him back. But that was strictly not the policy and other than going about my work (he had called me during non-helpline hours) I could do nothing.

But a few minutes later, he called again, and relief flooded me. That he, again, sought a helping hand to guide him away from his decision implied that his impulse to end it all was slightly under control. We started speaking again, but suddenly while I was speaking he abruptly said "Theek ahe" (Ok) and terminated the call. He did not call back. I

spent a few sleepless nights and miserable days agonising. Did he jump? Did I say something that made him break off the call? If he did jump, was I responsible for his death? Despite all my training, it was hell to face the fact that, I held someone's life in my hand and a small change in the pitch of my voice could end it all.

As I stood in front of the audience of volunteers of *Connecting* NGO (Pune) (a suicide prevention helpline), I was aware that quite a few had been through similar experiences time and again. The NGO had invited me to discuss issues related to LGBTIQA, pertinent in handling suicide ideation calls from the community. Vikramsinh Pawar who had, in the past, worked on our *Pehchan* Project as Data Administrator and was now a Co-ordinator at *Connecting* NGO had taken the initiative to arrange my session for their volunteers.

The critical difference between *Connecting* NGO helpline and my helpline was, they provided the service of listening, whereas I had the mandate to assist the client actively. It could be frustrating either way. Volunteers at *Connecting* NGO might well want to do a more active intervention, but policy forbade them to do so. For me, the mandate to actively intervene became frustrating in cases where the client was from out-station, and I had no support systems or networks to assist the caller.

The number of cities and towns which have LGBTIQA NGOs/groups is few; the number of LGBTIQA NGOs/groups whose quality is worth referring a client to even fewer. I learned this the hard way, over the years, by hearing ugly feedback from callers referred by me to distant LGBTIQA NGOs/groups whose work turned out to be just hot air. To make matters worse, very few cities and towns have LGBTIQA sensitive Psychiatrists and Psychiatric social workers, if at all.

In such cases, all I can hope when a call comes, whether related to suicide ideation or otherwise, is to keep the call going and try to befriend the caller while earnestly struggling to understand the experience sharing by the caller in their local accent, perhaps a mix of Bhojpuri and Hindi or Rajasthani and Hindi. At the same time I try to make sense of the query so that I can respond in a language and terms

they understand— all the while bitterly aware, that the quality of the call is getting shot to hell in the translation.



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## SAGE ADVICE

“Would they continue to blackmail us?” the caller asked anxiously. It was not the first time I had heard such a query. A victim of extortion generally faced a double whammy; coming to terms with the first instance of extortion, and secondly spending sleepless nights worrying whether the extortionist would get greedy.

In this case, the caller and his friend had been fooling around in their car. Two Policemen on their rounds had accosted them and had demanded ₹15,000.00 not to file a case. Panicked, the youths had gone to the ATM, withdrawn the money and handed it over. The Policemen had made one write a 'confession' note and sign it, admitting to what they had done. They then warned the youths that if they were to complain to the Police, they would get arrested based on the confession and left, taking the note with them.

I told the caller that we could seek the assistance of the Social Security Cell or Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) Pune cell. I had attended a couple of meetings of NGOs with the ACB cell in Pune, chaired by SP Shirish Sardeshpande Sir. I was sure that the Police would take action.

But like most callers, he did not want to approach the Police. It seemed that he was able to deal with the loss of money. His concerns were a) whether the 'confession' was legally admissible and b) would the Policemen, in future, extort them based on that confession

I had replied in detail, summarising that:

a) no, legal proceedings had not been initiated and the 'confession' did not follow the due process laid down in CrPC (Criminal Procedure Code, 1952.) and-

b) yes, there was a possibility that the blackmailers could become greedy, but I was seriously doubtful whether they would be back. If they did show up, he always had the option of approaching me, so that we could take it up with the Police.

I have not heard from him again, so I assume that was the end of the



matter.

While most victims were unwilling to approach the Police, some were ready, but with 'closeted' strings attached. A typical call went – “I met him on ----- App. He called me to a place where three others were waiting for me. They beat and robbed me. I am a closeted, married man and I want the NGO to file the complaint with the Police on my behalf”. The request is generally followed by the demand that the NGO provide a guarantee that his relatives, neighbours, friends or colleagues would not be questioned and his name would not appear in the press.”

My standard reply was: “The NGO is not the affected party. You have to come forward to file the complaint and sorry, the NGO cannot give such a guarantee.”

Then there are calls where the caller wants the NGO to act as a recovery agent. A typical call goes- “I loved him, I gave him ₹25,000.00 when he was destitute, and now that I am badly in need of money, he refuses to return it. If you recover the money, I will give you 10%.”

No, thank you very much.

Some calls are a variation of the above theme: in which the lover keeps demanding money; instalment after instalment; sometimes for college admission, sometimes for hostel fees, and lives a lavish lifestyle off the sucker (the sucker, sadly, without the suck, as all this communication, is only on phone or Facebook) and threatens to die by suicide if the demand is not met.

Panicking that the 'lover', would end his precious life, the closeted 'boyfriend' calls me. I take some time to calm down the caller and give him the sage advice that, well, the bad news is that, you can say goodbye to the money already spent. The good news is that a person who is addicted to a lavish lifestyle, especially at a sucker's expense, is the last person to say adios to it. Since suckers are born every minute, the leech would simply latch on to someone else...

...and then some call me, “Sir, my long-distance boyfriend, a foreigner from -----, has come to India to marry me. He called me just now. He

is currently held in custody by Customs officials at the airport and urgently wants me to transfer ₹25,000.00 to a bank account for his release. *Mi kai karu? Deu ka?* (What should I do? Should I pay?) I despair....

...and lastly (how could I forget), there are instances where, some of my vociferous LGBTIQA critics from Pune, when they receive a Police case, call my friends on the sly. "You see, I would have handled the case myself, but because..... I can't. Since you are friends with Bindu, can you please ask him to look into it?"

  
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## MOTHER HEN

“Sir, you remember me? I had attended your session at *Wai*” I paused, trying to remember. I had done a couple of sessions at *Wai*, so remembering someone with this meagre information was a challenge. “Sir, I spoke to you after the session during your walk...”, he went on hesitantly. Suddenly, I remembered, but could not visualise the face. “I have come out...”

I had met the young man a few years ago, at a youth workshop having around a hundred participants from various parts of India. The workshop was organised at *Wai*, where I spoke on LGBTIQA issues and rights. I reached the venue early in the afternoon for the evening session and dropping my bag off; I immediately proceeded to *Pustakache Gaav* (The village of books) at Bhilar (Mahabaleshwar), where one of my Straight young friends, worked. Various houses in the village had book racks which housed books of a particular subject. Signboards in the central lane of the village indicated book genre: 'Children', 'History' etc. 'Sex, Gender and Sexuality' was missing; so, after the visit, I wrote to them, (an email and a courier) with a request to start the section and my willingness to donate my books to them for the purpose. I continue to wait for their reply.

I came back to the venue late afternoon and went hill climbing with the youths. We got a nice view from the top and a large plateau littered with broken beer bottles, a parting gift of the revellers. I spent time with some of the participants, unconsciously taking on the role of a mentor, pointing out forts in the distance; *Pandavgad*, *Vairatgad* could be seen prominently and in the hazy distance, what I guessed as *Kamalgad*. It turned out that quite a few of them had never seen a hill-fort and even fewer had trekked to one.

Descending, we freshened up and gathered in a large auditorium for my session. The session was exceptionally well received by the participants. And since the organisers had graciously allowed me to stay overnight at their hostel, I was in no hurry to leave as was generally the case. Some youths approached me with their queries

and congratulated me on the session. With the group surrounding me, I tried to answer them as best I could and then stepped out and went for a walk, barely able to see in the dark, with massive, unidentifiable trees towering over me. The glow of a successful session had made me oblivious to the winter chill.

Walking alone, I suddenly became aware of youth following me. I stopped under a light, and he approached me shyly. His face registered a couple of tics of excitement as he stammeringly thanked me for the session; repeatedly, profusely. As he calmed down, he spoke about the takeaways of the session, and while he did not explicitly give away his sexuality, he dropped enough hints to indicate that he was Gay. Here was one more whose life I had touched at a very personal level and for the better. Such feedback always made me feel humble, and in this case, I could palpably feel his vulnerability. I could see he was overwhelmed, and my first instinct in such cases is unprofessional- to hug the person. But I refrained from becoming the mother hen; I so desired to be at times, well aware that such a touch could be misconstrued. (I distinctly remember a complaint of a Gay youth that, at times, I act just like his fussy Mom.)

I put on a professional tone, wished him success and reluctantly walked away before my tender instincts overwhelmed me. It was at times like these that I suddenly felt the deep desire welling in me to have a Gay son or rather dozens of Gay sons; to be a parent who completely accepted and supported them.

I was able to fulfil that role somewhat with Tinesh. Interestingly, although I considered myself to be a mother hen, he viewed me as his Dad; he could not imagine me in Mom's role.

Perhaps, because being a teacher/session conductor addresses my parental instincts to some extent, I find the role so fulfilling. Teaching may not elicit much respect or money or prestige, but it does at times, such as these, come with a sense of accomplishment and serenity, which is unmatched by anything else I do. That day, I was content and at peace with myself, aware of my loneliness and yet not morose due to it. Had it not been for the mosquitoes, I would have continued walking for a very long time. But the jungle mosquitoes savagely

quashed my intent, and within twenty minutes, I was back at the hostel room, hurriedly closing the door before one of those bloodsuckers got in.



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## TRAINING KNOW-ALLS

Training youths, to conduct Sex/Sexuality Education sessions was an absolutely essential but painful exercise. Learning everything and understanding nothing, they learned by rote (the bane of the Indian education system) but never once did they feel the need to use that information to re-evaluate their understanding and beliefs.

It became evident every time I sat in the class and as per my practice, asked one student at a time to do a pilot run. Other participants and I would play adolescents. Participants were encouraged to ask questions typical of adolescents desiring nothing but causing embarrassment to the teacher. Ideally, I should have been just the observer, but this was no ideal world; I had to become one of the participants as all participants would be in cahoots, none asking a single question, taking care to get each other's backs.

As the sessions progressed, I would realise that what I had discussed and what they had understood not the same. Their baggage of biases and insecurities accompanied the information they delivered. So when they talked about 'Masturbation' and I asked "How many times is it ok to do it? Once a day? Twice a day? Once a week? Twice a week?" they groped for an acceptable answer. "... ummm... we should not get carried away with it... we need to focus our thoughts elsewhere... ummm..." If I decided to be a naughty boy and lobbed the question, "Sir, Sir, do you masturbate?" 'Sir' froze like a deer caught in the headlights.

Training youths was one thing: training teachers of schools was a different ballgame altogether, a veritable nightmare. One of the worst sessions I have ever faced was during a Training of Trainers (TOT) workshop. I was invited by an NGO to do a session with teachers on how to conduct a session on HIV/AIDS and STI for students.

The session of forty-five minutes ended in thirty minutes. Within the first five minutes, it became clear that the teachers, both male and female, had a certain view about HIV/AIDS and STIs. And the view could be summed up in one line- "Instil the fear of DEATH into the

students, lest they even DREAM about having sex”.

This experience reminded me of the old booklets on HIV/AIDS which displayed diagrams of HIV with a skull at its centre and the old *Balbir Pasha* advertisements, banners mounted over bus stops (paraphrased)- “Balbir got AIDS. Where did he go wrong?”.

The first problem was, many of the participants were older than me, which meant that they were in no mood to get trained from someone younger. The second was, they were so habituated to 'telling' that they had long lost the habit of 'listening'. Thirdly, they implied from the beginning that if people get HIV, they deserved it. And lastly, they were here for the session because they had been ordered to do so. (I have no clue by whom.)

With such steadfast negativism, the session had degenerated into a heated argument and realising that unless I made a quick exit, I would blow my fuse and fire and brimstone would rain; I had abruptly terminated the session. I walked out, telling the NGO that these teachers were a bunch of losers. From then on, I never ever made the mistake of training teachers. However, I continued conducting sessions on Sex Education, HIV/AIDS, STIs for youths and NGO staff until 2015, after which I restricted myself to accepting invitations for LGBTIQA sessions only.

Before I close this chapter, I must share this enlightening experience. After a session on Sex Education, where I had shown a male and female condom to 10<sup>th</sup> standard students, a girl student had disarmingly mentioned the session to her mother; under the mistaken belief that since her mother was a Gynaecologist she would take it in her stride. The next day, the Doctor had righteously strode in the school, complaining, “How dare you teach....” To the credit of the school, they had politely listened to her, professionally reported the incident to me and had calmly gone about planning the next session.





## HIR! HUR!

As I stepped inside HST's large administration room, I could hear weird noises coming from the cabin in the far corner- Amma's cabin. The rest of the staff accustomed to Amma's quirks went about their usual business. Working at their desks, with one ear dutifully cocked in the direction of Amma's and Vivek's cabins: they were on the lookout for exciting gossip they might hear that they could then gleefully magnify, distort and share with relish.

Although Vivek was in his cabin, my curiosity propelled me to Amma's cabin where I could now hear the sounds distinctly, "Hir", "Hur", "Hir", "Hur" as he worked on his laptop. "Hi, Amma, sorry to interrupt your ummm, what should I call it?" Even as I greeted Amma, I could see the delight on his face as he happily invited me to sit in the lonely visitor's chair across the table. I parked my rucksack at the base of the table and sat down, leaning forward expectantly, and waited for him to elaborate. Amma kept aside his work on Facebook, which probably involved digitally goring a leftist and happily looked at me. With an eager, attentive audience like me, Amma was at his best.

Removing the profanity and allied references from his disquisition, which decency forbids me to repeat, what I gathered made me first, smile and then laugh. A few years ago, some Lesbians and feminists had organised a conference. At this point, I muttered, "That is all our community seems to be good at" at which Amma had given a short bark of a laugh and moved on.

Apparently, at the conference, a participant had presented a paper which suggested replacing of gender pronouns by combining them and making them gender-neutral, e.g. 'him' and 'her' with 'hir'. It elicited intellectual approval from the audience at which Amma had lost it. And today just as I was presenting myself, something had triggered off Amma's memory, and he was having fun as the funny side of it had again dawned on him.

I joined in the laughter. Hearing such ideas, in a country where even something as basic as Heterosexual Sex Education is vociferously



objected to, I responded, "Amma, I think this is the only bright spot in activism. They have no idea of ground reality but are always entertaining if nothing else!" [1] Amma wiped his face, "Oh baby, yes! Life would be so miserable without such...". And on that note, I ceased to exist for Amma; putting on his glasses he again became the ferocious hunter, engrossed in hunting Hindu-phobic posts on Facebook, singing under his breath, "Hir, Hur, Hir, Hur".

I excused myself and went to meet Vivek, hugged him and sat down. Vivek was as usual neck-deep in work. His brow furrowed, he was finishing off an urgent email, stress written large over his face. He had aged and looked tired; administering HST was no easy task. As he typed, he hollered, "*Baccha jara chai lana*" (Baby, get us some tea.) I turned to study the frames on the wall.

The issues of gender, labels, use of certain terms and lately perspective too will continue to fester forever and, once in a while during my sessions I encounter an enlightened soul, generally an academic/intellectual/social-media activist kind, who carps about the scope of my sessions, labels, the terms I use or perspective. So let me put across my views.

On Gender & Sexuality: Yes, we are indeed learning something new every day on gender and sexuality: ninety-seven genders or whatever the current count. In fact when I started my work, Asexuality was considered to be a theoretical possibility; it was much, much later that I encountered a woman who identified herself as an Asexual. So like you, I am learning new things too.

But, there is no way I can cover ALL these in the primer that I focus on, not because I deny their existence or don't accept them or respect them, but because I am very much aware that I am teaching a gender and sexuality primer to an audience whose vocabulary comprises of only three words: *Mard* (Male) (Gold Medallist), *Aurat* (Female) (Silver Medallist), *Na-mard* (pejorative: Not Male) (Disqualified); my sole objective in a two hour (if I am lucky a half-day) session, is to increase the awareness, understanding and sensitivity of the *hoi polloi* on a few basic alphabets: L, G, B, T, I, Q & A.

Yes, there are a few enlightened souls especially from the academic background that are dismissive of my sessions and have made it a point to tell me so. They feel it is too kindergarten. You bet it is; this is who my audience is. Since I accept that criticism as a compliment, they are invariably left nonplussed. (I remember a panel discussion I was part of, where an enlightened female soul from gender studies background spoke for quite a while to a lay audience. The audience, unable to comprehend a single sentence, sat stunned, not knowing what had hit them. Finally, she wound up, and they heaved a collective sigh of relief.)

At times, I run across a few enlightened souls who dismiss my session as being 'too CIS gendered' or 'not enough 'inter-sectionalism''. At times the remark I get is, "It is incomplete"; this happens when their particular dimension of gender or sexuality is only cursorily addressed or left out.

Well, the enlightened souls should not have been in the audience in the first place. My sessions are not meant for their ilk. They should seek juicy research scholarships or safe academic auditoriums. Or better still, five-star conference rooms to expound their views in panel discussions or read out their papers to their compatriots and leave people in the field like me, alone.

Labels: I also encounter a few enlightened souls who are increasingly not in favour of being labelled. That is fine by me; it's your right what you want to call yourself or not to call yourself. But I encounter participants who question the labels I use to describe myself e.g. as a Gay man. They feel these are outdated terms.

