



**Making the Invisible Visible:
Adding New Dimensions to the
Transgender Rights Movement in India**

Organized by Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India

With support from the UNDP

Kolkata, June 25, 2009

**Report
July 2009**

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Organized by SAATHII with support from the UNDP
At Kolkata on June 25, 2009

1. Introduction

A one day event titled "Making the Invisible Visible: Adding New Dimensions to the Transgender Rights Movement In India" was organized by Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India, Kolkata (SAATHII) with support from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New Delhi. Attended by 25 participants, the event was held on June 25, 2009 at the Floatel Hotel, Kolkata from 10.30 am to 9.30 pm. Participants included students, film makers, teachers and activists from West Bengal. (See Appendix 1 for list of participants)

The agenda of the meeting was as follows:

11.00 – 11.45	Introduction: Role of transgender people in the worldwide and Indian queer movements – Amitava Sarkar, SAATHII
11.45 – 12.00	Need for working with transgender youth in various settings: Special focus on transgender youth in educational institutions – Pawan Dhall, SAATHII and Rajarshi Chakraborty, Swikriti
12.00 – 13.00	Presentation of case studies / testimonials by activists and transgender school and college students
13.00 – 14.00	Lunch
14.00 – 14.30	Pre-lunch session to be concluded
14.30 – 16.00	Action plan: Setting up a queer campus activism forum – using film and other media – focus on developing a mechanism that supports the weakest and therefore serves as a common minimum system for all queer people on campus - Panelists to include filmmakers, students, activists and educationists
16.00 – 16.30	Tea break
16.30 – 19.00	The way people look at us: Screening of films on transgender issues (mixed with panel discussions): i) Manas, ii) Arshi Nagar, iii) Rupantar;
19.00 – 21.00	Dinner

Souvik Ghosh from SAATHII welcomed all participants, and after a round of introductions, invited Amitava Sarkar and Pawan Dhall, both of SAATHII to elaborate on the background and objectives of the event. This event was in follow up and connection with a series of national and regional consultations on Hijra and transgender health and development concerns conducted in Kolkata and several other cities across India. Apart from funding support from UNDP, the event was also supported by SAATHII's project 'Building the Capacity of People Living with HIV and Sexual Minorities

in Orissa and West Bengal to Advance their Health and Rights' (where SAATHII has Interact Worldwide, London as technical partners and the Department for International Development – Civil Society Challenge Fund, Glasgow as the donors).

2. Role of transgender people in the worldwide and Indian queer movements

Amitava Sarkar gave a talk on the role of transgender people, placing them within the historical context of the queer movement beginning with the Stonewall Riots in 1969 through till the present day. Describing transphobia as the prejudice and discrimination directed at people who stray from the rigid gender expectations of our society, she elaborated on the existence of transphobia, both within and without the queer community. She also talked about the achievements of transgender persons in India, beginning with the 1990s when international aid agencies first identified these communities as being vulnerable to HIV. Some of the achievements she mentioned were those of:

- § The All India Hijra Kalyan Sabha which fought for over a decade to get voting rights, which they finally got in 1994
- § Transgender persons in public office - Asha Devi (Mayor of Gorakhpur) and Shabnam Mausi (elected to the Legislative Assembly in 2002)
- § India's first transgender talk show by Rose Venkatesan talks back on gender issues
- § People in the state of Tamil Nadu, where transgender people are now able to identify as a third gender when applying for ration cards and welfare schemes; the formation of the Transgender Welfare Board in 2008, and free sexual reassignment surgery in Tamil Nadu hospitals.

She concluded with an appeal to all transgender people to “spread out, hand in hand, to secure our basic needs and a dignified life with cooperation and support from everyone”.

3. Need for working with transgender youth in educational settings

Pawan Dhall explained that the rationale for the event was to initiate queer activism in the educational context. Elaborating on the role of transgender persons, he said that they face transphobia not only in larger society, but also within the GLBT movement. While transgender women, or transwomen, i.e. male to female transgender persons are not acceptable to many gays and lesbians, transmen, i.e. female to male transgender persons are invisible even within the GLBT movement. This event was conceptualized in an attempt to address lacunae in the educational sphere, where a large number of transgender adolescents and young adults face violence and discrimination.

