

Consciously Speaking 2

BY - AMRITA TRIPATHI

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First published in print and digital versions in New Delhi, India, in 2023 by Avian WE.

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Acknowledgements

Consciously Speaking 2 stands as a testament to the combined efforts of love, dedication, patience, and the unwavering support of everyone involved in its creation. Avian WE, along with Amrita, extends heartfelt gratitude to:

Amrita Sarkar, for guiding us through a narrative rich in love and healing.
Aryan Somaiya, for reigniting our belief in compassion and understanding.
Shivangi, for showcasing the courage in accepting care.

Varsha, for illustrating that defiance sometimes means standing firm against constricting barriers.

Sukhdeep, for ensuring a platform for the voices that need to be heard.
Pavel, for demonstrating how queerness can challenge and transcend a rigid world.
We are deeply thankful to each of these individuals for entrusting us with the stories of their lives.

Special acknowledgements to Syeda Tanzeela Husain, Sr. Manager, Design and Saurabh Joshi, Manager, Design, Avian WE whose diligent efforts have endowed this project with striking aesthetics and illustrations.

Our thanks also extend to Sumit Kaushik, Account Director, Social Impact, at Avian WE, who has tirelessly offered his assistance and support at every step.

We are ever grateful to Sharmistha Ghosh, Sr. Vice President, Social Impact practice at Avian WE. Her conceptualization of the book and her guidance, immeasurable support and patience have been the foundation upon which this book was built. Last, but certainly not least, our sincere appreciation goes to Sharif D Rangnekar. His decision to open up the Rainbow Lit Fest for the launch of this book and his unwavering support throughout the journey to fruition have been invaluable.

About Consciously Speaking 2

In “Consciously Speaking 2,” the compelling narratives of six queer individuals unfold, offering a vivid tableau of their struggles, aspirations, and victories. This book serves as an exploration into the diverse, often complex world of LGBTQIA+ experiences. Through the lens of personal accounts, this volume illuminates the rich tapestry of queer lives, each marked by unique challenges and triumphs.

In a world where sweeping generalisations are the norm rather than an exception, Consciously Speaking 2 attempts to bring to light the nuanced nature of queer identities. It emphasises that LGBTQIA+ persons are not a monolithic group but a rather diverse set of individuals who form communities whose foundations are firmly rooted in solidarity, and companionship. Each narrative in this volume is a testament to the individuality of experiences shaped by layers of marginalisation and privilege. From navigating a world dominated by heteronormative standards to confronting societal and internalised prejudices, the stories reveal the resilience and adaptability inherent in the queer experience.

This volume builds on the foundation laid by its predecessor, which highlighted the evolving nature of language by explaining 34 terms associated with gender and sexuality. A key focus of “Consciously Speaking 2” is the impact of language and communication on the lives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The narratives delve into how language, both spoken and unspoken, has the power to either include or ostracise. This exploration highlights the critical role of communication in shaping one’s sense of self and belonging within the community and the broader society. Consciously Speaking 2 is more than a collection of stories – it is an invitation to understand, empathise, and reflect. It challenges readers to recognise the multifaceted nature of queer identities and to appreciate the profound impact of words and gestures in shaping the world we share. This book is a call to action, encouraging a deeper engagement with the narratives of those who navigate life beyond the binary and conventional norms, ultimately enriching our collective understanding of the human experience.