Well, I don't feel so. I have come from a background where I did not know the label for people like me till I was in Engineering College (Those days, newspapers rarely wrote on LGBT issues. It was a taboo topic.) As I started reading medical textbooks in the British Council Library (BCL) to understand who I was, I got my first label- I was a homosexual (a term coined by Karl-Maria-Kertbeny). Tragically the other labels attached to the first were- abnormal, deviant, sodomite. Over many years, I have travelled a long distance from 'the love that dare not speak its name' thru a suicidal depression at being labeled a

pervert to finally, a label I could be proud of- Gay. Which is why I continue to hate the term MSM, which focuses on sexual behaviour but hides my sexual identity as a Gay man- a man who loves only men. From the nameless darkness into the light of this proud tag has been a long, excruciatingly painful journey and I am not willing to let go of the hard earned tag- Gay and dissolve again into the nameless mass I came from. NO SIR!

And so, my work, of the past two decades, has been just the opposite of being 'lable-less'; to engage stakeholders on the basics of different dimensions of sex, sexuality and gender; grouping persons with specific anatomical, sexual and gender characteristics into labelled communities so that their rights which are denied to them or continue to be violated or laws which affect them negatively, to a significant degree, could be highlighted and addressed e.g. Sec 377 IPC.

Use of certain terms: As recently as November 2020, when I was giving finishing touches to this book, I received emails from some enlightened souls of the new generation in which they strongly objected to my use of the 'top' and 'bottom' terminology, in an article on HIV/AIDS and STIs that I had written in *Samapathik Diwali Ank* (Annual Issue 2020.)[2] They considered these terminologies to be outdated. Obviously, they don't know what terms are used by Gay youths when seeking a sexual partner. After reading innumerable text messages, while studying blackmail cases of victims, I have seen that the five common words in all of them are- 'Place', 'Top / Bot(tom) / Ver(satile)' (for checking sexual role compatibility) and 'Size' Which wonderland are these objecting Dorothys living in

Fluid Sexuality: At times, during sessions, discussions degrade into an argument, and my offer of 'let's agree to disagree' is swept aside when, the horror of horrors, I steadfastly refuse to accept a participant's view that: "EVERYBODY's sexuality is fluid".

When I express my view that, generalising gender-sexuality-fluid exception cases by claiming that gender and sexuality is fluid for everyone, is incorrect and misleading, the enlightened participant starts foaming at the mouth, ending the tirade hysterically with, "You

have no right to talk about gender and sexuality; you know nothing about it.”

Well, I have never claimed that but I know that I was, I am and will always be a CIS gendered, Gay, male. I am definitely not sexually or gender fluid. If they expect me to engage with them on the theoretical possibility- 'How can I predict about my sexuality or gender in the future' they are mistaken, I leave that as homework for them to masturbate and orgasm.

These enlightened souls have done no fieldwork and, with no worthwhile achievements to their credit, all they do, is play the academic critique; preferably in front of an audience. Each speaker taking the stage is a student at their exam, to be failed at the slightest whiff of a disagreement.

“*Chai*”, a handsome swishy youth had brought tea in Vicky's cabin. I turned to look at him and barely caught his profile as he turned around to leave; someone new; I had not seen him before.

“... send the conference agenda to you”. Vicky was saying something, but I had lost track, I was too engrossed staring at what the youth's tight jeans hugged. A pang of desire swept over me, this youth reminding me once again of the number of months my needs had remained un-satiated and knowing that as I aged things would not be getting any better. Regretfully turning around, I got down to business.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] The ground reality (as of 2020): I guess that more than 99.9% of the population of my state of Maharashtra does not know the Marathi word for 'Intersex'. I think that more than 99% of the same population do not understand the difference between Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

As far as the Marathi language is concerned, I had to start from the basics. I had to find or create Marathi equivalent words (or retaining the English word as it is) for gender and sexuality-related terms with valuable assistance from my friends, Suresh Khole, Pushkar Ekbote and Saurabh Bondre.

For example, there is no Marathi equivalent of the word 'Queer'; we use it as is. The first version of the list of such English words and equivalent words in Marathi was published in *Samapathik*, our first *Diwali Ank* (Annual Issue Year 2019). I do not claim the list to be complete or perfect, but it is a starting point. So before we start with the Hir and the Hur, let's understand this ground reality.

[2] *Parat Ekda Savadhan!* (You stand warned. Again!) By Bindumadhav Khire. *Samapathik Diwali Ank*, 2020. Page 33.

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## BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

At one of HST's workshops, late 2015 or early 2016, I proposed that we get written statements from *Indian Psychiatrist Society* (IPS) on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity to present in the Supreme Court in the Sec 377 IPC case.

It would also become a valuable supplement to our mental health program and help counter the alarming number of instances in which politicians made homophobic statements. In July 2011, Gulam Nabi Azad, the Union Government Health Minister said: Homosexuality was a disease[1]; In January 2015, Ramesh Tawadkar, Goa's Minister for Sports and Youth had made a statement to the effect that a treatment centre be created for homosexuals to turn them into people with 'normal sexual orientation'[2] and in March 2015, Dr Deepak Sawant, Maharashtra Health Minister had stated that LGBT needed psychological counselling.[3][4]

All the participants at the conference were in favour of my idea. I volunteered to undertake that responsibility, mentioning that since I knew Dr Vidyadhar Watve (who had been Vice-President of IPS the last time I had met him), I could meet him and start things moving.

Upon my return to Pune, I met Dr Watve and asked him if the IPS had a written position statement on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. He replied that since nobody had asked for it, they did not have one. He asked me to get in touch with the current president of IPS- Dr G. Prasada Rao of Hyderabad for the same.

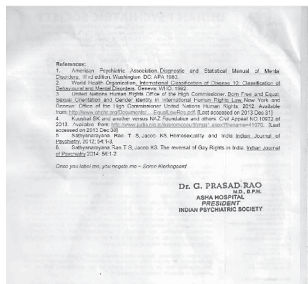
I reached out to Dr G. Prasada Rao, who was incredibly supportive. After a couple of calls and emails, to my amazement within a month of first contacting him, I received a courier in March 2016 containing the Position Statement of IPS.

Since I had met Dr Dinesh Bhugra (President of WPA) at ANCIPS 2014, I felt that I should try my hand at getting a similar statement from WPA. Dr Bhugra was all for it and urgently set about drafting a statement.

I requested re-wording of the statement, after reading the softcopy: '(WPA) considers sexual orientation to be innate and determined by biological, psychological, developmental, and social factors' to '(WPA) considers sexual orientation to be innate' as the former statement might imply finger pointing at parents, upbringing, and social and cultural values.

But the Executive Committee of WPA had already approved it and had circulated the statement widely. So no further changes were possible, and soon, in March 2016, I got a courier with an original copy of the statement. [5] I then couriered the original IPS and WPA statements to HST. A couple of months later, myself in Pune and Pallav Patankar (Director of HIV program, HST) in Mumbai used the statements to spread awareness on May 17, 2016 (Anti Homophobia, Transphobia, Biphobia Day.)

Dr Watve's response that, no one till date had asked IPS for the position statement, hit me like a sledgehammer. Yes indeed. Why had we not asked for these statements before? The lackadaisical approach by the LGBTIQ movement to all issues had allowed such an important one left unaddressed. We collectively failed by not pushing for such a statement; it was also tragic that despite the Sec 377 IPC battle raging on in the Courts since 2001, IPS had not felt the necessity to intervene *suo moto*; their track record too was questionable. But then again, it was the LGBTIQ community who had a lot to lose. Another example of our shoddy approach to activism.



## IPS Statement on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (March 2016)





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The writing group was led by Professor Dinesh Bhugra and constituted Drs Kristen Eckstrand (USA), Petros Levounis (USA), Arindya Kar (India), Kenneth R. Javane (Philippines)

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## WPA Statement on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

### \*\*\* Notes and References

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## A BRIDGE TOO FAR

The exchange of information on the e-platforms: WhatsApp, Email had been explicit. Graphic representative photos of what each would like to do to pleasure the other, descriptions of a variety of positions in fornications ran to dozens of pages. The last pages were the ones where the youth had received messages of blackmail. In a panic, he had approached me, and I had invited him to the Trust office.

The Gay youth was a college-going student, and like many closeted-college-students, he was incredibly stupid in such matters: dating a stranger, sending his photos- clothed and nude, explicit sexual content, blissfully unaware that his 'lover' could misuse this information.

The more closeted they were, the more appalling risks they took. He had known about *Samapathik* Trust for years but had never visited it; he wanted no truck with any organisation having an 'agenda'; the irony was that he felt it was too risky.

We frequently received distress calls where closeted Gay men had given in to blackmail and were now at their wit's end realising that there was no limit to an extortionists' greed. We had given a press release warning about the rising incidence of blackmail and extortion of closeted Gay men. We highlighted the risks they were taking in meeting strangers on dating platforms, giving their identification to strangers, bringing strangers into their rooms/apartments or going to their rooms/apartments. Did the incidence rate go down after the warning? I doubt it. The only youths who seem to read newspapers nowadays are those preparing for UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) or MPSC (Maharashtra Public Service Commission) examinations. I, time and again, posted about this issue on Facebook. Did anyone learn any lesson from it? Who knows?

Hardly one in a hundred victims, bothered to get in touch with an NGO. The rest either put up with blackmail or if possible, changed their cell numbers, stayed away from Facebook, dating platforms, erasing their identity from the virtual world they had thought was

safe and had become addicted to. This youth had approached me as a last resort.

After he came to the Trust office, I questioned him in detail, the way the Police do, trying to find out any chinks in the armour. I always tell my clients to tell me the truth however ugly; it's better to be upfront about it now, rather than hide it and the Police discover it later which makes the victim a suspect in the eyes of the Police. This guy came clean about everything: photos, messages, Emails. He was not out, came from a poor, conservative family and was terrified of being outed.

After discussing the case with him, we outlined his options; the most sensible one was of approaching the Cyber Cell of Police. He did not seem happy about this option. I patiently explained to him that that was his call and not mine and that he should take a couple of days to think through.

He called the next day, stating that he was willing to go to the Police, provided I accompany him. I again called him to the Trust office, asking him to bring a printout of all the relevant photos and messages. I typed the details of his complaint on our letterhead, and we went to the Cyber Cell.

The Cyber Cell was then located (it has now moved to Police Ground, Shivaji Nagar) in ad hoc offices on the top floor of the CP, Pune office. We waited for about forty-five minutes or so before they called us in. During this time, my client's anxiety had steadily gone up, and he was now visibly nervous and agitated.

Our case was cursorily looked into by a female Police officer. Habituated to seeing varied types of blackmail cases, she took the pornographic images and the explicit messages in her stride. After asking a few questions which included some directed at me about my role in this matter, she then directed us to another Officer.

The Officer was in the neighbouring cabin, and after a short wait, he called us in. He went through the photos and messages in detail and looking at my client who was by then a nervous wreck said, "*Aapan anu yala laaynivar*" (We will straighten him out.)

Just as both of us heaved a sigh of relief, he suddenly stopped and studying the address asked, “Where is this... on which side of the bridge... that side... Oh! Sorry... but this area does not fall in our jurisdiction. Madam seems to have overlooked the jurisdiction part. You should go to the Cyber Cell near Pune University which handles the rural area”. Seeing the victim's crestfallen face, he said, “Don't worry, if you face any problem, give them my name and number”. Resignedly, I noted down his name and number, and we walked out to the parking lot.

I tried to keep up my client's morale. He was on the verge of crying. “It's hardly noon. We will reach that office in less than an hour, let's go”, I prodded him. He hesitated. “No, I don't want to go.” “Why? If we face any problem, we will call this Officer, you have come so far, don't give up now.” I was pushy. I could understand his anxiety and reluctance, but I had a huge backlog of work to do and wanted the case to be lodged as soon as possible so that I could get back to work. “No, I don't want to proceed”, he was now stubborn.

And on that note, he decided to change his cell number and disappear from the virtual world. This strategy could work for now. But in the long term... How long would he remain underground before his carnal needs overpowered his fear... What would he do then...

Like many, his anxiety and fear had played a significant role in giving up, and that continues to be one of the biggest hurdles I encounter. I know of male rapes which have gone unreported for want of courage and the victims suffer untold trauma as they are assaulted and sodomised repeatedly, day in and day out.

And last but not the least, after this traumatic experience, did the youth feel the need to keep in touch with my Trust or attend its events to find friends in a healthy and safe environment... What do you think...

... Nope.





## JUST A PHONE CALLAWAY

In rare cases, success turns out to be unexpectedly easy, as in this case. The guy (who on later revelation turned out to be a Transwoman and she now identifies herself as Damini) had gone to a Gay party at a night club and had been introduced, by one of her friends, to someone. Taking a carnal interest in that 'someone', she had brought that 'someone' to her apartment. After a romp (worthwhile I hope) in bed, she had gone to freshen up and had come back to realise to her dismay that the 'someone' had left, along with her company's laptop. The laptop held important data and presentations. The 'someone' had switched off his cell phone and was untraceable.

The next day, she had spoken to a Partha Biswas, a journalist from *The Indian Express*, who knew me, and he called me up and briefed me about the case. I asked the victim to meet me, and within the hour, she was at my office. She was livid, had already missed out on a day's work and had not been able to do the all-important presentation she was supposed to do. She had to have the laptop back. I was willing to accompany her to the Police *Chowki*, but she would have to be upfront with the Police about why a stranger was at her place at night. She was willing, and after verifying jurisdiction, off, we went to the Police *Chowki*.

The Police Officer gruffly asked us about our business. I explained the case to him, and thankfully the victim was open about her sexuality. The Police Officer looked at her. Then without a word to her, he asked me, “*Tumcha yachashi kai sambandha?*” (How are you connected with this?) My polite explanation was followed by the usual questions to the victim. “Where do you stay?”, “Do you own the place?”. “No, I have rented the place”. “Then show me a copy of Police verification of you as the tenant”. We were stumped; the victim did not have it. Balefully, he looked at us, “*Kaida palaila nako, basa tithe*” (You don't want to obey the law, sit there), gesturing to a couple of chairs at the back. Punished, we quietly sat at the back, staring at our feet, like errant school kids.

After a while, the Officer, deciding that he had meted out enough punishment, took up the matter. "What do you want? Do you want to file a complaint?" The victim pleaded, "I don't want to file a complaint; I just want my laptop back".

"Do you have the number of the friend who introduced that person to you?"

"Yes."

"Give me the number".

The Officer used the landline to call the friend. "*..... tycha phone band ahe.... te mala kahi mahit nahi. To laptop jar 24 tasat tyla milala nahi tar mi complaint dakhal karnar ani tuzhavar abetment cha gunha.... Tuzha ayushyacha record kharab hoil....*" (... his cell is switched off... I don't care. If the laptop is not recovered in twenty-four hours, I will file a complaint and charge you with abetment... this will be on your record for the rest of your life....) Keeping the phone down, he dismissed us, "If you don't get the laptop by tomorrow, come to file the complaint".

As I dropped the victim off, I warned her, that for safety's sake, she should not open the door without taking due precautions and, if possible, she should call a friend over to stay with her for the night.

Same day. 10.30 pm. Location- victim's apartment. The doorbell rang. The victim peeped through the keyhole and hesitantly opened the door, there was no one outside, but near the door, waiting for its rightful owner was her company's laptop.





## NO SENSE AT ALL

*"Tumcha lokanna kahi akla nahit ka?"* (Don't your people have any sense?) Annoyed, the Police Officer asked me. Since I was from an NGO, he was trying to be as polite as possible. Shamefacedly, I averted my eyes; I fully empathised with him.

*"Aata online sagla miltay na? mag tithe ----- kashala zhak maraila jaicha? Khajgit kara na kai karaichai te. Konala padlai...?"* (You get everything online now, why do you have to go to ----- ₹ Do whatever you like in private. Who cares?) *"...ani tumcha hijadyanni tar ucchad madlai... rastyat sadya kai var kartat... Kon sahanubhuti denar?"* (and your Hijras are the pits... they pull up their saris in public... Who will sympathise with them?) "Yes Sir", I mumbled.

The most hurtful of all words when dealing with the Police was *tumcha* (your), when dealing with the cockups of the community. 'Your people', 'Your Hijras'. None of the Queer armchair activists and Facebook trollers had to face this barrage; it is an activist like me working on the field, who had to bear that brunt, for no fault of mine.

I am not sure when this discussion happened; was it during one of my visits to the Social Security Cell for a case? Or did we interact at a meeting in the context of a panel that had been recently formed to make surprise, random checks on brothels in the Budhwar Peth red-light area, once or twice a month, to check for cases of forced trafficking and trafficking of minors?[1] Mr Prakash Yadav (President of ABDS) and I had been nominated as NGO representatives, on the panel. I could understand Mr Prakash Yadav's nomination as he resided there, worked in the area and knew the area inside out, but my being invited on the panel was a surprise.[2]

So, once a month, we would gather at *Shukrawar Peth Police Chowki*, and the Police Officer In-Charge of the team would randomly ask one of the team members to name a building to make the surprise visit. And off we would go, a half dozen Policemen, Policewomen, a Psychiatrist from *Sassoon* Hospital and Mr Yadav and I as observers. Later, sometime in 2017, for some reason unknown to me, the Police discontinued the surprise visits.

Anyways, here we were, talking on, what else, cockups of some of the community members. As he continued to voice his displeasure, I was reminded of an incident which had occurred some time ago. An extortion case.

The Gay youth had been at a cruising site and, as he proceeded to exhibit his desire, the extortionist had beaten him, taken him to an ATM and made him withdraw money. He had then left, taking the victim's cell phone and his wallet (containing identity card and address proofs), after threatening the victim that, if he complained to the Police, he would pay a visit to his house.

The victim had then approached me and I accompanied him to the Social Security Cell. After a fruitful meeting, the Officer-In-Charge called up the In-Charge of the Police Station under whose jurisdiction the crime had occurred and directed us there.