A queer activism forum on campuses would serve two purposes. For one, the forum would be a support group for young transgender persons facing discrimination in schools and colleges, and secondly, it would serve as a means of raising awareness and sensitizing students and faculty on transgender issues. There are a number of young people making films on queer issues, and in fact, at a panel discussion of film makers at the Siddhartha Gautam Film Festival earlier in the year, this idea had been mooted that the media, especially film media, could be used for sensitization and awareness on school and college campuses.

This event was to invite participants to discuss whether queer campus activism was a feasible idea, and if so, how and in what form, these activities should take place.

4. Presentation of case studies / testimonials by activists and transgender school and college students

Souvik Ghosh invited all participants to share their experiences, and also talk about how they have overcome the barriers they have faced in various contexts.

Kanchan, a young college student, shared her traumatic experiences of being sexually harassed throughout her childhood. As a young child she was sexually abused by her father's friend, which is something she has not been able to tell anyone about, not even her family. Later, when she was in middle school, when she was sexually harassed by older male students, she began to realize that she was being targeted because she was 'different' – it became clear to her that although she had a male body, mentally she felt that she was a woman. That realization affected her deeply. Although she had been a sociable child, when she realized she could not share her feelings with anyone, she withdrew into herself and found herself terribly alone.

In college, the trauma continued, with other students taunting her and avoiding her overtures of friendship. She was surrounded by a wall of isolation, as she was looked on as a "bhinno kono jeeb", and was often asked whether she had a vagina or a penis. Once, she was taken to the college union room, where surrounded by students, a professor of the college asked her to remove her pants so that they could verify her sex. She felt as helpless then as she had felt when she was abused as a child, and till today, it haunts her that she did not have the strength to protest. Today, she rationalizes that since unwelcome sexual attention is part of her life, by having sex with those who would torment her, she is using them as much as they are using her.

It was only thanks to a professor at the college, Rajarshi Chakraborty (also present at this event) she began to understand issues such as sexuality and gender orientation. Although she had felt that perhaps men would understand her, she found acceptance with three female friends, and with their help, is able to stand up against those who harass her. She described how, just a few hours earlier on her way to this event, she held her own in a train compartment crowded with leering, staring people, and told them that even if they could not respect another person, they had no right to insult him or her. She is now a member of MANAS Bangla, and wants to work with like-minded people to bring about change.

While sharing his experiences both as a student and teacher, **Tirthankar Guha Thakurta** spoke of the overt homophobic and transphobic atmosphere in schools as being traumatizing; in contrast, in the relatively detached atmosphere of the college campus, what disturbed him the most was the absolute silence around issues of alternate sexual choices. He was scathing in his opinion on the role of medical textbooks and the medical fraternity in creating and perpetuating homophobia by treating homosexuality as a disorder. Apart from the fact that medical textbooks teach students only about the human reproductive system and ignore the concept of a sexual system, he said that some biology textbooks even taught that attraction to the opposite sex was a secondary sexual characteristic of males, therefore implying that a male not being attracted to females was abnormal. He did not blame students brought up on such textbooks for being ignorant about the fact there was a whole range of sexual orientation and behaviour apart from hetero-male and hetero-female, none of which was 'abnormal'. He was also critical of psychiatrists who, influenced by outdated theories of psychodynamics, rather than educate a person troubled about his / her sexuality, reinforced their confusion by treating them under the term ego-dystonic homosexuality.

As a teacher of medicine, Tirthankar Guha Thakurta also stressed the need for disseminating scientific information, and teaches sexuality and sexual psychology in his classes, in spite of these topics not being on the syllabus. He has found that these classes encourage students to be open and

accepting, and has also encouraged some students to come out and discuss their sexual preference without the fear of being ridiculed and rejected.

Rajkumar Das' experiences echoed that of other transgender students. In school he protected himself by staying isolated from others, however, college was a nightmare, where he was constantly subject to verbal and physical abuse, and even considered running away. When he summoned up courage to complain to the principal, the latter admonished the other students for picking on him because he had a 'hormone problem'. That incident shattered him, and even today, when the thought of protesting against harassment occurs, his principal's words haunt him, and he stays quiet. He compromises by trying to fit chameleon-like into whichever environment he is in, and has stopped dressing in any way that would cause comment. His family are unaware of his gender orientation, and they would be shocked to know that along with his college, he works at organizations like MANAS Bangla and PLUS.