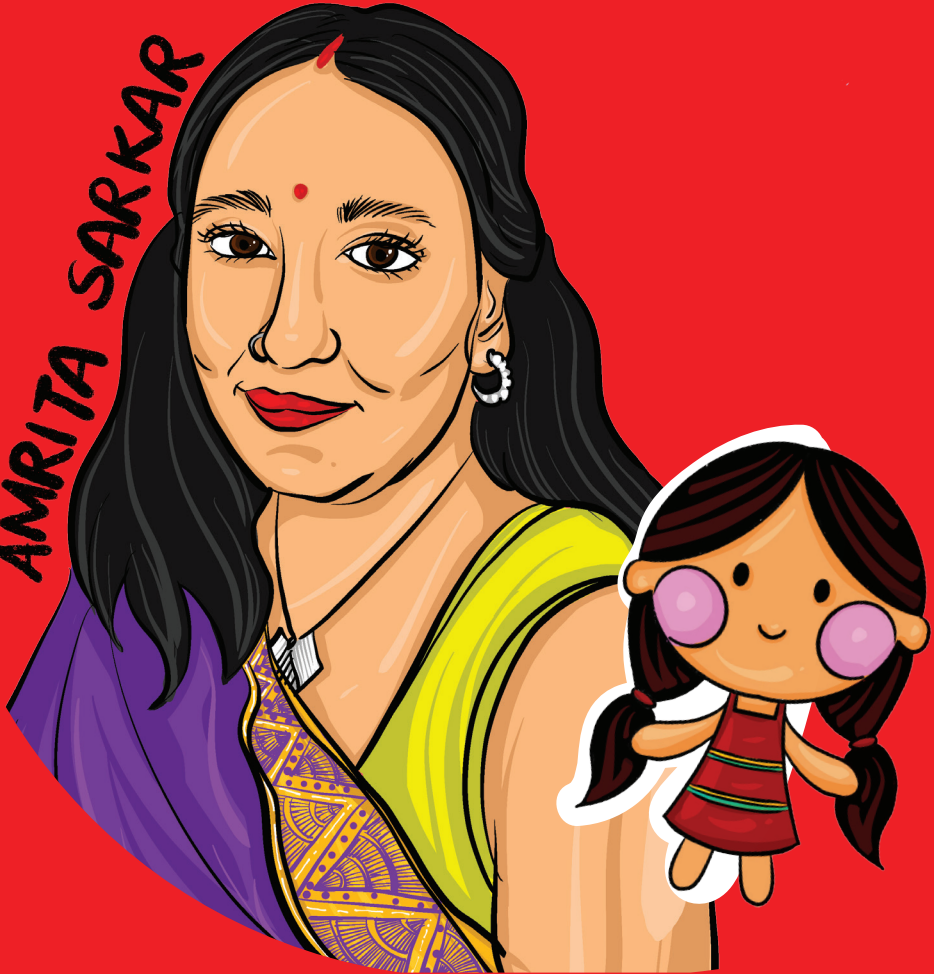
About the author

Amrita Tripathi (she/they), a gender non-conforming lesbian, works as a content consultant for the Social Impact practice at Avian WE. Passionate about addressing pressing social issues, Amrita's writing spans both thought-provoking non-fiction and imaginative fiction. In writing, Amrita skillfully applies a queer lens, infusing narratives with rich, nuanced explorations of identity and experience. They also delight in performing sit-down comedy, to entertain friends, loved ones, and chosen queer family. She is also a part of queer organising in India in various capacities.

“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

— ***Audre Lorde***

AMRITA SARKAR



CONVERSATION WITH AMRITA SARKAR

01

A journey of acceptance, healing and learning love

The definition of love changes from time-to-time. Sometimes it is acceptance and affection of others, sometimes it is acknowledging one's strength in overcoming the obstacles that life throws in one's way. It can be the comfort and healing found in hobbies. Mostly, love is about keeping the hope for a better future alive. A conversation with Amrita Sarkar- a transwoman activist enlightened me about the way love can be experienced in various ways.

Why do you want to play with dolls?

Amrita Sarkar was born in 1973 in Kolkata. It was a time when people had no knowledge about the term LGBTQ. It was a time when the discourse in the feminist movements spoke about patriarchy, but never about transgender persons or sexuality. It was in that period, where there was little understanding about gender and even lesser resources which one could access, that Amrita, who was assigned male gender at birth, grew up. Amrita was forced to conform to a gender expression and norms which applied to cisgender boys and men. Pronouns for men were thrust upon her. She was even admitted to a boys' school and expected to wear uniforms for boys. She was chastised for not playing cricket or football. *"Why must you play with dolls and cook and clean?"* every individual in her joint family demanded.

Her femininity soon became a subject of ridicule – both by her peers and the teachers. There were other effeminate boys at the school as well, but not as feminine as Amrita. On the teachers' part, there would be veiled taunts directed at her. She recalls an incident that took place at her school. In Bengali culture, there is a puja for Saraswati – the Hindu goddess of literature and learning. This puja was also performed at her school. After the prayers, the school would organise a lunch for all the teachers and the students. *Post a Saraswati Puja which was held during the course of a school function, a primary teacher noticed that Amrita's Bengali teacher was having lunch, "How are you already eating? Who served you the food?"*

"Don't you know that we have three girls in our boys' school? They served the food," the Bengali teacher responded. Amrita could not understand for a moment whether the teacher had said something positive to validate her gender or whether she had teased her.

The chaos of queues!

"Are you a boy or a girl or neither?" her classmates teased. This bullying prevailed throughout the course of her education and her early career. Other students would feminise her given name to taunt her. Things were no better at home. She would constantly be questioned about not wanting to play with the boys. In college, a co-ed, where both boys and girls could attend, Amrita was harassed on a daily basis. The students would make fun of her, call her 'ladies.' There was a constant feeling that she was not accepted.

In her first job at a call-centre, she could not dress in a saree as her legal gender-marker (of a male at the time) did not allow that as per the company's dress-code. Because of her feminine voice, her colleagues would make fun of her. They would complain to their boss, *"We don't understand him or her, how he or she talks. It is very funny to have a colleague like him."* The boss, fortunately, was concerned only with the work delivered. *"I don't care as long as he brings in business. If people call him back, that's all I care about,"* the boss held. The acceptance however, stopped there. The colleagues were still unhappy and were free to pass comments without any repercussions, presumably, if they too were 'bringing in business.'