We went to the concerned Police Station, where the Police took up the case. As we stepped out of the Police Station, the victim took me aside and told me that there were some objectionable videos in his cell phone and if the Police recovered these it would cause him some heartache. "You have videos of you having sex with someone" I asked casually; the Police did not care; they had seen it all. "Yes, but it's a bit more than that, a video also shows me mainlining (injecting) Heroine". I stopped dead in my tracks. Fuck! Fuck!! Fuck!!!

As I sat there, cringing, listening to the Police Officer, I could not agree more; I was as one with him.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Maharashtra Home Ministry. Circular No. PW0314/Pra.Kra.89/Visha6/World Trade Centre No. 1, Cuff Parade, Mumbai 400005 dated July 21, 2014.

[2] The letter from the Social Security Cell of Police (Pune) to me, outward number 86/2016, is dated February 08, 2016..







## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Early in the morning, I had, as was my annual practice, gone to pay homage to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar on his birth anniversary, at a small park next to the Pune District's Collector office. Years ago, I used to go in the evening, but to avoid the crowds, and loud Dolbys, I had wisely started going at 7.30 am.

This early in the morning, there were more Police personnel than visitors. Parking my bike near *Bund Garden* Police Station, I entered the park having a statue of Babasaheb, surrounded by murals of his achievements. About two to three dozen people were present, most of them wearing white clothes; some offered garlands, some lighted candles. I paid my respects and sat on the lawn. Sporadic slogans of "*Ekach Saheb Babasaheb*" rent the air. As I sat there, I realised again, how lucky we were to have him and other great social reformers- Shahu Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, R. D. Karve, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, ... as our ideals. I felt at peace and simultaneously inspired.

After a while, getting up, I read a few of the murals and left. On the way home, I collected a parcel of *Shira* (a sweet) from a restaurant and reaching home, gorged on it. I had fleetingly thought of going on a small trek, but it was far too late for that and feeling drowsy, having a whole day to myself and nothing to do, I put my cell on silent mode and went off to sleep.

When I got up, there was a missed call from Parikshit and one missed call from a Gay youth I knew. A message from Parikshit indicated that the youth was in a crisis and was trying to reach me urgently. Wide awake now, I called up Parikshit, then the youth and rushed to his place after telling my Mom, I would not be home for lunch.

It was a bit of a challenge finding his place in narrow lanes and ill-planned locality. As I rang his doorbell, he immediately opened it, looking as he had looked for years, a geeky, baby-faced school kid.

It transpired that my young adult Gay friend was in touch with a

person on Facebook, and had invited him home. The sight of the guy had been a complete turnoff for my friend, and he indicated that he was not interested in any action. Unknown to my friend, after receiving the invitation to come to my friend's home, the person had changed his profile description on Facebook on the sly, mentioning that he charged for services.

And now, stubbornly, the sex worker refused to leave till my friend paid up ₹1000.00, action or no action. Babyface was no baby and telling the sex worker that he did not have any cash on him, had asked him to wait, pacifying him that his friend (me) was on his way with the money.

The sex worker, far younger than me, but physically in even worse shape than me, was sitting on the couch, waiting for payment. I told the sex worker that I was a lawyer and that he had two options: either to leave quietly, or we take him to the Police Station. His spirited defence was that the caller knew that he was a sex worker and it was only fair that he charged him for time and travel. Raising my voice, I asked him, since he admitted that he was a male sex worker, did he know Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA) ₹ Did he want me to explain it to him ₹ Taking another angle of argument, I went on, is not homosexual sex a crime ₹ It was 2019, it was not, but the dumbo did not know it. He went quiet.

Just then, the doorbell rang and Abhilash came in. Since I had not picked up the call, my young friend had called Abhilash, and he had come to his aid as well. Since the three of us ganged-upon him, the sex worker left quietly, but before that, on my suggestion, my young friend and the sex worker mutually agreed to delete the text records of messages in the presence of the other from their cell phones.

After he left, I turned to my young friend and taking on the mantle of the parent, made my disappointment clear. He had made a mistake in inviting a stranger to his place; things could have been a lot worse. But I was not harsh with him; I knew he was a good kid, it was the horniness of his youth that had made him lose a step; fortunately, the consequences of the misstep had been minor.

As we sipped tea at a stall across his residence, we discussed that if we had sufficient networking and support within the community, we could stop a lot of extortion. With dozens of community members we could call for help, we could hope that at least a couple of them would come to assist in a crisis. Accordingly in a Facebook post, I made a call for volunteers in Pune and PCMC to handle crisis calls. I would train them, and we could work out schedules and linkages. From PCMC, Anil Ukarande was the only one who responded; in Pune, till today, I have no one to rely on.

I cribbed to Dr Bhooshan Shukla that the community was not supporting me and they stubbornly refused to step out of the security of the kitchen. Dr Shukla replied, "Bindu, they are too exhausted fighting to get to a safe place; it's challenging for them to step out again, especially to handle such a crisis. You have to be a bit anti-social to do that". It sounded suspiciously like a backhanded compliment.

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## THE OUTLIER

How do I explain to the Police, that in this case, they were wrong? That, there are people out there who just cannot fight back or run away or call for help. They just freeze, not always physically, but mentally, as in this case, and quietly, 'voluntarily' give in to the perpetrator? Would the Police understand outliers like these? As Anil Ukarande, one of my staff members, and I headed back to the office, from the Police Station, I was forlorn, though I took care to hide it from Anil.

A few days back, on the way home from *Samapathik* Trust office, a Transwoman had been befriended by an older man in a crowded place and escorting her to a public urinal where another accomplice was waiting, had robbed her of ₹1000.00. Mercifully, she had not been raped, presumably it being daytime and a crowded area.

The victim had been afraid to tell me, had narrated the incident to one of her friends who had, in turn, informed Anil who had, in turn, informed me.

The victim was a very frail, short, timid looking person, one who couldn't say boo to a goose. She did not cross-dress, but it took an experienced eye, but a second, to recognise her as a Transgender person. After she had come out to me, I had spoken to her relatives, who hailed from a tribal area. They had been very compassionate, had accepted her, and showed their willingness in supporting her gender affirmative hormone treatment and later on surgery. Despite the incredible level of support from her family, her level of assertiveness continued to be alarmingly low.

After hearing the victim's ordeal, approaching the Police was a reflex action on my part, and I told her that we should go to the Police Station of the relevant jurisdiction. Mutely she agreed, and I assumed that she had consented to approach the Police. Like the Police, I had unknowingly, become a victim of my past experiences.

I asked Anil to accompany her to the Police Station, and I followed an

hour later. After we spoke to the Station In-Charge, Anil was told to come back in the evening to have a look at the CCTV footage. The CCTV footage was available for the initial part; none was available in the vicinity of the public urinal. The CCTV footage showed a very crowded street, and as the Transwoman walked, an older man had started walking next to her and eventually had put his hand around the shoulder of the victim till they walked out of the CCTV view.

The next day, the Station In-Charge invited Anil and me inside his cabin and told us that CCTV footage indicated that there was no coercion; *“To Hijra tyacha marjina gelai”* (The Hijra has gone on her own volition.) He implied that it was probably either for free sex or for sex work. He further added that it was impossible to believe that she had shown no resistance at all, in a crowded street and had allowed a strange man to put his hand across her shoulder and guide her to a urinal; all she had to do was shout in protest, and a crowd would have gathered. It would be in her interest not to pursue the matter further.

Knowing the victim, I did not believe that she had accompanied the older man for sex or sex work. Back at the office, I spoke to her. Would she like to pursue the matter further? No.

She then mentioned that this was not the first time someone had extorted money from her in the streets. She was an easy target, was always disbelieved by those to whom she narrated the incidences and as a conspicuous member of the Transgender community, people always assumed the worst. It was at this point that she confessed, that, in the first place, she had not wanted to go to the Police, but she had been too petrified of me to refuse and so had mutely, given in.





## WHICH OF THE TWO?

My interview, by the journalist, had proceeded on the usual lines. “What made you get into activism?” “When did you first realise that you were .....?” At the last word she had stumbled, unsure whether to use the word Gay and then settled for 'different'. Her awkwardness was understandable, she was a newbie reporter from an English newspaper, and this was her first interview with a Gay activist. Many of the Marathi journalists used a similar, problematic word, “*Tumhala kadhi kalala ki tumhi 'tase ahat'*” (When did you realise that you were 'like that'?) It is also common to see news headlines in Marathi newspapers using the word *Tyanni* (They), e.g. “‘*Tyanni' mandlya tyancha vyatha!*” ('They' spoke about their suffering!.) Note the single quotes, implying the other/outsider.

As the interview progressed, she said that she was a feminist. Which meant that she would eventually ask me that one particular question- yes there it was- “Who do you think has played a bigger role in the struggle for Queer rights- men or women?” I could not resist a smile. The look on her face was expectant. I suspect, she expected me to say, 'women'. I took some time to explain to her as to how I saw the issue.

The two genders played vital roles but in different strata. Women played a key role at the micro-level: family. Quite a few mothers, after struggling to accept their child's sexuality, had played a significant role as negotiator, mediator, conciliator between their child and spouse. In many cases, fathers were too uncomfortable to discuss this issue and at times were virulently homophobic, and the mother had become the essential bridge and buffer between the two. It was because of her acceptance that the child became self-confident and gave it the courage to take on the world.

On the other hand, when it came to the macro-level: there are very few women at the top positions in the government, law enforcement, medical profession where those who were LGBTIQ sensitive could shape inclusive policies. Suppose, it is assumed that there are relatively more women who are sensitive to LGBTIQ issues than

men, then it follows that with most senior positions occupied by men, there is less probability that we will encounter a senior female official who is sensitive on LGBTIQ issues. Which means that the sooner women get in the upper echelon of government officials, the better life will become for the LGBTIQ community. Whether anyone likes it or not, at a macro level, it still continues to be a man's world.

She did not look too happy at my explanation, and when the newspaper carried the interview a few days later, this particular question and the answer was missing. Was it her or the editor who had lopped it off? I can only guess.

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## INTERACTION WORKS

“Sir, *Intersex la Marathit konta shabda ahe?*” (Sir, what is the word in Marathi for Intersex?), the journalist asked me on the phone. It turned out that he had attended my session at *Ranade Institute of Journalism* many years ago and now that he was doing an article on the subject, he had contacted me with a query.

Reporting on LGBT was not covered in Diploma or Degree course in Journalism / Media and Mass Communication. In the early days of my work, Sanyogita of CFAR had assisted me in getting in touch with English and Marathi reporters who were sensitive on LGBT issues. In Pune, it was Radheshyam Jadhav (formerly with the *Times of India* and now with *The Hindu*) who was very supportive and in *The Indian Express*, it was Anuradha Mascarenhas who diligently and sensitively covered LGBT news.

But when it came to the Marathi press, there was very little coverage and what little there was, was extremely homophobic.[1] A classic example is Dr Rajan Bhosale's article in *Lokmat* in 2007[2]; Much later, I got a chance to debate with him on LGBT issues on a Marathi TV channel.

At times, newspapers carried news which was scientifically unsound. E.g. When reporting the tragic death of a Transwoman: she had recently undergone Gender Affirmative Surgery; the reporter stepped into the realm of science fiction, and would have made Assac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke proud, by reporting that the surgery was to remove her 'male chromosomes'. [3] All in all, in the early days of my work, it was only in rare cases that I got to present our side of the story or put on record a proper scientific view.

Before I proceed, I must note here that although my focus was on Marathi news, it does not mean that other language media; Hindi or Urdu were any more liberal. The response in *Navbharat* newspaper to the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC, is titled, '*Kis keemat par yaha neeji azaadi*' (What is the cost of this personal freedom?) [4]. The Urdu newspapers, *The Inquilab*, wrote on the



release of the feature film *Girlfriend*, 'Despite the ideological differences with the Shiv Sena and Bajarang Dal, sometimes we have to support them....' and *Hindustan* wrote 'Films like *Girlfriend* must be opposed tooth and nail. Our society lives on certain values...'. [5] In English newspapers, the Catholic Church continued to pursue its duplicitous agenda, stating that homosexuality is an unnatural tendency which must be dealt with compassion and counselling[6].

The only way to bring about an increase in sensitivity in reporting on LGBTIQA issues in Marathi was to address it through a long-term strategy. And so, I had approached Dr Ujjawala Barve and Dr Sanjay Tambat (of the Department of Communication and Journalism of Savitribai Phule Pune University, better known as *Ranade Institute*) and Mr Santosh Shenai (Head of Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at *Marathwada Mitramandal College of Commerce*.) with my proposal of conducting a free session on LGBTIQA issues for students. They graciously accepted, and for more than a decade, I have been addressing their students on reporting LGBTIQA issues. (Later on, I got invited to address students of some other Media and Mass Communication colleges too.)

The sessions covered terms to use/avoid, photos to use/avoid the current legal status on same-sex intercourse and medical stand on homosexuality, bisexuality and Gender Identity. At the end of the session, I gave students my contact so that they could reach out to me for checking the accuracy of terms used, quotes and references. And so over some time, many journalists came to know me, calling me for my views, underlining the fact that they had attended my session, years ago. A few did articles on my work for various newspapers and magazines. The strategy was a success but still just a drop in the ocean.

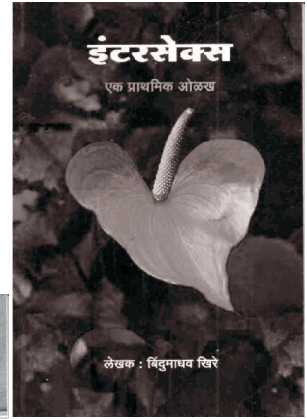
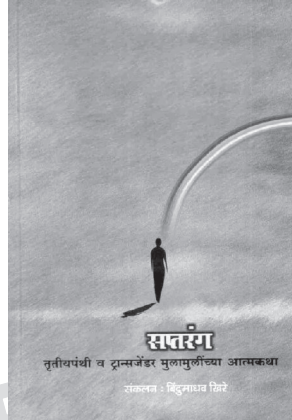
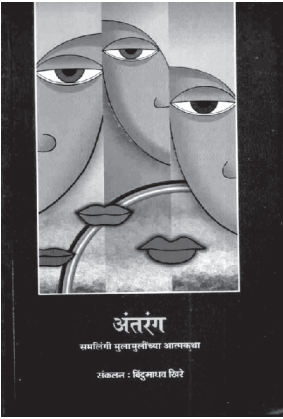
In 2012, a critical breakthrough came from Mr Shekhar Deshmukh (former supplement editor- *Divya Marathi* newspaper) who offered me to write a short series of articles on sexuality under the heading *Samajswasthya* 2012 in *Divya Marathi's* Sunday supplement *Rasik*. Going further, in 2014, he invited LGBT community members to write their stories/experiences under the heading *Teesra Aavaj* (Third

Voice.)[7] It was perhaps the first time that a Marathi newspaper did a series of articles on LGBT issues. Mrunmayee Ranade also reviewed some of my books for the newspaper. I specially mention this because very few Marathi newspapers are interested in reviewing Marathi books on LGBTIQA topics. But all in all, today, I am happy to say that, in Marathi, *Loksatta*, *Lokmat*, *Maharashtra Times* do a decent job in presenting our community's point of view.

As far as television channels are concerned, here too, my main focus has always been to communicate in Marathi. Only once, in 2011, was I (and my Mom) on an English channel- *NDTV* where Barkha Dutt had interviewed parents and their Gay sons/daughters in a program recorded in Delhi.[8] On English channels, it was Ashok Row Kavi and Laxmi Tripathi who were the preferred voices of the community.

On Marathi television channels, it was the fearless personality of Mr Nikhil Wagle Sir who aggressively highlighted our issues. He was Chief Editor of the Marathi *IBNLokmat TV* channel and host of the debate *Aajcha Sawal* (Today's Question) and later on the host of *Maharashtra 1 TV* channel. Back then, there were very few LGBT activists willing to be on Marathi TV channels. And so, as the battle of Sec 377 IPC heated up, I got many opportunities of being on his debate shows, fighting it out with homophobic Hindu and Muslim right-wingers.[9] At times, Gauri Sawant or Laxmi Tripathi, who represented the Transgender community, would also be on the panel accompanying me.

Post the NALSA Judgment, as Marathi TV channels started evincing interest in LGBT issues, especially Transgender issues, it became a subject of glamour and every other new generation LGBTIQ community member became a self-styled activist, desperately angling for a byte or an interview; sadly, without doing any homework. Absence of clarity in their concepts, lack of patience to hear out the full question, losing track of the question midway through the answer and sometimes foolishly confusing a request for byte with a request to pose became the norm of the day.



Book Covers: *Antaranga*, *Saptaranga*, *Intersex*

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] There are too many homophobic news/articles to list; the following is just to give you an idea of how our society has viewed us and treated us.

- *Vikruticha nana tarha.* (Different types of perversions.) By Madhav Gavankar. *Loksatta*. December 7, 2002.
- *Samalaingikata karane ani upay.* (Homosexuality- reasons and treatment.) By Dr Shaunak Kulkarni. Magazine *Shree va Sau*. Pages 12-15. September 2004.
- *Anaisargik...* (Unnatural) *Maharashtra Times*. July 10, 2009. Page 3. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: This is a short homophobic satire.)

- *Anaisargik goshtinna kara virodh.* (Oppose unnatural things) *Sakal.* Kolhapur. July 19, 2009. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: The article notes the negative views about homosexuality of some well-known personalities-. Adv. Ujwal Nikam, Abdul Kadar Mukadam (a scholar in Muslim culture studies), Dr Rajan Bhosale and Hindu astrologer Jayant Salgaonkar.)
- *Vikrutich prakruti banlya, tar hras hoil.* (If perversions become natural, society will suffer) *Sakal.* Pune. July 26, 2009. Page 4. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: Former Hon'ble Justice P. B. Sawant of Bombay High Court spoke against the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment on Sec 377 IPC.)
- *Samalaingikata- ek samjun ghenyacha vishaya* (Homosexuality- An issue to understand.) By Mangala Samant. Magazine *Milun Saryajani.* (*Varsharambha visheshanka.*) (Special issue) August 2011.