Agniva, a transgender activist from PLUS, spoke movingly about working with the experiences of childhood abuse – and sexual compromises made to evade the inevitable pain, of the trauma of tenuous relationships made and lost amongst *Launda* dancers, and of the utter vulnerability of street children unable to protect themselves every night from preying adults.

During the discussion, it was emphasised by various persons already working in the field that it was necessary to distinguish between homophobia and transphobia, between homosexuality and transgender, between gender identity and sexual orientation, and to clear the misconception that all feminized men necessarily had sex with men. Much of the violence against transgender people comes from the attitude that any feminized man is a sex object, and is there to be used for that sole purpose, with or without consent. They reiterated that the silence around these issues needed to be broken, and that this forum needed to work towards this.

Aniruddha Dutta, a PhD student, added that there was a need to create a space for persons who do not categorize themselves either as a gay nor considered themselves transgender. Lumping all feminized men under the term transgender was pigeon-holing them into a gender identity construct with complete disregard to their variations in their sexual orientation and other personal identity preferences. Between the two binary poles of gay and the 'trans', there is a broad spectrum of persons whose identities defy description, yet need a space to exist, and he urged that that space be created.

5. Action Plan

Pawan Dhall set the ball rolling for the post-lunch session by inviting the participants to discuss whether a forum was needed to address these issues, and if so what form should the forum take, and what would be the activities of the forum. He stressed that having a formal structure was not of importance, of primary import was the issue of people from diverse backgrounds putting their heads together to see how they could work together to take these issues to school and college campuses.

All the participants agreed that creation of such a forum was not just necessary, but imperative. Prandadhika Sinha offered to share her organization's (Elaan) knowledge and experience on working with survivors of child sexual abuse, and asked whether there was any data on in this context. Agniva replied that there were no separate studies on sexual abuse in transgender children, however there were various studies on commercial / sexual exploitation of boys from which experiences and numbers could be gleaned, such as the Government of India report on Child Sexual Abuse, 2008, studies on under-age prostitution in boys in Kolkata, the ECPAT study on abused boys in three cities

of the Indian sub-continent, as well as some studies done by Praajak and PLUS, including studies on *Launda* dancers.

The Action Plan session was conducted by Pranadhika Sinha and Souvik Ghosh. The participants formed four groups, and Souvik urged them to consider how each as individuals could play a role, as well as come to a consensus on some common activities on which the forum could move forward.

The first group felt that it was necessary to **establish linkages** with NGOs and institutions such as the police and media as a first step. They proposed activities such as dialogues with young persons and networking with educational institutions to promote awareness of issues such as gender and sexuality, and suggested that this could be done through existing organizations such as the Youth Resource Cell and Rotaract Club who often hold programmes with young people. They also suggested using the existing leverage that the organizations such as Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee have with the police to deal with harassment and violence. Given that this was a diverse group which would not be able to come together often, they put forward the idea of creating of an **e-forum** through which the members of the forum could communicate. (Members of the first group were: Piyali Chakraborty, Ranjit Sinha, Tirthankar Guha Thakurta and Debashish Mondol).

The second group agreed that an informal forum, such as an e-forum should be created for the group to work together. They felt that each person should work in their own sphere of influence to identify transgender persons who need help, and that the forum should establish a **support cell** which could refer them for counselling or necessary help. However, they strongly felt that it was necessary for those on the forum itself, to familiarize themselves with issues such as gender and sexuality before working with others. (Members of the second group were: Amitava Sarkar, Agniva, Md. Arshad, Sajal Das and Joydeep Sengupta).

The third group felt that awareness and sensitization was the first step in creating a non-stigmatized environment. They suggesting working through **peer groups**, arranging programmes in community spaces using the help of local bodies such as panchayats and municipal institutions to spread the idea that there is no difference between 'them' and 'us'. They also suggested the need to collect **data about harassment** on campuses and the need for intervention with **families** through sensitization initiatives. Linkages with police and NGOs to help in resolution of harassment issues were proposed. (Members of the third group were Kanchan, Pritam Garai, Vijay Anthony Thomas, Rajkumar Das and Saday Bhushan Raha).