Public places like airports, hospitals, and public toilets, where access was segregated by gender, presented many challenges. To begin with people would stare and laugh. *"As per my legal gender marker in the ID card, I would go and stand in the men's queue – where I would be told to go to the female queue because of my clothes. In the women's queue, once my ID was checked, I was asked to explain why I was in the wrong queue."* This was akin to harassment for Amrita. She would have to explain about transgender persons, hijras and kinnars to make the security guards understand why she had chosen to go through the gate meant for women. People also took advantage of the situation sometimes, groping unnecessarily as she passed the security checks for men.

More than hurt or depressed, Amrita felt angry. *"I felt that this should not continue. I do not like this kind of touch. I should change my name and gender officially. At least this disturbance, this harassment will stop. My anger motivated me and gave me the determination to go through a gender affirmative surgery, which is not very easy."*

A silent acceptance

Amrita's mother was a schoolteacher. To Amrita, her mother was also homemaker, a woman of numerous activities – an ideal. Watching her mother engrossed in numerous activities would fascinate Amrita and she decided that she wanted to be like her mother. Unlike her father who disappeared in the morning for work and returned at night, she wanted to play different roles and be involved in a range of activities. Amrita was inspired by her mother – she wanted to be a woman. Officially.

Since grade 3, she had started dressing up in her mother's clothes. Whenever she found an opportunity, she would apply make-up and mascara, and get bullied for it. By the time Amrita reached high-school, she grew more confident in her femininity and began expressing it more freely. Her parents would insist that she change herself and she would counter, *"You have seen me from my childhood. I cannot change myself. If you have to accept me, you have to accept me like this only."* That argument continued for a long, long time.

In 2002 or 2003, Amrita was associated with a sexual health project in Kolkata. An interview that she had given was published in a national health newspaper. She thought that that was a good opportunity for her to disclose her official identity to her parents. She asked her mother, *"Do you feel that this is wrong? Should I still change myself? Her mother surprised her, "You are my child, you grew up wearing my clothes. The problem is that I will understand your feelings, but society will not. The relatives and the other people would make you feel lonelier and more isolated. You may not have a biological family, who will take care of you?"* In her mother's concern, Amrita found an implied acceptance.

In 2008, after an International Aids Conference which was held in Mexico where her film was played, and she was interviewed by an Indian national newspaper, the story ran a picture of Amrita in women's clothes and make-up. When she showed it to her father, all he had to say was, *"Your mother is no more, but I will tell you the same thing she said. The world is not very friendly towards queer people like you. Even though you are doing a good job for your community, but your relatives will still isolate you. So, you should reconsider living this way."* That made Amrita feel that her parents were also helpless because they were associated with their respective families. It was difficult for them to change their mindsets. Yet, at some point, in some corner of their hearts, they had found acceptance for her.

A miracle happened the day the NALSA judgement (National Legal Service Authority vs. Union of India) was announced. Amrita asked her father if he knew about the

NALSA judgement. Her father surprised her by asking, *“Does this mean that you people will now have the same rights as everyone else?”*

That ‘you people’ meant a lot. For her father, the judgement had brought a validation that only legality could have brought – that his daughter was not a criminal. He realized that the government was trying to help as well – by recognizing the identities of transgender persons.

Legality alone is not enough

Even post the Trans Act (Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, people from Amrita’s community face a lot of issues. A transwoman, for instance, talked about her struggles to Amrita. The paramedical staff told the woman to wait until they had seen all the patients, her turn would come when they had finished seeing everyone else. Amrita was certain that the perception of people about transgender persons being different or divergent would not change with simply a change in legislation. In the first place, the laws, and legislations themselves needed to come from a place of thorough knowledge and understanding. Amrita gave an example of the Population Bill introduced by the Uttar Pradesh government. *“They (UP govt.) proposed a green card or gold card for parents who had 1 child or 2 children. They said that if a transgender child is born, then there will be a discount that people can have 3 children instead of 2. Because the transgender children will be considered as Divyang or special children. There is the gap. WHO has accepted that being a transgender person is not a type of physical and mental illness. On one hand you come up with the Transgender Act, saying that there must be no discrimination, on the other hand you disregard all scientific evidence, and categorise transgender or intersex children as having a disability,”* Amrita pointed to the large knowledge gap in terms of legislation for LGBTQ+ persons. She emphasized that the policymakers and political office holders must understand, learn, and engage with LGBTQ+ community before formulating laws and policies.