[2] *Ti & ti. To & to. Samalingi sambandhancha rahasya.* (Female + Female. Male + Male. The secret of Homosexual relations) By Dr Rajan Bhosale. *Lokmat.* Supplement Oxygen. Page 1. January 19, 2007.

[3] *Lingabadalacha Shastrakriyenantar aurangabadet yuvakacha mrutyu.* (After Sex Reassignment Surgery, a youth from Aurangabad dies.) *Sakal.* Pune. Page 2. February 18, 2006.

[4] *Kis keemat par yaha niji aazhadi* (At what cost this personal freedom) *Navbharat* (Hindi.) Page 4. July 14, 2009.

[5] What the Urdu Press is saying. Compiled by Mohammed Wajihuddin. *The Indian Express.* Pune. Page 9. June 18, 2004.

[6] Society's not in a gay mood. By Dominic Emmanuel (Spokesman of the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese.) *The Indian Express.* September 30, 2004. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: The article appeared after the Delhi High Court dismissed the *NAZ Foundation (India) Trust* Sec 377 IPC PIL on Sept 2, 2004.)

[7] My LGBT colleagues and friends Tinesh, Payal, Abheena, Santi, Ajit, Nalini, Sapna, Manas, Prasad wrote for it or consented to have

their stories reprinted from the anthologies I edited; namely, *Antaranga*– Anthology of true stories of Gays and Lesbians (June 2013) and *Saptaranga*- Anthology of true stories of Transgenders and Tritiyapanthis (April 2013.)

[8] Being Gay: The Parents' Story. NDTV. Host: English News Group Editor Barkha Dutt.

<https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/we-the-people/being-gay-the-parents-story-196883>

Published on April 17, 2011.

[9] In addition to the debates, *Maharashtra 1* TV Channel had a weekly program called *Great Bhet* (The Great Meet/Gift). I felt honoured when Mr Nikhil Wagle interviewed me for it.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-DOSzO3NtU>

Uploaded on youtube.com on Aug 8, 2016.

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## INTERACTION WORKS... BUT NOT ALWAYS

As I read an article in *Maharashtra Times*, one part of my mind kept on telling me that, it must be a mistake; I needed to verify whether the author of the homophobic article was the same Dr Arun Gadre, who had worked with *Pathfinder International*. [1] The first name and the last name were both common enough, so maybe I was mistaking one for the other. On verification, it turned out the author was the same one, and my mood changed to hurt and uncontrollable anger.

It was not the first time that such a homophobic article had been published. They were dime a dozen, and there were only two things I could do: ignore them or write a reply. The last time I replied was when Mr Shekhar Deshmukh (former supplement Editor of *Divya Marathi*) had drawn my attention to such an article in *Divya Marathi* which stated that homosexuality was unnatural... blah blah. *Divya Marathi* had printed my point by point rebuttal in its entirety. [2]

It became increasingly difficult to reply to each of such regressive articles and letters to the editor, because of my heavy workload. And expectedly, there were many such articles and letters in newspapers and magazines. I tried to encourage the LGBTIQ community to write to the editor; voicing their displeasure at such articles. I feel it is important that we give a reply to such homophobic and transphobic articles and letters.

I called on the community to send hundreds and thousands of such 'displeasure postcards' or emails along with a warning that they would discontinue buying the newspaper if such homophobic propaganda continued. Despite the suggestion that closeted ones could give fictitious names, I suspect that the number of participants in such activities was always pathetic. On one occasion, it was in single-digit; I know because I had asked them to let me know they had sent the postcard/email so that I could get a conservative idea of the number of responses.

All that the community was good at was, bringing the issue to my notice; with the expectation that I take action, which was not possible

in most instances. I could only do so many things at any point in time, and after so many years of work, the shameful fact was, I could not find even a dozen LGBTIQ community members in the city willing to take on such simple tasks. Was it lack of confidence? Lack of courage? Laziness? Or what I suspected- the unwillingness to accept any responsibility for bringing about a change?

I got so frustrated on being directed to another homophobic article in a Marathi newspaper that I had simply replied, stating that if the community member feels so offended by the article, he should respond to it; I won't, and I didn't. The community will have to live with it or fight back; they cannot expect me to fight each and every battle. It is just not fair.

To assist the community in working with the media on LGBTIQ issues, my Trust organised a one-day workshop for community members and invited Radheshyam Jadhav from *The Times Of India*, Partha Biswas from *The Indian Express*, Prachi Kulkarni from *IBNLokmat* Marathi Channel as speakers. Did things improve? No.

But, this article by Dr Arun Gadre was not by an unknown author; this was personal. He was a Doctor by profession, who had worked with *Pathfinder International*, which had supported our HIV/AIDS TI Projects for MSM & TG. He had visited my Trust multiple times, interacted with Gay and Transgender staff and all had found him to be a sensitive person.

And now, a couple of years after he had left *Pathfinder International*, he had written a blatantly homophobic article. So what had gone wrong? I did not know but, what I did feel was a strong sense of betrayal by one whom I had trusted and had assumed to be on my side. I could not let this one go. Suspending all the work I was doing, I settled down, wrote a detailed refutation and shot it off to *Maharashtra Times*. It was printed more or less verbatim, shrewdly leaving out the line in which I criticised them for publishing Dr Gadre's article.[3]

\*\*\* Notes and References

[1] *LGBT samuhacha manavadhikar ani gauravikaran. (Samvad.)* (Human rights and dignity of the LGBT community) (Dialogue). By Dr Arun Gadre. *Maharashtra Times*. Pune. Page 8. July 16, 2017.

[2] *Samalaingikatevishayi avaidnyanik mahiti. (Vadvivad.)* (Unscientific information on homosexuality. (Debate).) By Bindumadhav Khire. *Divya Marathi*. Page 6. February 17, 2014.

[3] *LGBT Naisargikach! (Samvad)* (Being LGBT is Natural!) (Dialogue). By Bindumadhav Khire. *Maharashtra Times*. Pune. Page 8. July 23, 2017.

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## THE ENEMY WITHIN

“You know we are not allowed to show our tits; it's so unfair, men can...” It was my second San Francisco Pride March, in 1999. This stranger, a woman in her twenties, had taken out two one-inch stars made of glitter paper from her bag. And casually taking off her top, her breasts on display for all, she had started affixing them to her nipples (with what I cannot remember.) As I turned away embarrassed, she had helpfully provided the commentary.

I belong to a conservative middle-class family and have a certain world view. Yes, me. Me, who had a rollicking time sticking dollar bills in G-strings and the socks of drop-dead gorgeous GoGo male dancers in the privacy of a West Hollywood Gay club, Los Angeles. I had become besotted with one, on first sight, and had spent the rest of my dollar bills on him, as he oh so sensually gyrated on a circular platform, his smooth skin sprinkled with glitter, sparkling under the disco lights.

It was the same me, who was extremely embarrassed, when my friends and I, walking at *La Jolla* beach (which after a few hundred meters further down, turned into a nude beach) in San Diego, saw one of my friends, who had walked ahead, return, nude, his underwear in his hands. I had looked the other way, pretending that the naked person walking next to me was a stranger.

I repeat, I was born and brought up in a conservative, middle-class family, and I am unapologetic about it. When I organised the first Pune Pride Walk, it was evident that I would not model it after San Francisco or Mumbai Pride Marches, but the low key San Jose Pride March (I do not know whether, by now, it has gone the San Francisco way), where parents would feel at home walking with their Gay children.

Over the years, under my conservative leadership, the annual Pune Pride Walk went from strength to strength, with an increasing number of LGBTIQ participants, their parents, feminists, allies, NGOs, corporates participating in it.[1][2][3]

But a few rotten apples unfailingly played spoilsport. The vituperative

trolling of socialists and leftists to my condition of 'decent clothing and behaviour' exponentially increased. The posts started with, "*Tu Sanghi*", "*Tu RSSwala*" (You from the RSS) followed by unprintable matter and the accusation of me being a Hindu fundamentalist.

LGBTIQA youngsters started calling me before the Pride Walk to voice their fear of attending the Pride Walk or bringing their friends with them, "*Sir, Nange se to Khuda bhi darta hai!*" (Even God is afraid of the shameless!.) And I kept on telling them, "YOU HAVE TO ATTEND! Don't allow the loonies who are a minority to take over! We are the majority and let's show our strength at the Pune Pride Walk! I personally assure you that, as long as I organize the Pune Pride Walk, it will be decent!."

Just before the Pune Pride Walk of 2017, the trolling got so vicious that, I was worried they might plan a ruckus at the event. I always asked for Police protection at Pride Walk for fear of right-wing Muslim, Christian, Hindu fundamentalists but now I was facing socialist, leftist enemies who were as spiteful, hateful and destructive as the others. (I must note here that most of the support for my work has come from socialist and left-leaning feminist friends and colleagues.)

As if the demand of some, for freedom to do anything and everything in public was not enough, some participants were intent on bringing other issues to the Pride Walk; issues which had nothing to do with LGBTIQA rights.

At the first Pune Pride Walk, I had asked that posters of the Pride Walk be submitted beforehand so that I will be able to screen them. Some internet trolls vociferously objected; "Who are you to censor us?" I had been wise to take that stand. Because, before the first Pride Walk, a guy came into my office and submitted two to four posters. The posters had no name on them. When I went to the office and saw these posters, there was a poster which was extremely Hindu-phobic. I saw the poster, tore it up and threw it in the dust-bin.

At another Pune Pride Walk, I got a call from a Queer student from *Film and Television Institute of India* (FTII), Pune, who said he and his friends objected to the appointment of a certain person as the Institute's Director. And they were going to come to Pune Pride Walk

to protest the Director's appointment carrying posters, banners and slogans. I flatly refused and gained one more foe.

Yes, in addition to LGBTIQQA issues, other issues are close to our heart too, but the objective of the Pride Walk is a one-point agenda: being a proud member of the LGBTIA community or being its ally. So, I made it a policy to allow only LGBTIQQA Pride and Rights related posters.

That became another point of friction for those pusillanimous community members who shamelessly sought to hijack a readily available soft target like LGBTIQQA Pride Walk and related platforms to propagate their agenda, using divisive, rabbleroxing tactics, all in the name of solidarity and social good. And no, their contribution to organising pride, taking responsibility for obtaining Police permissions, crowd management, etc. was zilch.

And so, the dissent against my views, steadily building up for a few years reached a climax at the 2017 Pune Pride Walk.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Out and Proud. By Rishabh Deb. *The Times Of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. June 4, 2018.

[2] Nine Times Proud and Counting. By Rishabh Deb. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. June 3, 2019.

[3] Sadly, not even 5% of community members who attend the annual Pune Pride Walk show up at meetings on serious issues. In the background of the June 12, 2016 terrorist and hate attack by Omar Mateen on Gays at the *Pulse* night club at Orlando, Florida, USA, *Samapathik* Trust had organised a condolence meeting on the evening of June 21, 2016 at S. M. Joshi hall. Just about two dozen showed up.

- Condolence meets to pay tribute to Orlando victims in the city. By Swasti Chatterjee. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. June 15, 2016.





## NANGA NAACH (NUDE DANCE)

It was, June 11, 2017, the day of the controversial Pune Pride Walk and I was in a foul mood. I studiously ignored the loser who had scrolled on a paper the words *Nanga Naach* (nude dance) and stuck it to his back; I had more important things on my mind.

As the Pride Walk started, a reporter saw the *Nanga Naach* sign and hurried forward to click a photograph. Seeing this, Amol, one of my Straight volunteers, quickly intervened. Before the reporter could click a picture, he ripped off the paper and at the end of the Pride Walk, handed the paper to me stating, "Sir, had this photograph got in the newspapers, it would have sent a wrong message to the readers. So, I had to do this."

The past week, hatemongers had done a lot of rabble rousing on social media. They conveniently forgot that 'freedom of expression' is not absolute or more likely, had not bothered to read the caveats written in The Constitution of India. They had worked themselves in a frenzy of hate, goaded on by like-minded compatriots from other parts of the country.

As is the annual routine, *Samapathik* Trust gave a written undertaking of the do's and don'ts to the Police and had accepted complete responsibility for the Pride Walk. So non-organisers had no business to impose their will upon us, the organisers. Legally, we were responsible for the Pride Walk and would be held accountable for any misdeeds. I made it amply clear, that if the hatemongers did not like the terms, they need not attend the Pride Walk; they were welcome to organise their own. But till the 2018 Supreme Court Judgment on Sec 377 IPC, the dissenting LGBTIQ community from Pune did not have the balls to do that either. In fact, post the Supreme Court Judgment of 2018, one of our volunteers, Anil Ukarande, organised the first PCMC Pride Walk, under my guidance.[1]

For the Pune Pride Walk of 2017, we had invited parents and siblings of LGBTIQ to be the collective Grand Marshall. It was a token of respect for their acceptance and support of their Gay

children/siblings. Worried that vindictive Queer elements might plan a disruption in the Pride Walk and traumatise supportive parents and siblings, I discussed my concerns with a couple of Gay friends. In case of a fracas, the Police could, of course, intervene, but to have an intermediate layer of control, I decided to hire bouncers for the Pride.[2] I called Umesh Kamble a Straight friend of mine, who was a bodybuilder and asked him whether he could talk to his gymnasium buddies to act as bouncers. I would want about eight to ten of them.

And so with a sleepless night behind me, I had come to the Pride Walk in a foul mood. Before the Pride Walk, I reiterated to the staff, volunteers and bouncers that in case they came across any hanky-panky, they were to handle it at their end. If things escalated, they were to bring it to my notice, and I would give a final warning to the miscreant. And if the miscreant did not accept my warning, I would hand him/her/they over to the Police and file a complaint against them after the Pride Walk.

I am happy to state that such a situation did not arise. We chalked another very successful Pride Walk. Umesh's' gym buddies acting as bouncers walked in tight T-shirts, ensuring order was maintained, trying valiantly to hide their shock and embarrassment at the multi-coloured feathered fan following, who kept pestering them for their contact numbers.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] First LGBTI Pride Walk in Pimpri on Dec 16. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 3. December 13, 2018.

[2] In a first, bouncers walk LGBT march. Anupriya Chatterjee. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 5. June 12, 2017.





## PRIDE HANDOVER

The initial euphoria of organising the annual Pride Walk in Pune had long waned, and with no end in sight to the community in-fighting, it had become an ordeal. I wondered how long I would be able to do this thankless job.

It was the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court Judgment of 2018 that came to my rescue. The Pune LGBTIQ community could now, finally, muster courage and come forward to take charge of the Pride Walk. And so, for the 2019 Pride Walk, I decided to form a committee and hand over the control of the Pride Walk to them. I had made one such attempt a few years ago, but it had come to nought, and the entire work of Police permission and logistics had to be done by my staff. I hoped against hope that this time it would be different.

I organised a meeting at Sambhaji Park, inviting everyone from the community interested in learning how to arrange a Pride Walk. Only six attended, some of them my friends, some my foes and some of my friends who would turn foe. I formed a committee of all those present, except me, restricting my role strictly to mentoring them. I refused to attend their meetings or be an arbitrator if differences arose.

I heard that, after just a couple of meetings, differences broke out between them. Some of the members walked out. I tried to guide the rest, the best I could. My best was not good enough; one of the remaining committee members kept on making comments which were not in the spirit of the secular nature of Pune Pride. I started receiving messages, directing me to his views, requesting me to throw him out. I could not; I was not part of the committee, and my warnings went unheeded.

After the 2019 Pride, the Citizen's Amendment Act (2019) (CAA) and National Registry of Citizens (NRC) controversies, further widened the chasm between various ideological wings.[1] And so after giving it a good thought to the collective failure of the 2019 Pune Pride Walk committee to forge a secular group, I concluded that I would have to

start all over again.

I could not dissolve the Pune Pride Walk organising committee, since I was not a member. But I could, again, become a mentor to someone else interested in organising Pune Pride Walk which was secular and focused only on LGBTIQ Pride. Anil Ukarande, who had formed an LGBTIQA group called *Yutak* in PCMC and had twice arranged LGBTIQA Pride Walk in PCMC, was willing to take charge. After discussions with him, we decided that he would organise the tenth Pune Pride Walk (2020) on the first Sunday of June 2020, but due to COVID-19 crisis, it got postponed indefinitely.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] CAA, NRC row splits Pune pride planners. By Prachee Kulkarni. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 3. February 03, 2020.

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## ADVAIT QUEER FILM FESTIVAL

It was just a few weeks to our maiden *Advait* Queer Film Festival, and we had still not received permission. As the D-day neared, with no clearance from Information & Broadcasting Ministry (I&B) received either by email or letter, panic set in. Did they not get the file? Did they have a problem with an LGBTIQ film festival? That did not make any sense, as *Kashish* the biggest Asian Queer Film Festival has been held annually in Mumbai for many years. The calls I made on the number listed on the website went unanswered. I had not expected this hurdle.

After 2005 when, for the first time, my Trust collaborated with *Open Space* and *Tathapi* Trust to organise a three-day Film Festival *Pahal*[1], it had been nine years before the festival bug bit me again.

During the first decade of 2000, organising Queer film screenings for the community had been one of my favourite activities. Early on Dalip and I had scheduled a free film screening of *Gulabi Aaina* at Dalip's place, and Director Sridhar Rangayan had attended the screening, regaling his experiences with the censor board to a rapt audience.[2] Post the *Gulabi Aaina* screening, I organised a couple of free private screenings at my house and then shifted the screenings to the Queer-friendly venue *Open Space* (then located near Law College Road.)