Members of the fourth group felt that it was first necessary to clearly **identify the target group** under consideration, and defined them as 'persons of teenage or below teenage who do not fall strictly within the normative sexuality and gender construction and who are more vulnerable to abuse and discrimination'. They identified some of the problems of the target group as being sexual abuse, mental trauma, physical trauma and other forms of stigma related discrimination.

They suggested that it was necessary to collate the capabilities of the organizations and persons present to understand what resources could be generated within the group, and also to create external resources through linkages with other organizations which tackle discrimination. They suggested **sensitization activities** through existing platforms, such as reaching out to **school or college** teachers and facilitators through B. Ed courses or refresher courses; and out to students through organizations such as Scouts, NSS, NCC, Interact and other **social service groups**. (Members of the fourth group were: Rajarshi Chakraborty, Aniruddha Dutta, Saikat Das, Rishi Roy, Satadru Gupta and Sanju).

A central concern emerged amongst all the groups was that gender and sexuality, being taboo topics, would need to be propounded indirectly, especially in view of the fact that school and college authorities actively shied away from dealing with these topics.

The larger group then worked on reaching a consensus on activities of the forum, how these would be implemented and a structured timeline for activities.

The group agreed to move forward through the following activities:

- § Creation of an e-forum and support cell to be used for information and resource sharing, and making referrals.
- § Training of the individuals associated with the e-forum and support cell on:
 - § Broader gender identity and sexual orientation terminology and issues
 - § A narrower focus on transgender issues
 - § Their legal context/status, rights and relevance
 - § How to approach these issues when moving out into the community to raise awareness and sensitize people
- § Creating linkages with existing organizations from both within and without the group, such as MANAS Bangla, counseling centres, shelter homes and so on.
- § Inclusion of the members of this forum in events being held by other organizations

It was decided that the e-forum would be set up by SAATHII within a week, and would be moderated by volunteers from SAATHII and Elaan.

Souvik Ghosh volunteered to present a module on gender and sexuality, prepared by him under the aegis of Swikriti and the Ashoka Foundation's Change Looms programme, for the forum's orientation and training. It was decided to schedule this towards the end of July 2009, after consulting with all the members of the forum.

Those with information related to legal issues, such as SAATHII, PLUS and Tirthankar Guha Thakurta were assigned to upload such information on the e-forum. It was also decided to upload the APCOM-SAATHII 2007 resource directory on transgender groups in India to the e-forum.

Apart from information sharing, the e-forum was also to be used as a space for all activities such as problem solving and referrals.

6. Films

The event concluded with the screening of the following films:

- § "Manas", a documentary on gender non-confirmative individuals and the violence they face, directed by Enrico Pizzalato and Riin Kraana
- § "Rupantar", a film made by Amitava Sarkar, which talks about the hurdles that most male to female transgender people in developing countries face, and argues that support and recognition can go a long way in helping them lead dignified and healthier lives.
- § "Arshi Nagar", directed by Subrata Acharya, a film that describes the shadowy lives of the 'others', and reiterates the need for the invisible to become visible, recognizing that in the unacceptable face of the 'other', we find our alternate selves.

Appendix I

No.	Participant	Organization / Individual information
1	Vahista Dastoor	SAATHII
2	Raj Kumar Das	PLUS
3	Joydeep Sengupta	Vidyasagar School of Social Work
4	Saday Bhushan Raha	Vidyasagar School of Social Work
5	Md. Arshad	Yuva
6	Piyali Chakraborty	MSW student
7	Vijay Anthony Thomas	Elaan
8	Percy Francis Thomas	Elaan
9	Aniruddha Dutta	PhD Student, University of Minnesota
10	Pawan Dhall	SAATHII
11	Saikat Das	Filmmaker
12	Souvik Ghosh	SAATHII
13	Maksud Alam (Kanchan)	Student
14	Debashis Kr. Mondol	West Bengal State University
15	Sajal Das	West Bengal State University
16	Dr. Tirthankar Guha Thakurta	Individual consultant and filmmaker
17	Pranadhika Sinha	Elaan
18	Rishi Roy	Elaan
19	Agniva Lahiri	PLUS
20	Ranjit Sinha	Bandhan, Anandam
21	Rajarshi Chakraborty	Swikriti
22	Pritam Garai	Praajak
23	Amitava Sarkar	SAATHII
24	Santanu Pyne	SAATHII
25	Satadru Gupta	Filmmaker