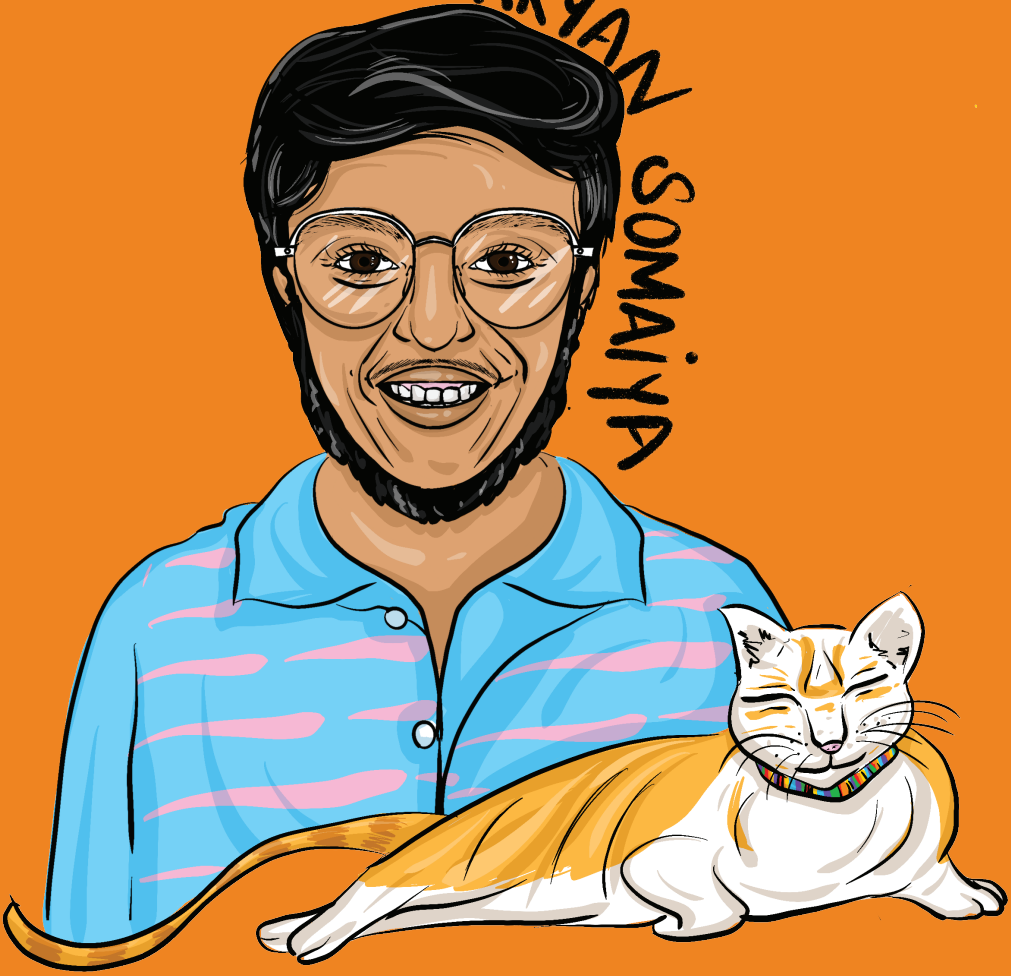
Healing and love

When Amrita moved to Delhi, there was a phase when she felt very lonely and depressed. She was alone in a new city and at the time was having frequent fights with her partner. At that point she turned to Tagore. Amrita used to sing sometimes and learnt songs of Tagore – she believes that loving these songs was due to her mother’s influence. In her depression the songs took on a different meaning which gave her more pleasure and hope. *“Even if you are not getting love, support, or not getting a perfect relationship, the songs taught me that you could move on. It’s not the end of life.”* These were songs of positivity which told of all the beautiful things the world can be.

Listening to Tagore, singing, and dancing gave her hope. The experience of finding solace in these songs motivated Amrita to create a movie, 'Healing Through Tagore.' She collaborated with a few friends, who were classical dancers. The movie was a combination of songs, dances, and the narration which was done by Amrita. She wanted to convey to her community through the movie, *"You can heal yourself through art. It could be anything, it can help to heal the pain from your mental scars. You have to devote your time in a meaningful way. Do something which you want to, which you love to do."*

Amrita believes that love is transient and that its definition changes as time goes by and the needs and the desires change too. *"When I was young, I used to like wearing clothes for women and make-up, when I entered college, I used to think that someday I would be married just like other girls. Then I found my femininity in Tagore songs. Now when I am 48 years old, I know that love cannot have a definite shape, or features – it is not something tangible. Love can be with objects; it can be with people. My partner is much younger than me, we have an age difference, and cultural differences. I am clear that tomorrow he might move on with his life and other priorities. But the love with my father is still there, love with Tagore songs is still there, love with my God, love with my music and enjoying movies is still there and that, at least, will remain. I am getting older now. In India we don't have LGBT shelters for elderly people where they can come together and stay. I imagine a structure where I can stay with the people of my community, with whom I have grown up, who have had similar struggles and journeys as me. Biological family is a distant dream for people like us, so if we can convert the love for an individual to love for the community, I think that will help us all more."*

ARYAN SOMAIYA



02

Healing the wounds of violence with compassion

Through his experience of growing up as a transman and working as a psychotherapist, Aryan has a lot to tell us about drawing boundaries, fighting for oneself, and how compassion can help people be free of narrow confines and encourage others around them while surviving violence at home.