After we conducted the MSM & TG survey in Pune & PCMC in 2005 followed by the launch of TI projects, screenings Queer films had taken a back seat.

Now in 2014, I set about planning a Queer festival called *Advait* (Unique)[3][4][5]. I curated it as a three-day festival; the first day, a Queer theatre festival; the second day a Queer Film Festival, and the final day would be the Pune Pride Walk.[6][7][8]

To keep things simple, we started with a domestic Film Festival. The addition of international films a couple of years later turned out to be very problematic, and my ambition of showcasing world-class Queer films took a considerable beating. Getting access to movies was one



issue; finance was another. The initial success I got in getting international films was due to a) the Canadian Consulate and b) two American students Katrina Weschler and Haley Carlson who had come to India as part of the Alliance Program for Distance Education. That approach worked for a while, and I am proud that we were able to screen films like *Heartbeats* (Canada), *Love Simon* (USA) and *Call Me by Your Name* (USA.) The latter was never released in India— what a shame.

The other issue was funding; some of the distributors/copyright holders who responded quoted astronomical royalties. I was, to say the least, taken aback when after making inquiries for a single screening of the classic B&W film *Victim* (1961), they asked for around ₹40,000.00 which was almost half the budget of the film festival. Oh! Oh!!

Because of a low budget, we decided to keep the domestic Film Festival for a single day only. We also kept it for free. The bureaucracy involved in getting entertainment tax exemption from Mumbai was simply too much, and I did not have the wherewithal to go to Mumbai time and again to follow up with the matter. The added advantage of keeping it for free was, we could do it at the *National Film Archives of India* (NFAI), Pune which only allowed free screenings. It had a good auditorium, spacious parking space, and was in the centre of the city; in short, convenient in every sense.

While planning for the Film Festival, we also planned to book NFAI separately for a trial run to ensure that the technical equipment and CDs worked well. Most Film Festivals do not have trial runs, but we made it a policy; we did not want any nasty surprises at the last minute. One year, in a trial run, we found that the projector lamp had become noticeably dim; fortunately, the shipment of new lamps arrived before our festival, and we heaved a sigh of relief.

Forming a film selection panel, booking NFAI, giving the call for films, selecting them, hiring a technical consultant, publicity, all of these were minor matters. The primary issue was getting clearance from I&B ministry for short and featured films which did not have certificates from the Indian Censor Board of Film Certification (CBFC.)

The application to I&B had to be couriered well in advance as they could take up to 45 days to clear the file.

At my wit's end, I called the Director of Films, I&B Ministry– “No, we have not received the file”. That sinking feeling. “But, but... we sent it by Speed Post courier, and I know that it was delivered to the correct P.O. Box” I spluttered. “Could you send a soft copy and follow-up with a hard copy?” came the reply. The file had got mislaid.

Interestingly, this would not be the only time the Film Festival file got mislaid, two years down the line, it happened again, but by then we were mentally prepared; we would call time and again to check progress. Mislaid files at I&B Ministry level might alarm the layman and yes it should, but apparently, other ministries in New Delhi did not fare much better. The mandarins in the Home Ministry were blasé in reporting, after almost a year, that INFOSEM (*Integrated Network For Sexual Minorities*)'s file (I was one of the founder members) submitted for registration was untraceable.

Dancing around like a headless chicken, I got my copy of the Film Festival file, scanned all the documents, made a .pdf and sent it to the email id she had provided; made a Xerox set of my hardcopy and couriered it to Delhi. Finally, on September 19, 2014, we got the permission by Fax. The festival was on October 11, 2014, just three weeks away. By then, I was a foul-tempered, nervous wreck.

It was during these nail-biting days of waiting for clearance from I&B ministry that I made the mistake of posting on Facebook that we had yet not received permission, and if we did not get it in time, we might have to cancel the festival. We had already started publicity, so I felt that it was only proper that I inform the audience of the potential showstopper.

That post on Facebook was enough to set off eager beavers furiously writing to me that- (a) BJP Government has just come to power, so what did I expect; (b) Why was I following the legal process in organising the Film Festival? Would I&B ministry be any the wiser if I organised the Film Festival without their consent? And (c) Why did I not organise it at some embassy? (So that I would not need I&B

permission.)

Almost all the emails received on the above themes had one underlying commonality; all of them blamed the BJP Government, which had recently come to power. I am no BJPwala, not by a long shot, but it was crystal clear in their writings that they had not yet come to terms with the party's stunning victory in the *Lok Sabha* (House of the People) elections of 2014 and their anger at the turn of events was palpable.

When I ecstatically announced that I had received permission, the BJP haters retired, disappointed.



Advait Pune Queer International Film Festival Posters- 2018, 2019

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Film fest on masculinity, sexuality, violence begins today. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newsline. Page 3. August 19, 2005. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: The *Pahal* Film Festival was organised at IMDR Auditorium, DES Campus from August 19-21, 2005.)

[2] Many years later, in 2019, Sridhar and Sagar Gupta's feature film *Evening Shadows* would have its Pune premiere at Advait Pune International Queer Film Festival followed by Sridhar and actors Mona Ambegaonkar and Yogesh Kulkarni's dialogue with the audience.

[3] City to host its 1<sup>st</sup> LGBT film festival. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune. August 23, 2014. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: It was not Pune city's first LGBT film festival; it was Samapathik Trusts' first LGBT film festival)

[4] Through A Queer Lens. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 31. October 08, 2014.

[5] Films on a rainbow screen. By Kartiki Nitin Lawate. *Mid-Day*. Page 17. August 26, 2014.

[6] The theatre festival started with the play *1 Madhavbag* (actor Rama Joshi), followed by Amma's felicitation and presenting him the Lifetime Achievement Award at the hands of Dr Raman Gangakhedkar and other sessions of poetry reading and literature. With the announcement of Maharashtra Legislative Assembly elections, the Police got busy managing political rallies and we postponed the Pune Pride Walk at the request of the Police.

[7] *Aajpasun Trutiya Panthi Mahotsav*. (Third Gender Festival Starts Today.) *Maharashtra Times*. Page 4. October 10, 2014.

[8] *Natak-Chitrapatantun 'tyan'che bhavavishwa ulgadnar*. ('Their' emotions will be showcased thru Plays and Movies) *Loksatta*. October 7, 2014.





## CORPORATES

“On World Environment Day, we would like to do a program of planting trees with the LGBT community.” The Corporate HR (or CSR) representative enthusiastically announced on the phone. “Ok”, I responded guardedly, “What do you expect from us?” As it turned out, the expectation was not so ok at all. “You gather a bunch of LGBT crowd, preferably Transgenders, and order some saplings from wherever you can procure them for free, and we will join you for the event... and by the way, also find a place where we could do the tree plantation”. I will leave you to guess as to how the call ended. You understand the meaning of the word 'exploitation' only when you start dealing with corporates.

There were some genuine exceptions, and I am deeply grateful to them for their struggle to be LGBTIQA inclusive even during the Sec 377 IPC era. I knew a few companies in Pune who worked on LGBTIQA inclusion at the workplace; all were IT companies. A few of them, e.g. *Thoughtworks*, *BNY Mellon* etc., kept interacting with me on this issue for years. Companies like *Thoughtworks*, *BNYMellon*, *IBM*, *Symantec* etc. made it a point to attend the annual Pune Pride Walk. Thank you. But make no mistake; such LGBTIQA inclusive companies were exceptions and not the rule. Most shied way from arranging even a single LGBTIQA awareness session. And, no, my honorarium was not an issue.

There have been countless sessions that I have done for free, never allowing lack of funds in an institution to stop me from conducting a session. There are quite a few who hesitantly ask me, “What are your financial expectations?” and I reply, “Whatever you can afford”.

I have seen very poor NGOs struggling to give me ₹100.00 as token honorarium and many a time, I have, knowing the hard work they do, refused to accept any. In one instance, knowing that a school was in dire straits, I gave them blanket permission to invite me without any commitment to an honorarium for as long as they wanted. It was after a year or two that the institution saw a turnaround, and they paid the dues. So honorarium was not an issue, never was.

The problem was most corporates were (and are) loath to deal with

LGBTIQA inclusion; Sec 377 IPC was just a pretext for their reluctance; homophobia and transphobia was and is all-pervasive. So wherever possible, they avoid this topic. Or if they are pushed for it by their western counterparts or in cases where they can earn brownie points when angling for contracts in the western world, they pay lip service to it.

My first exposure to LGBTIQA inclusion in the corporate world occurred in 2013, when I got a call from an MNC. A lady with a soft, silky voice was on the line. “Hi, is this Bindumadhavan?” the 'an' at the end made me suspect that she was a South Indian. “I received your reference from one of my colleagues that you are a Gay activist working for LGBT”.

“Yes, I am”.

“We at ----- are planning on having a sensitisation session at our Pune campus but, before we proceed, I would like to know whether there will be any financial angle involved.”

“No. I have done quite a few sessions for free”, my answer was music to her ears.

“Oh! That's good because you see relations get spoiled when money comes into the picture.” The South Indian accent unmistakable in her pronunciation of the word 'spoiled'. No guesses on how the corporate made so much profit.

So, in 2013, I conducted a couple of sessions for that company. They were very nervous during the first session, wary of what I would speak. So they wanted to see my presentation, beforehand. They vetted it and demanded quite a few changes.

The focus of the sessions was kept very narrow: definition of terms, non-discrimination and sending a clear signal to all employees that they were not to make or encourage homophobic, transphobic jokes. The web conference went well. I asked the corporate, well knowing what the answer would be, whether I could post on Facebook that they had organised such a session. No way, Jose.

Later on, I did another session for them; that too went well. I invited the corporate to participate in the annual Pune Pride Walk. No allyship then.

Over some time, I did sessions for other corporates too. I was glad that they were making efforts to sensitise their staff on LGBTIQ issues and tried my best to support them, but I stumbled across another problem. Some got obsessed with the outcome from day one.

“Bindu, we have had three events so far, and yet not a single LGBT person in our staff has come out. What does it mean? That we don't have LGBT staff? Or the message is not getting to them? The reason we are asking is, senior executives are questioning as to why we should continue with these events, as there does not seem to be a quantifiable outcome.”

After a couple of D&I events, did corporates really expect Gay staff to climb the receptionist desk, megaphone in hand and a rainbow flag around their necks a la Ayushmaan Khurana in *Shubh Mangal Jyaada Savadhan* movie? A rainbow 'G' thong allowed only on Friday casual day? After spending a lifetime dealing with overt and covert homophobia? And transphobia? And... is it not too much to ask for too soon? Considering that in your company (pun intended), women at the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century still continue to get a rotten deal, in comparison with men. It is going to take time, and we will just have to be patient.

All this does not excuse the closeted LGBTIQ community to stay in the closet forever; the onus is on the community to use these opportunities to come out, step by small step and become part of the brave new world. Cowardice will not get us anywhere.

Till 2018, the Indian corporate sector would look for candidates with academic qualifications and experience; post the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court judgment of 2018, some actively started seeking an additional qualification: a candidate who belonged to the LGBTIQ community. I can visualise the advertisement: “Requirement. A Symbolic Candidate. Qualifications B.E., M.B.A., L.G.B.T.I.Q. With at least three years of experience in talking on sexuality and gender on special occasions (only.)” Methinks there is no real work of empowerment here.

Recently, post COVID-19 lockdown, a Transgender was selected by a company in Pune. She was told that she would get around 11,000 Rs a month (Since the offer was not made in writing, I cannot provide an

accurate figure.) She would have to work in three shifts and arrange for her own transport. (On the average, it takes about one and half hours to travel the distance of around 25-30 kms from her home to the company.) She would have to work six days a week and may also have to work on Sundays if the work load was high. She was encouraged to take a room on rent near the company so that she could avoid the time and cost of travel. She refused. Should I call the company's offer 'inclusion thru exploitation' or 'exploitation thru inclusion'?

I must again state here that I am deeply grateful to those few but precious corporates who, in letter and spirit, struggle to be LGBTIQA inclusive.

It was sometime after the 2018 Supreme Court Judgment that I took a call to stop working with corporates. I foolishly thought that with the Sec 377 IPC judgment in our favour, it made sense to have a session where I would invite Mr Parmesh Shahani from *Godrej Industries*. They had done a lot on LGBTIQA inclusion, and he could share his experiences so that other corporates could take tips and also share their journey of LGBTIQA inclusion at their workplace. Parmesh graciously agreed and waived any honorarium and travel expenses. I announced the session and sent invitations to all I knew. Sadly only two corporates responded, and I had to cancel the session. The cancellation caused me heartburn, but on introspecting, I felt that perhaps the corporate culture was not an area that I could adjust to and maybe I should leave that part to others.

Fortunately for me, the decision to walk away from corporates overlapped with another opportunity that was coming my way-working on LGBTIQ inclusion with hospitals, namely- *Bharati Hospital* (Pune) and *KEM Hospital* (Pune.)







## HOSPITALS

“Would you like to explore the option of collaborating with *Bharati* Hospital on starting an LGBTI inclusive clinic?” The call was from Dr Jyoti Shetty, Professor and HOD of Psychiatry Department, *Bharati* Hospital (Pune) and I eagerly set up a meeting with her to discuss the issue in detail.

It was not the first time I was dealing with *Bharati* Hospital. In 2017, I had sent a feeler through Psychiatrist Dr Arvind Panchanadikar, a consultant at *Bharati* Hospital, whether they would be interested in having an LGBTIQA session, for their PG Psychiatry students. The session would focus on LGBTIQA non-discrimination by medical practitioners, as a part of our *Being Equal* Project funded by VIIV, HST and *Samapathik* Trust. He spoke with Dr Jyoti Shetty who enthusiastically supported the idea.

Unlike the session for PG students at MIMH, which was a fiasco (Refer Book I- *Shadowland*. Chapter: *Newbie Cockups*), this session went well. Dr Shetty spoke to the Medical Director, Dr Sanjay Lalwani, and arranged a similar session with second, third and fourth year UG students of *Bharati* Medical College. After the session, Dr Shetty made it a point to inform me that she plans to arrange such a session once every 3-4 years so that the entire batch gets the information. I was delighted at the outcome. Sometime later, I also got a chance to address medical students of *Bharati* College of Homeopathy, on LGBTIQA at the invitation of Dr Laxmi Mali (who had previously worked at the *Vanchit Vikas* clinic located in Budhwar Peth).

In the meeting, Dr Jyoti Shetty, asked me, whether *Samapathik* Trust would be interested in formally collaborating with *Bharati* Hospital for LGBTIQA referrals. It was true that we referred clients to the Psychiatry department, but could we work on a more formal arrangement through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)?

I mentioned that the Trust would like to have the most frequently used services by LGBTI, included in the arrangement. I undertook the initiative to draft a list, and Dr Shetty was to try to find at least one

Doctor in each department specified in the list who was sensitive or willing to work with LGBTI patients.

As far as HIV/AIDS or STIs were concerned, we had a lot of referral linkages, so these were not high priority issues for me. Gender affirmative medical services in addition to Psychiatric care, definitely were. So it was decided to have a Psychiatrist, Endocrinologist and Plastic Surgeon all under one roof. Transgender persons faced a nightmare running around trying to find sensitive and knowledgeable doctors for gender affirmative medical services; their harrowing tales of transphobic doctors deserves a separate book.

In my work, I had been fortunate; Dr Arvind Panchanadikar had introduced me to Dr Varsha Jagtap (Endocrinologist), and she had proved to be very supportive. So we had already been referring Transgender persons who approached me for Hormone Therapy to her; it also helped that she was a consultant at *Bharati* Hospital.

*Bharati* Hospital had a MOU template, and I worked on it in consultation with our lawyer Adv. Santosh Lonkar. Dr Shetty and I ensured that inclusion, sensitivity, non-discrimination and confidentiality became the corner-stones of the MOU. We agreed that it would be a non-exclusive referral arrangement, i.e. I was free to refer my clients to other medical institutions and medical practitioners too. It was also mutually agreed that neither the Trust nor the hospital was to charge the patient/client or each other for providing such referrals.

A short meeting with Dr Sanjay Lalwani, the Medical Director, resulted in the approval of the project, and we were good to go. All in all, it turned out to be a good arrangement, and I am grateful to *Bharati* Hospital for their initiative.[1]

While I was working with *Bharati* Hospital, I got another breakthrough through Taysir Moonim. She was the Psychologist for primary mental health services for staff and students of KEM Hospital (KEMH), Pune. She was interested in working on LGBTIQ inclusive healthcare service delivery and inclusion for employees at KEMH in a systemic manner and reached out to me. She wanted to know what

kind of support *Samapathik* Trust could extend, as a CBO.

We discussed at length, the various aspects of support I could offer, and I informed her that we would be more than happy to provide technical support for free. Having confirmed community support from us, she outlined and concretised her proposal to KEM management on how to take such a programme for the hospital forward. It turned out that KEM management was supportive but had initially been hesitant not knowing how things would work out. They decided in favour of trying it out, starting with one talk with me as the speaker.

And so, the start of this project was a session, 'A Dialogue on Inclusive Healthcare Service Delivery', organised by Taysir at KEMH on July 2, 2018, for medical professionals, administrators and management. Despite uncertainty around the attendance, the hall filled up with about forty attendees, and a couple of HODs made it a point to attend. It went well, and after that, there was no looking back, thanks to Taysir's perseverance, Dr Sachin Melinkeri's support and Shirin Wadia's (General Administrator) unstinted backing.

The first phase of work on LGBTIQ inclusion involved dialogue on LGBTIQ inclusion with the staff of various departments; Nurses, Lab Technicians, Security personnel, House assistants, Administrative staff etc. The experience of these dialogues with six hundred and thirty-one staff members, in twenty-one sessions and spanned over six months (August 2019 to January 2020) turned out to be a very enriching experience.