Growing pains – and respite

Aryan, a transman, was always aware that he did not relate with the female gender that he was assigned at birth. Nevertheless, since his father wanted him to study in a convent, he was shifted to an all-girls' school from the co-ed school that he studied at till grade 5. He was always attracted to girls, but it was hard to accept when he was in co-ed. There, his identity as a female was constantly reinforced in certain ways. Segregation by gender was a huge contributor. Aryan recalls how the female identity was constantly reinforced, *"Boys stand up, girls sit down, girls stand up, boys sit. At that time, I had crushes on men due to peer pressure. I had crushes on girls too, but I could not think much about those."* There was also the issue of boys and their masculinity at school. Aryan often wondered whether he would be supported if he chose to stand in the boys' queue. At the girls' school, he felt safer. There was a lot of dysphoria at his identity being clubbed with girls, but at least that space provided safety. Safety, from physical violence, and sexual assault – things which Aryan feared when he was in the co-ed school. *"Kam se kam ladkiyaan pakad ke maarengi toh nahi (at least the girls wouldn't beat me up),"* he thought with a sense of relief. At the girls' school he was also free to just let himself be.

He was free to be trans – or rather a tomboy, as he wasn't aware of any words to describe trans at that time. He liked a girl at school, and he thought she liked him too – but they never talked about it. He used to wear trousers and shirt and kept his long hair hidden under a cap. All went well for a few years. He had already had his period at the age of 10 and that brought a lot of dysphoria and rage. So much, that his mother had issued a caveat to everyone to leave him alone for those 5

days. However, soon the body began growing in other ways. Aryan was disappointed because he wanted to have a flat chest. *It took many years before he was finally able to get that. In November 2021, he successfully underwent top surgery and gave his friends a huge party to celebrate the event. Now, he is happy to pose shirtless for photos.*

In all these rather lonely explorations without community and constant violence at home, somehow his needs took a back seat and energy was taken up by survival. To see one of his parents get beaten up, abused, and violated, was becoming numb and terrifying. Violence grew on him too. The complexities started when one parent was violating and the other was conforming. Both in their ways were battling their own pain and hurt and as a child, one becomes easily displaced. When he was 10-12 years old, his mom forced him to wear a t-shirt and a skirt, he didn't celebrate his birthday that year due to embarrassment and shame. Then the next year, she forced him to wear a salwar kameez. That year, again, he didn't celebrate his birthday. At that point, his father told his mother to let him wear whatever he wanted and to not force clothes upon him. This relationship as a father and child, and child and parent became increasingly complex. On one hand his father supported his choices and on the other there was the battle of violence. With some vocal support from his father, everyone in the family gave him the identity of a tomboy, which at least helped him express his gender, if not have a detailed discussion about it. *"I had learnt very early that I have to fight my own battles, they are going to long and bigger, and I will be alone."* *"Bohot jaldi hi samaj gaya tha ki jo karna hai khud hi karna hoga."* Violence scares you in a way that is deep and intense. Mostly, he would give it off to other people who questioned his choice of clothes however there was a deep sense of pain and dejection. But he had to survive, he promised himself. He became numb to his pain- that is what violence does. It came in form of anger and later as anxiety. He would be asked intrusive questions, *"How will you get married? Nobody will accept you this way."* To which Aryan would reply with a *"I will deal with whatever comes,"* and then become silent. However sometimes, this fighting and countering would be exhausting. The labour of repeatedly explaining to people would take its toll and he would quietly listen and try to ignore. *"So, all those annoyances were there. I think those were a given in our community."*

Giving words to experiences

It was when he entered his 20s, around 2010-11 that Aryan learnt about the word transgender. That opened up new ways for him to express himself. Earlier, it was extremely difficult to explain to others what he was feeling. *"I am attracted to other women, but I am not a lesbian. I did not feel like a woman."* With Orkut

and Facebook, came the knowledge of terms like **trans**, **pre-op**, **post-op**, and the realisation that the identity he was experiencing was called **trans**. He had finally found the vocabulary for the experience that he'd had since childhood. Aryan describes his experience with using transman as his identity, *"For as long as I remember I identified myself as a man, others however did not. It was only when I found a label for it, I started calling myself a transman. At that time, it was a difficult word. I had to explain that too, to people. When I got tired of explaining, I would just tell people to go and kindly Google it."* Still sometimes people would use hurtful terms like girlboy – half girl, half boy. Most of the people would call him masculine. People would notice that he would like to walk, talk, and dress like a man and call Aryan masculine. That, Aryan felt, was still very positive. Just like the family members accepting him as a tomboy. But girlboy felt like a humiliation and disrespect. It tore him, broke him and he went into a deep sense of sadness. He would sometimes call out some people in anger. **"There is no girl here. Stop calling me girlboy! I am a boy!"** Aryan had to shout, but mostly managed to get the point across. His friends, thankfully, were largely supportive. They said, *"It's ok, whatever you like."*

Pathologizing and misgendering of identity

He had wanted to study psychology since he was in school, but things didn't work out with the person he wanted to be with. He felt abandoned. It was too daunting to go to the same college as her, so he did not. He applied to other colleges instead. There were no other colleges offering psychology in-house, so he decided to settle for economics for majors and then eventually pursued event management. He carried on in that field till he was about 27 years old. The desire to learn psychology however, never left him – he had wanted to study psychology since he was in grade 10. So, he once again resumed his studies – this time, learning the subject he loved. He got an admission in TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences), in their Post graduation Diploma in Counselling course. Throughout the admission process, the administration was very understanding about his transman identity and were careful to not misgender him. They even communicated his pronouns to his batchmates and professors and urged them to be sensitive and inclusive. However, one of his professors repeatedly misgendered him. Despite several corrections, he would use she/her pronouns for Aryan. This reached a point where the whole class had had enough. They turned on the professor and demanded that he give reason for the constant misgendering. The misgendering stopped after that. This experience in the field of psychology was shocking for Aryan. **"Inclusion in organisations needs to be more than ticking boxes,"** he observed. This also motivated him to do this Masters in Psychology.

Once, after he had successfully completed his degree in psychology, and was practising, he had a conversation that would change his perception about people. He was returning to Pune in a train (at the time he was living in Pune), after delivering a lecture on LGBTQ+ issues' intersection with psychology. There was a family sitting near him – a man (an engineer), a woman (his wife) and her sister. Another person who belonged to a right-wing organisation was also there. The college had awarded Aryan with a framed certificate which the engineer noticed. He asked Aryan what that certificate was about. When Aryan explained that he was a transman and had given a talk at the college, the engineer, immediately told him that he was possibly suffering from schizophrenia. A woman who was sitting next to Aryan, very pointedly shifted away from him. The wife's sister said that he had a dysmorphic disorder. The man from the right-wing organisation, who was not supposed to be liberal and wasn't as educated as the rest, surprisingly, wanted to know more about what trans meant. Aryan sent him an article in Marathi that he could read. The man went through the article and asked Aryan if he was happy. When Aryan replied that he was, the man responded, "***Then that is all that matters.***" Aryan was surprised that all the educated folks could be so judgemental and a man with less education and associated with that organisation could be so understanding. He learnt that day how limiting labels could be, and how limitless the potential for kindness was in a person.

Experiences of counselling LGBTQ+ persons and advocating compassion

Aryan only works with queer trans persons. He doesn't counsel cis-het persons. An overarching issue which several of his clients face is family trauma. "***We are all in a system,***" he says, "***no matter if you're queer or not, cis, or not. Family traumas are there for everyone, nobody gets away with those.***" We have to remember that wounds are embedded in relationships and so do relationships (of any kind) have the balm for it. Abuse, neglect, and indifference from family is an issue which may affect even cisgender heterosexual persons, but an extra layer of complexity and trauma is added when this intersects with someone's gender and sexuality. He always tells people, "***It is the system that is malfunctioning, there is nothing wrong with you. If the system only is malfunctioning, how is it possible for an individual within that system to function perfectly?***" Queer and trans persons have a lot of relational wounds including family, intimate partners, peers, workplace, etc. A queer person may find themselves in an education system, in a healthcare system, in a peer group. Aryan holds that queer and trans persons not only have to face the systemic issues specific to these sub-systems, but also have to face issues arising out of how that system interacts and relates with their identity. He also feels that while there are systemic issues there are also personal, individual impacts on each