The participants' disarming admission that they had never thought of how a Transgender patient perceived the hospital experience, their views on identification and addressing a Transgender patient, varied opinions on Transgender patients' access to washrooms and wards was an unforgettable experience. It helped me better understand the complexities of Transgender persons' inclusion in a healthcare system.

During this period, I interacted with Jayita Phulsunge, Public Diplomacy and Communications Officer of *Canada Consulate* in India

(Mumbai office) and sent her a proposal for financial assistance for printing a manual on *Basics of LGBTIQ Inclusion in Hospitals*, based on my experience with *Bharati* Hospital and KEMH.

The *Canada Consulate* approved the proposal and eventually, the first edition of the manual, a one of its kind in India, was released in February 2020[2][3]. It was a few months behind schedule due to delay from my side; my father's accident and subsequent surgery took precedent. But The *Canada Consulate* showed great patience, which came as a pleasant surprise; patience from a funding agency is always a miracle.

The first phase of work on LGBTIQ inclusion ended with two trial runs, one with a Transwoman and another one with two Transmen. It was one of the most important steps before starting work on the policy of inclusion: to have the patient/client go through the healthcare system as it exists before any change is incorporated.

Only Taysir, the examination doctor and I knew about this; we kept the rest of the staff intentionally in the dark. I was present at the dry runs to play the role of observer, the anxious patient/clients aware that I was there to support them if the need arose. The need arose a couple of times, and I helped smooth things out; answering a nurse when she questioned me about the two Transmen who had accompanied me, "Why are these men in Gynec. OPD?"; or to assist doctors in taking history; one doctor seemed uncomfortable.

The trial runs reminded me again, for the umpteenth time, of the stress and travails that a Transgender person goes through for the simplest of things which the rest of us take for granted. Simple tasks turn out to be insurmountable challenges; day in and day out, exhausting them physically and emotionally. So much so, that they start withdrawing from the world, seeking solace in tiny spaces that are willing to accommodate them, forever hoping that they do not have to step out into a world where they did not fit in. KEMH was one of the few hospitals willing to study, understand and modify the healthcare system to ensure that Transgender patients felt at home, and for that, I am deeply grateful to it. (The second phase- work on the policy has got delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis.)

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] City hospital, NGO sign MoU for better LGBTI healthcare. Sukhada Khandge. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 5. January 29, 2019.

[2] The case studies of *Bharati* Hospital (Pune) and KEM Hospital (Pune) are included in the *Basics of LGBTIQ Inclusion in Hospitals* manual-Version 1.0.

[3] Queer rights body, city hospitals prepare manual for inclusive healthcare. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newline. Page 1. February 26, 2020.

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## QUEERSEED FUND INITIATIVE

As I rode my bike and saw the desolate, arid landscape in the scorching heat, it suddenly struck me that I had not seen a single person on the road for a while. It was the summer of 2017; land and rocks around were blazing in the afternoon heat and other than a solitary bike now and then, nothing moved. No farmers in the fields, nothing growing. No cattle in sight, there was nothing to graze. The streams were dry, a million cracks running through their arid beds.

Further down the road, a thin youth (from a school<sup>₹</sup>) walked, with a rucksack on his back, turning now and then checking for a vehicle; I assumed looking for a ride. As he heard my bike, he turned again and stopping, signalled me. “Where are you going<sup>₹</sup>” he asked. “*Pemgiri*”. He nodded, gratefully clambering on the bike.

I had left Pune, early in the morning, travelling to Otur, then on to Brahmanwada and was on my way towards *Pemgiri* a small fort in Sangamner district. As we drove, I wondered whether he would have asked me for the ride had he known my sexuality. Probably not. Generally, I do not give a lift to anyone in the city. But in the remote areas, there are few private jeeps and fewer State Transport buses. Many villagers just start walking, hoping to get a jeep along the way, the men signalling the passing bikes for a ride. But it is the women who need it more. They are generally carrying a water can or *jalan* (wooden sticks for fire) or a child. But no woman could risk asking a strange man for a lift. And I had never seen a woman in such remote places driving a bike. Women get a rotten deal everywhere.

“Stop here”. As he got down, he expressed his thanks; I asked for directions. As I followed the bumpy road, I saw a few farms alongside, and a melancholy mood came over me. As happens at such times, I again wondered how I would have fared, had I been born in such a remote place where mere survival is all you could hope for, at best. I despaired for all the Gay youths out there who would perhaps never be able to meet someone like them, who would never celebrate their sexuality, would forever hide in shame and fear and self-hate. And it

was not just this part of the State; going on small treks to remote forts for years I know that most of the State is in the stone-age as far as awareness and sensitivity to LGBTIQ issues is concerned.

The melancholy turned to anger, as I thought of the riches of the LGBTIQ community in the cities. Their obnoxious splurging of funds, their chic parties, their branded clothes, their innerwear bands publicly, proudly displaying their worth. But expecting anything from them would be foolish. The city crowd was forever lost, living in its minuscule world. Those out deluded themselves all had been achieved now that they had escaped the fate of the closet. Those in the closet deluded themselves that partying and cruising was all that was to be achieved, now that they had stepped from a socially enforced closet into a self-created one.

And I made up my mind. I would have to shift my focus away from the city slowly.[1] It was not that there was no work in the city. There will always be, and I would continue to work in the city, for, after all, I was a creature of the city and would not survive outside of it. But I could reduce some of the activities, hand them over to others if they were interested or shut them down if not.

And as I rode on, I kept wondering how I could start. My first experience of supporting MSM & TG activities outside of Pune, a few years ago, had not been good. I had provided a small donation to a NGO from a district in Maharashtra so that they could start doing some systematic work. I invited them for an exposure visit to Pune, to learn field work, administration and accounting. My team had taken them to the *Khadakmal Ali* Police Station where a LGBTIQ dialogue had been scheduled with Police personnel and *Samapathik* Trust team. I clearly remember, Tinesh Chopade mentioning that Sr. PI Sandipan Sawant Sir In-Charge of the Police Station had been very supportive. It was not a good omen that one trustee of the NGO, during his entire stay with us, did nothing, but kept bugging my staff to provide him *pantis* (Tops) for the night.

Soon, fights broke out between the NGO trustees, and while I initially tried to intervene, I soon gave up, realising that it was a lost cause. In the meanwhile, by taking the risk of donating to the NGO, I got into

the bad books of another NGO working in that area as they had not taken kindly to my assisting another NGO to do HIV/AIDS, STI prevention work in 'their territory'. Embittered by this experience, I was wary; I would have to think carefully before supporting activities outside of Pune and the extent of my involvement in implementation and supervision.

I decided to create a corpus fund out of my savings and keep my scope limited to providing small donations for small activities like a workshop, Pride Walk etc. organised by individuals, groups, NGOs, not just in Maharashtra but anywhere in India. And so, in 2017 the idea of a personal *Bindumadhav Khire Queer Seed Fund Initiative* (Domestic) was born.

Aware that people in remote areas do not have technical skills for writing proposals and considering the diversity of languages, I designed a simple Google Form requiring minimal details.[2] I did away with the requirement of submission of the audit report since the donations were going to be very small, but the recipient had to submit the activity report. All communication was to be through email and softcopies, virtually eliminating all other paperwork.

I formed a Committee to screen applications, and in the first year, we received thirty applications.[3] It was a good start. I forwarded the forms to the Screening Committee and started my work of screening. It was this task that had unexpectedly turned out to be depressing.

Oh! Please, let this application not be another copy job, I groaned as I read the next application— no such luck. The highest number of applications was from a particular State, and many of the applicants from that State had copied from each other. As I read these applications, it gave me a surreal feeling that they had all got together to fill the forms, and tweaked the applications by varying the activity to be done. One applied for Media Advocacy, another for Police Advocacy with a slight tweaking of the budget. And on and on... The spelling mistakes were the same, and an additional full stop put in the narration, by someone, by mistake, had been repeated over and over. There was simply no way of knowing who was the original author of the applications. I stopped reading and got up; I needed a break.



After going through the selection process, one organisation that was selected did not bother to respond. I will never know why. Communication with them went unanswered.

Barring one instance where one recipient of the Seed Fund botched up a film project, the first year saw eight NGOs, groups, individuals conduct events and submit reports. But in subsequent years, I started coming across some NGOs and individuals (some of them self-styled activists) who despite repeated reminders, did not send activity reports. Did they conduct the events? What happened to the donation? Who knows?

After *Bindu Queer Rights Foundation* was registered in March 2019, the Foundation took over the initiative and Director Tinesh Chopade, and I started screening the applications.

Starting an International Seed Fund Initiative in 2019, turned out to be more problematic than I had anticipated. Not having contacts overseas, searching for LGBTIQA NGOs doing good work in Asia and Africa was a challenge. From Asia, I had ruled out Pakistan as I did not know how the funds would be utilised. And if they got diverted to terrorist causes that would be the worst nightmare to befall us. We finally selected an NGO from an Asian country, where same-sex-intercourse is a crime, to train Gay men in documenting the harassment of Gay men at various places.

It was while sending the money to the NGO that I realised that international funds transfer was not allowed from the Foundation bank account. I could only transfer with RBI clearance. So the International part of the initiative could not be run by the Foundation, and I transferred the funds online through my personal bank account to the foreign NGO bank account.

Despite some disappointments, I am happy that there are quite a few individuals, groups and NGOs who are genuine and committed to doing sincere and honest work. Their reports are a solace, a reminder that a large part of the funds issued by me have been used for a good purpose. And to seek the genuine ones, I have to pay a heavy price—judiciously betting my hard-earned money on new and old applicants

and hoping for the best.[4]

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Till the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court Judgment of 2018, very few out-station opportunities, for sessions on LGBTIQA, had come my way. My expectation, post the 2018 Supreme Court Judgment, was that things would dramatically improve on this front. I was naive. This assumption was quickly dispelled as many of my requests, to outstation institutes/organisations, for conducting a workshop/session on LGBTIQA for free (no honorarium or travel or lodging charged to the institute/organisation) went unanswered.

[2] This scheme had its limitations too. Quite a few LGBTIQA community members living in rural areas, doing good work did not know how to use the internet or how to fill the application form in English. So, in 2020, *Bindu Queer Rights Foundation* started giving donations, thru the Domestic Queer Seed Fund Initiative, on a need basis, without the requirement of the form, after verifying the credentials of the recipient.

[3] The committee comprised Tinesh Chopade and Nitin Karani (Trustees of *Samapathik* Trust), Vivek Raj Anand (CEO of HST, Mumbai), Shruta Nyetra (Research Manager at HST), Owais Khan, Souvik Ghosh and myself.

[4] At times, other donors too have chipped in funds for the initiative.





## QUEERKATTA

It had been many years since I had last come to *Bhakti-Shakti* garden at Nigdi in PCMC. As I climbed the knoll and sat on the slope of the well-maintained lawn a few meters from the *Bhakti-Shakti* (Shivaji Maharaj and Tukaram Maharaj) statue, a cool breeze started. The tall pole nearby, for hoisting the tricolour flag, was a recent addition; it had not been there the last time I had passed by.

I removed my slippers (although it was unsuitable footwear for everyday wear, I habitually wore them to work) and sat down, feeling the cool grass under my feet and thankful to the maintenance crew for keeping the garden clean. It was evening, the Pune-Mumbai highway in front of the garden was jam-packed, an ongoing construction adding to its woes. Children played around me, shrieking with joy as they threw lighted plastic toys while their parents sat nearby, chatting, with one eye on their kids.

Years ago, after my breakup, I had started feeling very lonely and to relieve myself of that loneliness, I had one day gone to *Saras Baug* (a garden) alone. A mistake. I sought a place to sit, which was reasonably clean, but it was no mean feat. Scraps of paper and plastic littered the whole area. Finally, I had uncomfortably sat on the poorly maintained lawn, hoping to relax and enjoy the evening, at peace with myself. A *chanawala* (a lite snack seller) passed by, expertly glancing at me, checking me out as a potential customer. A Straight couple sat nearby making out; their private moment ill-concealed by an open umbrella.

Suddenly, a wave of jealousy swept over me, and I turned away. But the image stayed; I should not have come. It was the same reason that for years, I had avoided attending weddings of my relatives; my parents gave lame excuses for my absence. Weddings unerringly underlined my solitude; I was an outlier amongst the norm and trying to entertain myself checking out eye-candy, and there was a lot of it out there, decked in finery, was of little help.

As I quickly got up to go, a Hijra headed towards the couple, the noise of her claps cleaving their cherished moment together; it seemed

solace was a mirage for everyone.

So, a few years later, when I decided to start a monthly *QueerKatta* (Queer social gatherings)[1][2], it was with dread that I went to do a recce of *Shivaji Maharaj* garden (near *Saras Baug*) and *Sambhaji* Park in Pune. But this time, it had been different; I did not feel that aching loneliness.

At least one reason was that, by then, I had reconciled myself to living alone. It had not been easy to accept the truth but, now that I had reluctantly faced it, it had brought a kind of closure to the issue. But that was not the only reason; I had started spending some time looking at my journey so far, at what I had tried to achieve (not always with success) and felt content. That I continued to receive emails and messages appreciating my work/books and meet youngsters who looked up to me had a soothing effect. I, to my peril, had ignored all these achievements, after my breakup. I had been in too much pain to understand its value.

Additionally, along the way, I had acquired foster sons, friends, and I took a personal interest in their wellbeing. And finally, I was thankful that I was in India to take care of my aged parents, who entirely dependent on me now needed me the most. All these factors had a stake in that serenity.

As I checked my cell phone, I wondered whether the first *QueerKatta* at *Bhakti-Shakti* garden would succeed. The Pune *QueerKatta* had succeeded beyond my wildest dreams.[3] The first one was held on the first Friday of January 2018 when Sec 377 IPC was still intact, and I had expected only a few to show up a couple of times, before they stopped attending. I had erroneously assumed that I would face the same experience I had faced seventeen years ago, when I first started monthly support group meetings. Happily, this time, my fears were proved wrong, and while regulars continued to attend the monthly meetings, I started seeing a newbie or two at every meeting. Now the average turnout at this monthly public social gathering is about fifteen or so. Most of them are in their twenties. I am now only a catalyst, but at least for the time being, an essential one, to bring them together.

As journalists started doing stories on *QueerKatta*, they asked me the same question, “Why do you think this is a success?” Pune city had private spaces for Gay, Transgender and LBT groups to drink, dance and cruise the night away. Yet, the community had other needs too: safe, public, non-sexual spaces where, amongst the mainstream, they can be who they are, whatever be their economic status. These needs had long been ignored by other LGBTIQ groups, as there is no commercial value for the organiser. For the youngsters, rich or poor, it has become imperative that they take a deep, free, unafraid breath in open public spaces, take the first baby step in getting out of the suffocating closet. The idea caught on, and I hear that a few groups in other cities too have started similar public Queer social gatherings.

With PCMC community members finding it difficult to come to Pune city for the *QueerKatta*, we agreed that we would organise the event, on alternate months, in Pune and PCMC. And I had chosen *Bhakti-Shakti* garden in Nigdi for the PCMC *QueerKatta*.

As I was about to recheck the time, two youths trickled in, through the gate. Squinting to recognise them, I waved from a distance, and one waved back. Yes, one was Anil, the other one I did not remember seeing before. Newbie.[4]



*QueerKatta*. December 6, 2019. *Sambhaji Park*, Pune. Gay men, Lesbians and Transmen are writing letters of protest on the flawed Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (2019) to Hon'ble President of India, requesting him not to ratify it. Seventeen letters were written and posted.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Since I loved trekking, before starting *QueerKatta*, I thought that it would be a good opportunity for the Queer community and the Straight community to socialise and form friendships. So I had organised a trek to *Kenjalgad* fort and *Raireshwar*, but only thirteen (most of them Straight) had shown up. Many Queer people said they were uninterested in trekking and I gave up the idea.

- How about a queer trek to begin 2016? By Swasti Chatterjee. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. January 2, 2016.
- Despite the buzz, city queer trek finds few takers. By Swasti Chatterjee. *The Times of India*. Pune Times. Page 1. February 24, 2016.

[2] *QueerKatta* was organised first Friday of every month, from 6.30 pm to 8.00 pm. Initially, it was for the community and allies. Still, under the garb of supporters, various college students started exploiting the event for research and surveys. So I had no choice but to restrict the event to community members only.

[3] First, meet of LGBT Community held in a canteen near Garware college. By Ardhra Nair. *The Times of India*. Page 4. January 6, 2018.

[4] *Samalinginsaathi hakkacha asa Queerkatta. Shaharatil tarutarunin kadun nigdi yethe survat.* (Social Public Gathering for Gays. Started in Nigdi by Gay youths) *Sakal*. Pune, PCMC-Today. Page 4. 07/08/2019.





## DAWN IN SLOW MOTION

For me, a good stress-buster has been, to visit *Parvati*, a hilltop temple formally called *Devdeveshwar* temple. It was just a few kilometres from my house and going there in the evening once in a while, on my way home, or Sundays was a good relaxing exercise for me. On top of the hill there are a few temples, the main one being the *Devdeveshwar* temple. A small adjoining path leads to the final resting place of Nanaasaheb Peshwa who, having lost his son Vishwasrao in the crushing defeat at *Panipat*, breathed his tragic last a few months later, on June 23, 1761. Next to it is the *Kartikswami* temple. Women could enter that temple on only one day of the year- *Kartik Navami* (9<sup>th</sup> day of the Hindu month of *Kartik*.)

I remember my primary school days when our family would visit *Parvati*, my mother and sister standing outside while my Dad and I visited the *Kartikswami* temple. I had never questioned this blatant misogynist practice; I had unquestioningly accepted it.