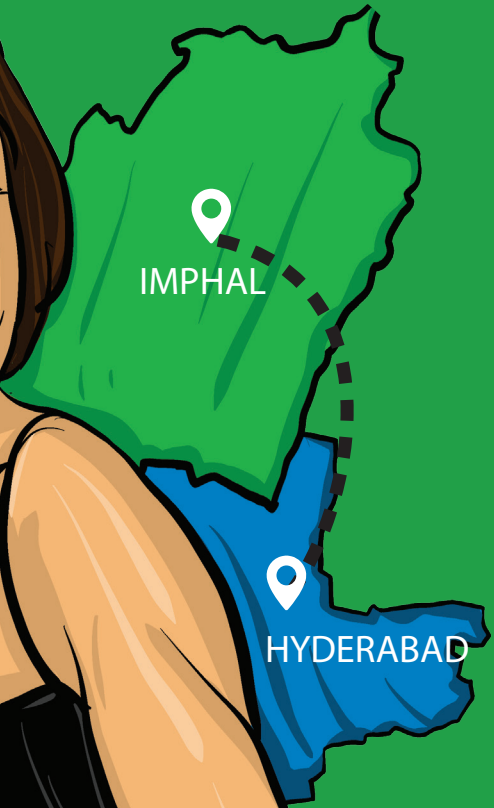
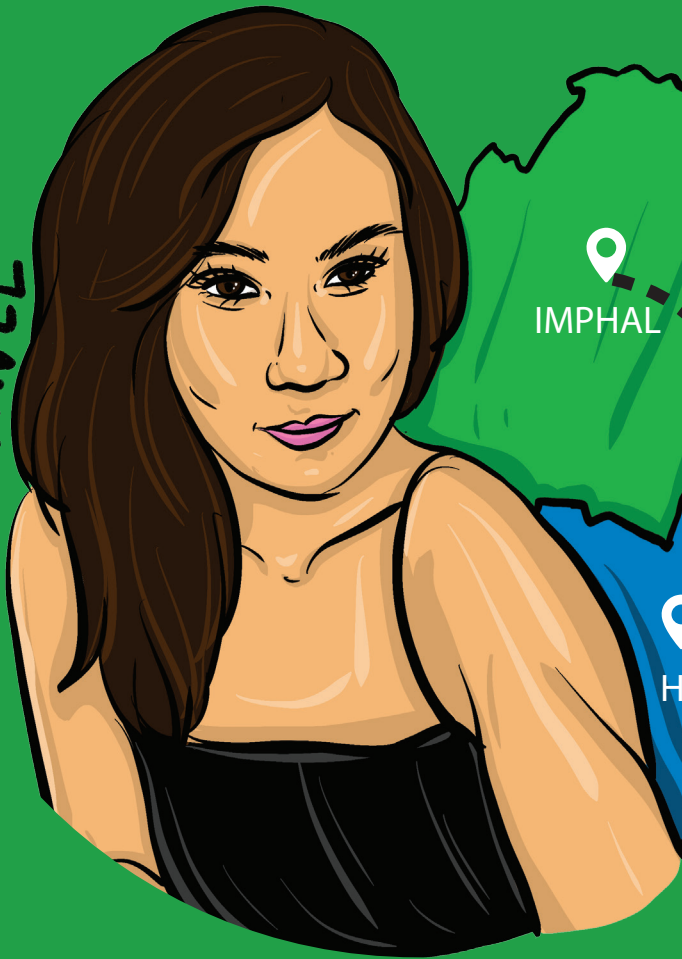
of us differently. We all perceive threat, hurt, pain, rejection, happiness, joy, neglect, etc differently. Hence, personal is a private experience as much as it is systemic.

"Imposter syndrome is another which I see a lot of people facing. This could be because there is a lot of stereotyping that goes on in our communities. If you are a transman, you will be like this, non-binary people will be like this, if you are queer, you must be flamboyant," Aryan observes. He notes that some people do not express themselves in ways they are expected to. They face a lot of violence, mostly in form of invalidation from their communities. These persons are met with the same gatekeeping and policing which is reminiscent of cis-het dominated places where they could not find any community. Finding themselves the objects of unwelcome scrutiny from people who are supposed to understand them can be heart-breaking. *"You are not queer enough, or trans enough or non-binary enough,"* such questioning, says Aryan, leads a lot of people to an identity crisis.

Aryan feels that if people respond from a place of compassion and not from intellectual understanding of any experience, it can be uplifting and form a community in the true sense of the word. *"Quoting Alok V Menon here,"* he adds. Even in love and relationships compassion for both oneself and for the partner is key to happiness. Compassion means giving each other the room to be vulnerable—make mistakes, to express emotions, to create their boundaries, hold, contain, rupture and repair relationships. In the current politically polarised environment, everyone is expected to perform political correctness. While it is necessary to be sensitive to other people, it is not always possible for a person who has just come out of 15–20 years of living in a patriarchal, misogynist atmosphere to learn everything overnight. Sometimes people act from a place of ignorance and they need to be forgiven. It is necessary to communicate and start a dialogue. That is a labour which community needs to perform for people who have never known others like themselves.

"From my own experience I can tell what I have learnt. One thing that everybody needs to know is that whatever your experiences of queer, trans, gender and sexuality are, they are for you to decide. They do not have to fit into anyone else's ideas of queerness and transness. Reach out. If you have the capacity, then reach out for support. Look out for community, no problem can be solved through individual support. We need elder queer and trans people to guide us, to give us hope. As a community I would say please stop policing. A lot of newbies are coming in, they will make mistakes, but don't abandon them. It is heart-breaking to be abandoned by the community."

PAVEL



CONVERSATION WITH PAVEL

03

Charting new paths with self-belief, love, and community

Queerness is not restrictive; it is in people's thoughts, identities, and perceptions. Pavel believes that queerness goes beyond gender and sexuality. It comes from beliefs, lifestyles, a person's personal choices, and their defiance of socio-cultural norms.