One Sunday evening, as I climbed *Parvati* hill, a pleasant surprise awaited me. At the entrance of the *Kartikswami* temple, a new board in Marathi proclaimed that all men and women would be allowed access throughout the year. How many decades had to pass by for this change?

Delighted, I took out my cell phone from my pocket and clicked a photo of it for Facebook. Then searching for a location where I could get range, I called up Vidyatai Bal who had, in 2016, approached the Bombay High Court for implementation of The Maharashtra Hindu Places of Public Worship Act, 1956[1]. As Vidyatai picked up the call, I told her of the development; she laughed happily stating, "I can no longer climb *Parvati*, but it's good to know you are a witness to this change". The *Shani-Shingnapur* temple, too, which restricted entry only to men, had changed its policy; women and Transgender persons were now allowed to worship at the shrine.[2]

Yes, I was fortunate to see this change. Doubly so, as recently, I had been witness to another milestone in the struggle for equality and

dignity. Post the summer vacation, the Supreme Court had quickly started hearing a clutch of Article 32 Writs challenging the constitutional validity of Sec 377 IPC and, on September 6, 2018, we had passed the final exam with flying colours; all the five Hon'ble judges of the Constitution Bench: CJI Deepak Misra, A. M. Khanwilkar, Dr D. Y. Chandrachud, Rohinton Nariman and Indu Malhotra had unanimously struck down Sec 377 IPC as unconstitutional in so far as it criminalised consensual intercourse 'against the order of nature' between two adults with Hon'ble Justice Indu Malhotra going so far as to say that history owed an apology to the LGBT community. The weeks after the judgment had been exhilarating.[3][4][5]

Muslim, Christian and Hindu right-wing fundamentalists and nut jobs (is there a difference between the two?) had been expectedly disappointed with the Judgment. But, what came as a big surprise to me was that a few socialists too had been disappointed. "Have you read the judgment carefully? Are you sure there are no loopholes in this judgment?".

My reply: "Yes and No." Some of them, diehard conspiracy theorists, had warned me that with the BJP government (read as Hindutva government) in the saddle, the Judgment was not likely to go in our favour; their firm belief was that the Judgment would kowtow to the BJP will. Has a defeatist mentality beset the leftists/socialists? Wallowing in defeat all the time? Pitying themselves as victims of an unjust legislature, executive and judiciary? Distrusting institutions to the extent that they casually suspected the integrity of all the Supreme Court Judges on a Constitution Bench?

But, before Hon'ble CJI Deepak Misra retired, within one month, rapid-fire Judgments on various petitions had proved their conjecture wrong. On September 6, 2018, a five-judge Constitution Bench declared Sec 377 IPC to be unconstitutional. On September 27, 2018, a five-judge Constitution Bench declared Sec 497 IPC (Adultery) to be unconstitutional[6]. On September 28, 2018, the *Sabarimala* case Judgment declared that restricting entry of women of menstruating ages, in the *Sabarimala* temple was unconstitutional.[7] So the Hon'ble judges had hammered not one



but three nails successively in that conspiracy coffin.

But, today, as I sat down on a stone bench near the *Devdeveshwar* temple, I was sad. After the celebration had come the blues. Discounting the *AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Aandolan* (ABVA) petition[8], it had taken us almost 17 years from 2001 to 2018 to get here. How long would it take to win the battle of Gay civil unions/marriage₹

Some community members do not consider the legalisation of Gay civil unions/marriage as a priority, accusing it of being an imitation of a heterosexual, patriarchal construct. Yes, in many ways it is, right down to the ugly power dynamics and at times the violence associated with it.[9] But despite the problems, I am in strong favour of Gay civil unions/marriage; security-wise it is an indispensable right.

I was happy that my foster son and *Samapathik* Trust trustee Tinesh Chopade had settled down with his boyfriend, Abhishek Sharma. I am all for them getting married in India, even if the marriage has no legal sanctity. I feel, they owe a public commitment to each other and additionally, it will be a signal to the society at large that they are as committed in their relationship as Straight couples. I was delighted when *Samapathik* Trust trustee Nitin Karani married his boyfriend, Thomas Joseph, whilst in the USA for a vacation; in New York, in the presence of their relatives.[10]

I heartily applaud the courage of Gay men like Hrishikesh Sathawane (settled in the USA, with his husband Vinh) who, in 2018, came to his hometown, *Yavatamal* (Maharashtra State) with Vinh and got married in a public ceremony, in the presence of Hrishikesh' parents, relatives, friends and well-wishers. I strongly feel, that those Gays who think that Straights have a good system of marriage, even if it's not perfect, should strengthen the concept of marriage by embracing it and fighting for legal recognition of our marital bond.

And so, after the 2018 Judgment, I started work on Gay marriage. I approached Gay couples to elicit their views (Tinesh and Abhishek; Nitin and Thomas were very enthusiastic) on filing a petition in The Bombay High Court, for recognition of Gay marriage thru the Special

Marriage Act, 1954 which was a secular Act.

Challenging The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 or for that matter, any religious marriage Act for discriminating against Gay couples would not be wise, at this stage, as religious recognition of Gay marriage is a tricky issue. We would, unnecessarily, invite the wrath of the 'guardians' of religions (and there were just too many of those.) Frankly, we had done absolutely NO work on the ground to get the predominantly religious populace to see our point of view.

I spoke to a lawyer in Mumbai who agreed to undertake the work and then, despite repeated reminders, did not follow up on it; my search for a lawyer started anew.

Meanwhile, Tinesh and Abhishek were laying the groundwork for the Gay marriage petition and applied to marry, in Mumbai, under The Special Marriage Act, 1954. The competent authorities did not accept the application and directed them to The Inspector General of Registration and Controller of Stamps, Pune.

I then visited the office of The Inspector General of Registration and Controller of Stamps, Pune with a copy of the application from Tinesh and Abhishek and a letter from *Samapathik* Trust (The letter is dated February 12, 2019). There was a moment of silence as the Officer felt the shock of my explanation of two men wanting to marry each other. He awkwardly pointed out that he had no powers to take a call on that. Politely declining to accept the application, he referred me to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Mumbai.

On February 21, 2019, I couriered letters, on this issue, to a few ministries of the State of Maharashtra. The Law and Judiciary Department replied that as the subject matter pertained to the Public Health Department and Women & Child Welfare Department they had forwarded the letter to these departments for necessary action.[11]

As I waited and waited for a response from them, came the news that a Gay couple from Kerala had filed a petition, in the Kerala High Court, which stated that The Special Marriage Act, 1954, which is a secular law, violates Article 15 of the Constitution of India by barring same-

sex marriages.[12] I again consulted a lawyer who explained, that if another Gay couple files a petition for Gay marriage on the same grounds, in The Bombay High Court, the Central Government could call for clubbing of all such petitions in the Supreme Court, eliminating an essential level of appeal for us. So for the time being, I suspended the work we were doing on Gay marriage. And so the struggle on various fronts, for equality and acceptance, goes on.

But again, coming back to the point before, how long before we get our rights? How long before we get our right to marriage, adoption, surrogacy and the right to serve in the military? How long will it take before the governments and the populace start accepting us as equal members of the society? I suspect, sadly, that it will be a very long time if we go by the evidence that Dalits and women are still rampantly discriminated against and their struggle for equality and dignity has been going on for much longer than the Queer movement in India.

A democratic country like ours, a country aspiring to be a world leader, should be leading from the front in bringing about change that celebrates diversity and equality in letter and spirit, relegating religion to the place where it belongs, in a dark personal corner.

Why has it taken so long for a single change in Sec 377 IPC? In the meanwhile, how many lives have we lost to suicides? How many hopes crushed? Relying on the arduous path of the Courts; to snatch from the government, a fundamental right which was rightfully ours, to begin with. With impotent political parties (all of them) watching the flailing of a statistical sexual minority from the sidelines, wishing away our existence so that they wouldn't have to take a public stand on the issue.



The board outside *Kartikswami* Temple at *Parvati*, Pune

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] In 2016, Vidyatai Bal and Adv. Nilima Vartak had filed a PIL (55/2016) in The Bombay High Court with a prayer for the issue of a Writ of Mandamus directing the Respondents to implement the provisions of The Maharashtra Hindu Places of Public Worship Act, 1956 and to give directions to Superintendent of Police and District Collector of all districts throughout the state of Maharashtra to ensure that the provisions of the said Act are implemented forthwith. The said Act was brought in existence to make better provision for the throwing open of places of public worship to all classes and sections of Hindus.

[2] Third gender gets right to pray at the temple. By Anurag Bende. *Pune Times Mirror*. Page 1. April 9, 2016.

[3] In The Supreme Court of India

Navtej Singh Johar & Ors v/s Union of India Ministry of Law and Justice Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 76 of 2016 With

Writ Petition (Civil) No. 572 of 2016. Akkai Padmashali v/s Union of India

Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 88 of 2018. Keshav Suri v/s Union of India

Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 100 of 2018. Arif Jafar v/s Union of India

Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 101 of 2018. Ashok Row Kavi & Ors v/s Union of India

Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 121 of 2018. Anwesh Pokkuluri & Ors v/s Union of India.

Judgment pronounced on September 6, 2018. New Delhi.

- SC legalises consensual gay sex. 'We are finally free!'. By Pranita Roy. *Sakal Times*. Pune. Page 1. September 7, 2018.

[4] An attempt was made to file an additional intervention on behalf of LGBTIQ activists, including myself, who had domain expertise and were personally affected by Sec 377 IPC in the ongoing Supreme Court litigation. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court did not accept the petition. If admitted, it would have been an opportunity to place before the Court, the diversity of the community as the petitioners

included people who identified as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender.

[5] We had planned a cycle rally in August, from *Samapathik* Trust office, Pune to HST, Mumbai, with the tag line 'For good health, IPC377 has to go'. I went to Mumbai for a HST conference on my bike to finalise the route and visited the Special Branch of Police (at CP, Pune office), where they explained the process of obtaining permissions. But before I could apply for permission, the Hon'ble Supreme Court started the hearings on the case, and I cancelled the event.

- LGBTI community to hold cycle rally from Pune to Mumbai. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newslines. Page 3. June 8, 2018.

[6] In The Supreme Court of India

Joseph Shine v. Union of India

Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 194 of 2017.

Mr. Joseph Shine had filed a PIL in the Supreme Court contending that Sec 497 IPC (Adultery) was discriminatory on the grounds that it violated Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution of India. The centre had defended the Victorian law.

[7] In the Supreme Court of India

India Young Lawyers Association & Ors v. State of Kerala & Ors (*Sabarimala* temple entry case)

Writ Petition (Civil) No. 373 of 2006.

On September 28, 2018, a Constitution Bench in a 4:1 majority verdict held that the temple's practise of excluding women between the ages of 10 to 50 (of menstruating years) was unconstitutional. It struck down Rule 3(b) which allowed for Hindu denominations to exclude women from public places of worship if the exclusion was based on 'custom'.

[8] In The High Court of Delhi

*AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) v Union of India and Ors, Delhi Administration, The District & Session Judge- Tis Hazari, Inspector General of Prisons- Tihar Jail, Superintendent of Jail- Tihar Jail and National AIDS Control Organization (NACO)*

Writ Petition (Civil) 1784/1994.

The earliest effort made to read down Sec 377 IPC was a petition moved by ABVA in the Petitions Committee of Parliament for the repeal of Sec 377 IPC. It remained dormant for want of a Member of Parliament to argue the petition in the Parliament. In 1994, the Inspector General of Prisons, Kiran Bedi refused to allow distribution of condoms to the male prisoners in *Tihar* jail, stating that there was no homosexual activity amongst the inmates and even if there was, condom distribution by prison authorities would be encouraging a crime. It is in this backdrop that ABVA filed a Writ Petition in The Delhi High Court challenging the constitutional validity of Sec 377 IPC. (*Humjinsi. A Resource Book on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Rights in India. Compiled and Edited by Bina Fernandez. Indian Centre for Human Rights and Law. 1999. Chapter: ABVA Writ Petition for the repeal of Section 377. By Ms. Shobha Aggarwal, ABVA. Page 34.*)

[9] Violence traverses the transgender bridge. (Same-sex relationships among men are not without violent side-effects, a new study warns.) By Swapna Majumdar. *The Times of India*. December 9, 2003. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: It's an article on a study by *Naz Foundation (India) Trust*.)

[10] Gay couple got married on July 2, calls it a 'happy coincidence'. By Anuradha Mascarenhas. *The Indian Express*. Pune Newline. July 13, 2019. (Note by Bindumadhav Khire: The day marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's first Rainbow Pride Friendship Walk.)

[11] Reply to my letter of February 21, 2019, is dated March 25, 2019. Ref No. 449/B. Signed by Pushpendrasing M. Rajput. Assistant Draftsman-cum-Under Secretary to Government. Law and Judiciary Department, Mantralaya, Mumbai.

[12] In The Kerala High Court

WP-CNo. 2186/2020

The Writ is filed by Gay couple Nikesh Pushkaran and Sonu MS thru advocate George Varghese Perumpallikuttiyil.

- Right to get married: Gay couple moves Kerala HC. By Mahir Haneef. *The Times of India*. Kochi. Jan 28, 2020.



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## POLITICAL PARTIES

“Why don't you join a political party, too?” a Gay community member questioned me when he came to know that a few Transgender persons from Maharashtra had joined various political parties. Namely, the *Indian National Congress (INC)*, *Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)* and *Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi*. Post the Sec 377 IPC Supreme Court judgment in 2018, it had become a trend for community members to openly affiliate oneself to a political party or join a political party. I countered him, “It is true that we need the support of all political parties in our struggle, and I heartily welcome political support to our Queer rights movement, but have you checked their track record on Sec 377 IPC until the setback of the 2013 judgment?” [1]

While I was working on my book *Indradhanu- Samalaingikateche Vividh Ranga*, I had spoken to a Communist leader on the Party's view on reading down of Sec 377 IPC. The reply I got was (paraphrased) “Your issue is important, but issues of food, clothing and shelter are far more important. Also, if we take up this issue on priority, the right-wingers (read Hindutava parties) will use this issue to side-track other more important issues.” Still, amongst all the political parties, the CPI(M) continues to be the most supportive of LGBTIQ rights. Their *Lok Sabha* election manifesto of 2019 promised support for Gay marriage and adoption rights.

The Communist leader's stand was more or less in sync with what the *Shiv Sena* said sarcastically in Marathi newspaper *Samna's* editorial of Dec 14, 2013. (Translated) Title: 'Food, clothing, shelter and homosexuality'. 'Our country is now free of all problems; everyone has started expressing their views on the law related to homosexual sex. The issues of food, clothing, shelter, corruption have now receded into the background, and homosexual relationships have emerged as the only important issue. We have not read or heard of Congress President Sonia Gandhi ever voicing her anxiety at the soaring inflation in the country. But the moment the Supreme Court



gave judgment that homosexuality is a crime, madam became worried ....'. [2] As I add final touches to the book, I cannot resist noting down the irony that, Maharashtra State currently has a *Shiv Sena* + NCP + INC coalition government.

I remember the times when the *Aam Admi Party* (AAP) was nascent and ascendant. There was a lot of excitement in the air and quite a few members of the Queer community pinned their hopes on it and canvassed for it. Post the setback of the 2013 Supreme Court judgment, I wrote to an AAP leader from Pune (he is no longer in the party)- "Is AAP is in favour of amending Sec 377 IPC?", he had tersely replied, "Yes". My happiness gave way to disappointment when I read their 2014 *Lok Sabha* election manifesto. It even had a section on 'Animal Welfare' but no mention of LGBTIQ or Sec 377 IPC.

The INC was unhappy with the 2013 Supreme Court judgment and in their *Lok Sabha* election manifesto of 2014 promised to decriminalize adult, consensual same-sex intercourse. But, we need not forget that till then, it did not make any serious legislative efforts to amend Sec 377 IPC. When the case was in the Delhi High Court, the Congress-led government submitted two conflicting Affidavits in the Hon'ble Court. One was from NACO (the Health Minister, then was Shri Anbumani Ramdoss) which supported the reading down of the section. An opposing one, (in the name of morality) was filed by the Home Ministry (the Home Minister then, was Shri Shivraj Patil). The Additional Solicitor General P P Malhotra went so far as to tell the Delhi High Court that, it did not matter what the Health Minister stated in the Affidavit.[3]

And while all this was going on in the Delhi High Court, what did the *National Human Rights Commission* (NHRC) do for LGBTI, whose rights continued to be violated day and night? Be it in relation to Sec 377 IPC or the barbaric conversion therapy?

Unlike the INC, I don't remember the NCP voicing its unhappiness at the Supreme Court judgment of 2013. Nevertheless, I am happy to state that, in October 2020, as I was giving final touches to this book, the NCP announced the formation of an LGBTIQA cell in Maharashtra. I hope they do substantive work.

I had expectations from the Dalit parties in Maharashtra; especially *Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi* headed by Dr Shri Prakash Ambedkar. I had assumed that they would be more sympathetic to our plight than other parties since they were spearheading movements for equality, dignity and respect for Dalits, who have been denied their rightful place in society since time immemorial. I assumed that they would be willing to interpret the Constitution of India inclusively, liberally, in the spirit of how the great Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar visualised it. Post the setback in 2013; I couriered letters to them (and many other political parties) asking for their view and support for amending Sec 377 IPC. I was naïve.

And, last but not least, the BJP. I believe that BJP by and large was and is a very conservative party in the matter of LGBTIQA rights. There was not a snowball's chance in hell that they would have supported reading down of Sec 377 IPC. Still, in 2018, realising the way the winds were blowing, after the unanimous Judgment, on August 24, 2017, in the case of Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v Union of India, by a nine Judge Constitution Bench of the Hon'ble Supreme Court, recognising Privacy as a Fundamental Right guaranteed by the Constitution, methinks they astutely refrained from objecting to reading down of Sec 377 IPC.[4]

But, all in all, things are looking up and I am happy about that. For the younger generation who does not carry the baggage of history, it is easy for them to embrace a political party. But my experience tells me to be wary of all political parties. Make no mistake, all the political parties and NHRC betrayed us when we needed their support the most. So it makes sense to me to work with them all on LGBTIQA rights but align myself with none.

With this quicksand of a political landscape, I am in no hurry to join a political party. If I do, I will forever be afraid of losing- the unthinkable- integrity with my cause for which I gave up my career 20 years ago.

The expectation is that, as a LGBTIQA activist, I fight on behalf of our community (all members of the community, not just for Gays or Transgenders or Intersex or...) and not on behalf of the political party I prefer. Therein lies the conflict.

Our final degradation, as 'activist politicians' or 'political activists' or 'political social workers' occurs when we have no choice but to defend the indefensible or at best, keep mum when our chosen or preferred political party takes a stand, that is against the LGBTIQ community. It happens every time the party keeps mum on an LGBTIQ issue, or pays lip service to it, or aligns with another party whose agenda is detrimental to our community.

I was witness to such an experience when a participant, at a conference asked a fellow participant, who is a Transgender activist cum social worker of a political party: "How did your party collaborate with AIMIM (*All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen*), led by Asaduddin Owaisi who is not known for liberal views on women's rights? With such political alignments, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to choose a party to vote for."

The activist cum social worker first fumbled and then with a laugh responded, "I am here in a personal capacity and not as a party spokesperson" and as the audience knowingly looked at each other, she added, "I will answer when it is time for me to speak". An answer that never came.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Most political parties had a few liberal Members of Parliament (MP) who were in favour of reading down of Sec 377 IPC; I am deeply thankful to them for their stand. But this list is but a drop in the ocean and nowhere near enough to push their respective political parties in setting a liberal agenda on LGBTIQ issues.

- Pune MPs to back Sec 377 amendment. *The Times of India*. Pune. Page 4. December 13, 2013.

[2] *Roti, kapda, makan ani samalaingikata*. (Food, clothing, shelter and homosexuality.) Editorial. *Samna*. December 14, 2013.

[3] 'Ignore Ramadoss stand on gays'. *The Times of India*. Pune. Page 16. October 1, 2008.

[4] In The Supreme Court of India

Justice K. S. Puttaswamy (Retd) v/s Union of India and Ors.  
Writ Petition (Civil) No. 494 of 2012.



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## SEASHORE

Four days in Konkan were bliss. This time, Mom and I had again gone to *Guhagar* (barring *Chiplun* all our destinations had been on the seashore), the lodge shouting distance from the beach.

At eventide, we sat in the sand, quietly watching the sunset in the gentle breeze. I remember Mom sitting in a blue sari with a floral design. Or was it the image of some other beach at some other time? In the far off distance, we could see silhouettes of a couple of boats. Far off, on the right, a row of lights could be seen, extending into the ocean.

As usual, we had gone during the offseason and other than a couple of women who were now and then picking up something, slowly wandering towards us, there was no one on the beach.

As they neared us, my Mom curious, asked them what is it that they were gathering? They mentioned a word which I have forgotten; some type of seafood they used to make *aamti* (soup.) After making enquiries as to where we had come from, they wandered off.

Soon, it was dark; we could only hear the roar of the waves. We sat quietly looking out towards the ocean, each of us lost in our thoughts, knowing we would have to leave soon, but postponing the inevitable as long as possible. Today, again, I felt grateful that I was able to spend time with Mom. We craved this quiet time, each of us at peace with the world. My projects, funding agencies, my community all were far, far away. And as it sometimes happens, I lost myself in a magical world. It was wool-gathering time.

In that world, I had sold off all my properties in Pune and buying a small house at a seashore in Konkan had settled down with my imaginary boyfriend and Mom (the daydream never had my Dad in it. Nor kids.) The imaginary boyfriend would be different each time; as I dreamt a life devoid of activism, ambition, the daily desperate struggle to make my voice heard. I dreamt of a husband who would be as lacking in ambition as me, content with a mundane life; the village

accepting our relationship without a fuss. The two of us tending our farm, watering the trees, proudly showing relatives and visitors the Betel vines and Mango trees, instructing workers to harvest Coconuts from a dozen tall Coconut trees on our modest farm. Just one more family amongst the many; invisible and complete.

But even as I wool-gathered, I knew that even if the fantasy were to come true, I would tire of it within a couple of years. Addicted to activism, I could not live a life away from it, knowing that there was so much to do out there. I would probably get irritated; pick fights with my docile husband. He would not understand why I was such an ingrate, and eventually, I would walk out of the relationship.

As the daydream faded, I felt a heavy, dull ache in my chest; it suddenly dawned on me that this trip would be one of the last trips with Mom. In the morning, we visited the Ganesh Temple at *Hedvi* after which, we had visited *Baman ghal* a gully in the rocks which at high tide sent plumes of water into the air, lashing against the rocks as it came down. At low tide, it was difficult to see the gully until you were very close to it.

The walk had been tiring, but Mom did not want to miss out seeing the *ghal*. She had periodically stopped along the way, sitting on the rocks on the seashore for a while. Her knees were giving hell and travelling by the State Transport bus had not been easy for her.

As night descended, I think both of us were thinking on the same lines. Was this the last of our visits to Konkan? Or the second last? My mood became desolate. I got up, brushing off the sand from my pants and assisted Mom in getting up. Carrying my shoes in my hand, we headed back, she limping along slowly. As we neared the lodge, I suddenly wanted to hug her tightly and cry my heart out, thankful for what she had given me and fearful of what was to come.





## SEENAGER

As we sat at a restaurant opposite Sambhaji Park, one of my Seenager friends and a strong supporter, who was part of the Gay Seenager group in Mumbai, popped the question- Would I like to start a similar group in Pune? Another reminder that I had stepped on the wrong side of fifty.

It was the second time someone had brought up my age. A couple of months previously, a writer had asked me when interviewing me for an article on Seenagers; *When the Party is Over*, for *Bombay Dost* issue of 2018, "What happens to your possessions after you pass away?"

Good question. Most people of my generation had married and had not doubt that they would leave their possessions to their kids and grandkids. Those who had not married had a fond relative or two they wanted to leave everything to. What should I do?

As much as I hated getting old, I had started brooding on the finality, hoping that I stay hale and hearty till my parents were around. If I were to pass away before them, my sister would no doubt take care of them, but what should I do about my assets? There were not too many assets, but still.

There were two options: I could leave it all to the government or leave it in the hands of someone I trusted, to carry my work forward.

The option of leaving the assets to the government was fraught with risks, especially in matters of LGBTIQ. Whichever party may be in power it was likely to be uncaring and squander away the assets or even worse; they could use the assets against the LGBTIQ community.

The second option too, had its own problems. I feel that the spirit with which you form an institution dies with you. The ones who take over have not earned it, as they don't have an understanding of your vision. For carrying your work forward with maturity, the journey is an essential rite of passage. I look around and see institutions bereft of

the spirit of their founders who have long passed on. So I would have to either look for someone to take over from me who has imbibed the essence of my work or give up that option.

Finally, I took the option of bequeathing my assets to someone I trusted and has worked for the LGBTIQA community. It would enable the person/s to continue their work without having to start from scratch; they would have learned their ropes well enough by the time they took over my assets.

Initially, I decided to leave my assets to *Samapathik* Trust, but since it was a Public Trust, I felt, it made more sense to form a Foundation for working on LGBTIQA issues and will all my assets to it. And so *Bindu Queer Rights Foundation* was born on March 1, 2019, and Tinesh Chopade and I became it's founding Directors[1]. Since there was no point in having two organisations in the same city working on the same objectives, we decided to wind up *Samapathik* Trust in a couple of years.

One fine day, I registered my will. I signed over everything I owned; monies, properties, intellectual property rights to my Foundation, secure in the knowledge that it will come to good use.

As my friend enthusiastically narrated the activities of the Seenagers group in Mumbai, I thought unhappily, 'Isn't 50 years too early to be labelled a Seenager?' I could not run away from my age, but I did not want another reminder; as it was, I was reminded of it every day.

Mom, near her eighties, had been ailing for a while now. She had failing knees & kidneys, was unable to walk unaided and too stubborn to use a walker. She had started losing her balance, falling, especially at night, the noise and her feeble calling for me followed by my scramble, worried that she had broken a bone. Eventually, she had relented to my demands. She started using a walker, but by then, I had got habituated to waking up bolt upright around 1.30 am – 2.00 am, rushing to her bed to find her sleeping quietly, my stressed brain playing tricks on my mind, replaying the thuds and her calls.

My father, a severe diabetic, had crossed 80 and had been admitted multiple times into emergency for Hypoglycaemia. With old age and



illnesses around me, I had started slowing down on my work, spending more time at home.

I had seen this coming, my horizons narrowing. I was grateful that I had got a clear run for almost 17 years before having to adjust to the changing circumstances. But it underlined the fact that as my parents aged, so did I. And I was definitely not willing to accept that.

Over time, I had met quite a few Gay Seenagers, from various cities, most of them married and I could not imagine being clubbed with them; reminiscing sexual escapades, bitching of the present and having done nothing for tomorrow's children, yet, expecting the world from them, as my memory slowly faded, the nerve meshing as in slow motion coming undone day by day, night by night. In their company, I would surely wilt. I did not want to become a Seenager. Period. Yes, my Seenager friend was doing good work; there was a need for such a group and volunteers to assist old, single LGBTIQA community members, but I was unwilling to either lead it or be a part of it.

I bloomed only amongst youngsters, who looked forward to a thriving and vibrant life. If I wanted to continue working and I did forever, whatever my age, I had to be a teenager, full of vitality and brashness, willing to fall in love and take breakups full-on. Yes, there was a time during one of my depression spells when I had taken a call to retire, unable to cope with my parents' needs, my depression and my work but I had got over it.

I have to be forever on the roller coaster ride, in heaven a moment and a hollow feeling in my stomach the next, as I scarily plunge in the depths of the pits, fervently hoping a couple of drops of piss do not slip out or if they do at least no-one, but I notice it. I have to be that teenager with a perpetual hard-on, who goes to bed dreaming of adventures and conquests and getting up in the morning, stands in front of the mirror, bright-eyed and busy tailed, eager to apply war paint.

**\*\*\* Notes and References**

[1] *Bindu Queer Rights Foundation*. CIN: U85300PN2019NPL182601.  
Formed under Sec 8 of The Companies Act, 2013.



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## EPILOGUE

As I put the finishing touches to this book, the COVID-19 lockdown has eased somewhat, and I have started going to the office for a couple of hours each day. As the lockdown eases, the traffic is slowly on the rise, but I know we are in for a very long haul.

Today morning, an out Gay youth has come to the office, with a rucksack and a plastic bag. He is a victim of domestic violence at the hands of his parent, who had last night assaulted him for his feminine behaviour. The swelling and the wound is clearly visible. Telling his parent that he was leaving for good, he had left, and slept the night, on the footpath. He came to the office in the morning, wanting a place to stay and a job.

The past few months have been challenging for many. Mumbai and Pune are the worst COVID-19 affected cities in Maharashtra. The battle for survival for Hijras, female sex workers, migrants and the poor staying in high-density areas has been a nightmare. Compared to them, I am living a blissful life. I had applied for volunteering; on the PMC App but received no response; was my age an issue? I don't know. And so, I was confined to my home.

Working from home, I assisted PLHIVs in need of ART, referring them to Amol Shinde (Counsellor at *Rajiv Gandhi Hospital ICTC*) or to Dr Sachin Melinkeri (KEM Hospital, Pune) who on their part had gone out of their way to provide support.

As usual, there was a shortage of funds, and so, I sent out calls for donations on Facebook. I relied on volunteers Amol, Milind, Payal to purchase and deliver ration to the needy LGBTIQ community members, aided by Chinmay Damle and his associates of *Saad Pratishthan Pune Trust* and *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha* (RSS) branches of Karve Nagar & Uttam Nagar who have been kind in collaborating with us in this task.

I relied on *Yutak* group (PCMC), *Abhimaan* group (Kolhapur), *Niramay Aarogya Dham* (Solapur) and community members from

Aurangabad and Parbhani, to reach out to out-station LGBTIQ community members in need of funds for ration.

The COVID-19 crisis provided me a golden opportunity of working on the final draft of this book. Between doing household chores, taking care of my aged parents, co-ordinating ration and funds distribution, I had, in the absence of distractions of meetings and administrative work, finally found some quiet time for the book while nature was busy extracting her revenge for the barbaric rape of the planet by the human race.

Stuck at home, online news and TV had been the only windows to the outside world. Articles sketching out the post-COVID-19 world had long started making the rounds. The world will become unrecognisable, forever altered by social distancing between parents & children, Doctors & patients, Police & criminals, God & devotees; the generations id themselves as pre-COVID and post-COVID. I am no expert in entifying these matters but what worried (and worries) me, is not what will change as much as what seems to be unchanging.

World over, the homosexual population continues to be a vulnerable target for religious zealots. I sensed déjà vu when I read the rant of an Iraqi Muslim cleric that 'same-sex marriage caused coronavirus'[1]; some evangelical leaders from the USA started linking LGBTIQ people to coronavirus.[2] And I am well aware that there are lots and lots of people around me, for whom this bigotry resonates with their own attitudes.

Such news invariably takes me back to the early days of my work when the sermonisers preached that HIV was God's curse on the homosexual lifestyle. As I read and hear the all too familiar vile views, I catch myself replacing COVID-19 with HIV and replaying the tapes again and again. I thought so much had changed, yes, I believe it has and yet, hearing this venom spewed at us, it feels as if nothing has, the virus lives, seeking opportunities and vulnerable targets to flourish and spawn.

And then, I read news on the rising instances of domestic violence, during the lockdown, against women, aware that it was just a matter

of time before I started seeing similar cases amongst LGBTIQ. (I was also sure that, post lockdown, there would be a steep rise in extortion cases. I was right.)

The abuse survivor stands quietly beside me; as I explain the case of domestic violence to the Police Officer and hand over a letter to him. We were at the Police Station, under whose jurisdiction the youth was staying with his parent. The letter states that the youth is Gay, an adult, has left of his own free will and that I am arranging for him to stay with my friends for a few days.[3] The Police Officer calls his parent. My calls to the parent have gone unanswered, and the call by the Police Officer meets the same fate.

As we step out of the Police Station, a torrential rain greets us. My raincoat is pretty much useless in the downpour, and we seek refuge under an awning.

And so, here I am with the abuse survivor... dripping and shivering, waiting for the sleet of rain to subside, the road completely deserted, not a single intellectual, armchair activist soul in sight.

### \*\*\* Notes and References

[1] Pro-Iran cleric in Iraq says same-sex marriage caused coronavirus. By Benjamin Weinthal. *The Jerusalem Post*. March 29, 2020.

<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/pro-iran-regime-cleric-in-iraq-says-same-sex-marriage-caused-coronavirus-622707>

[2] Some Evangelical leaders are linking LGBTQ people to new coronavirus outbreak. By Muri Assuncao. *New York Daily News*. March 07, 2020.

<https://www.nydailynews.com/coronavirus/ny-coronavirus-evangelical-christians-lgbtq-outbreak-20200307-jo7xvreb5za25ctud5iwnipsta-story.html>

[3] My Gay friends Anil, Umesh and Akshay generously allowed the abuse survivor to stay with them at their bachelor pad. Later, after the lockdown, with valuable assistance from Chinmay Damle (of *Saad*

*Pratisthan Pune Trust*), the abuse survivor was tested for COVID-19 and transferred to a Shelter Home. As we mentioned the case on Facebook, a Gay man got in touch with us and donated funds for purchasing a mobile for the youth. The survivor stayed at the Shelter Home for a few weeks and got a job as a sweeper at a healthcare centre. A month or so later, his parent patched up with him, and he went back home.

End Of Book III

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bindumadhav Khire, born on June 21, 1968, in Pune, is a Gay activist working since 2000, in Pune (India), for the betterment of LGBTIQA community. He has done his B.E. in Computer Science and has a degree in Law (LLB.)

Bindumadhav retired from his IT career at the age of 35 and founded *Samapathik* Trust, in 2002, in Pune. He is the President of *Samapathik* Trust and Director of *Bindu Queer Rights Foundation*.

Bindumadhav has written books, plays and film scripts in Marathi. He is a resource person for LGBTIQA workshops.

He is the Director of the annual *Advait*- Pune Queer International Film Festival and *Mooknayak*- the annual Marathi LGBTIQA Literary Festival.

### Books in Marathi authored by Bindumadhav:

1. *Partner*. Self-published, Pune. 2004. (Fiction novella)
2. *HIV/AIDS, Laingik Shikshan, Laingikata, Helpline Margadarshika* (Running a Helpline on HIV/AIDS, Sex Education, Sexuality). *Samapathik* Trust, Pune. 2007.
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1. *Antaranga*– Anthology of true stories of Gays and Lesbians. *Samapathik* Trust, Pune. 2013.
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#### **Magazine edited by Bindumadhav:**

1. *Samapathik Diwali Ank* (Annual magazine in Marathi, on LGBTIQ issues) (2019 and 2020)

#### **Marathi Feature Films Scripts** (registered with Screenwriters Association (SWA)):

- 1 *Ankur Clinic* (2019)
- 2 *Lonely Hearts Dinner* (2019)

#### **Marathi Plays:**

*Purshottam* (2015), *Jaswand* (2015), *Freddy* (2016), *Takala Jaun...* (2018), *Phera* (2018).



**Awards:**

Recipient of Social Worker Award (2014) *Maharashtra Foundation*  
(USA.)

Felicitated as one of Pune's Heroes (2014) (A *Pune Mirror* Initiative.)

**END**

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