On Identity and Pronouns

Pavel identifies as a gender non-binary, femme person. Ze believed that ze is non-binary because gender is a lot about choice and determination. While being gender-fluid, Pavel attached femme to it because ze had more affinity towards femme-representation. However, ze doesn't want to be boxed as a gender-feminine person as ze wants to traverse between different gender experiences and expression. Since Pavel is gender-fluid, ze is okay with any pronouns but that's subjective. If ze decides to put on makeup and jewellery and someone addresses zir by the 'he' pronoun, ze finds it offensive. On days when Pavel is gender-neutral, ze wouldn't mind any pronouns. Pavel prefers ze, which is a cross between he and she. When it comes to, they/them pronouns, ze finds it contextual as for zir, gender is the essence of all pronouns. Ze juggles between binary and non-binary and finds that they/them pronouns do not serve all occasions.

Growing Up

Born and brought up in Imphal – the capital of Manipur, Pavel found the family dynamics interesting. Ze belongs to the Meitei community, which is the dominant community in Manipur. and it tends to look down upon other communities. Within the Meitei community too, ze mentioned that there are two sub-communities – the Meitei-Meitei, which follow their indigenous religion and the Meitei-Hindu – and Pavel's parents came from both of these sub-communities. While Pavel's mother is a Meitei-Hindu, zir father comes from the Meitei-Meitei community, and both these communities have a point of contention regarding beliefs.

Having grown up in a household with different ideologies and cultural conflicts, Pavel found the zir family surprisingly liberal. Ze thinks this could be because zir father was one of the few educated persons in the community. He studied law and with a government job, Pavel's father was already considered a cut above the rest. Pavel's mother was rebellious, unconventional and a social activist. In zir community, neighbours' children are almost regarded as siblings. Pavel's parents were neighbours growing up and still got married – something that Pavel felt was perceived as incestuous by the community in those times. Now, fortunately, people are more open. But then, even in Imphal, which is considered one of the more unorthodox regions in Manipur, Pavel's family dynamics surprised others. Both zir parents stressed on education in a region/locality where education was treated as a secondary goal. Subverting of cultural norms by zir parents had an impact on Pavel's own queerness. Much like zir family, zir queerness defies being boxed into a neat category, and is in tune with zir choice and preferences.

The queerness of others

Most people who identify as queer feel different when growing up, but Pavel did not. As a child, ze wanted to learn karate and be physically strong like a boy but at the same time, ze wanted to play with dolls, wash clothes and be shy and coy as a girl. Ze wanted to be the best of whatever ze was seeing around. Ze didn't feel any different from others when ze was growing up and in fact, Pavel thought that everyone was like zir. However, the enforcement of gender norms and homophobia soon began. When Pavel was around 7–8 years old ze was told to not be like a girl and that being effeminate was bad because that would mean that ze would be gay – a taboo in the community which ze came from.

Zir parents were very conflicted regarding this because, on one hand, they did not make Pavel feel unloved and protected zir against bullying. On the other hand, they did not approve of zir being effeminate. Pavel's parents were blamed by the society for their child's queerness. However, Pavel's parents were also supportive, loving, and wanted the best for their child. Pavel's mother knew that ze liked playing with her hair so she would let zir, but not in the presence of others. As for zir father, he instilled values like dignity and respect in his children and never spoke or questioned Pavel about zir identity. Only zir brother had an issue with zir queerness. Something Pavel felt, was because of his fear of what people would say.

The Meitei community to which Pavel belonged was a close-knit one. The people of the community generally took a stand for their kin irrespective of who was right or who was wrong. Pavel's parents took a different approach – and if someone in the family was wrong, it was the prerogative of the other members to correct that person. There was a certain amount of queerness and rebellion that Pavel saw in zir family. They challenged norms which did not feel right to them. That was probably also the reason Pavel's parents were more accepting of zir queerness.

Pavel was a good student, one of the rank holders in the class, which is why ze felt that ze was spared from bullying and abuses – something from which zir other effeminate schoolmates could not escape. Pavel felt that zir queer friends' studies were also affected as they must have dealt with a lot of struggles and inner conflicts that come from being queer. The support which ze received from the family made things slightly better for zir. Pavel particularly admired one of zir teachers, who encouraged zir to be comfortable in doing whatever ze wanted and accept zirself. Pavel felt that her support for zir, was not the typical, conventional sort but what people call tough love. In the class, she would talk to zir as she would to a girl – a positive reinforcement and an acknowledgement of zir femininity. Her treatment was not in denial of Pavel's queerness, it was about acknowledging who ze was. She wasn't patronising. If she made fun of a boy in the class for being too macho, she would, at the same time, make comments about a girl being too feminine. This was not to invalidate anyone's expression, but to make the students question their adherence to gender norms. Pavel received the same treatment; she would make fun of ze but not in an attempt to rebuke but rather to make Pavel laugh at a joke of zir own.

Pavel's parents placed an importance upon education and individual ambitions. They placed aside their fears of the influence of other cultures and thoughts on their children and did not attempt to keep them at close quarters. Zir parents were of the opinion that anyone good at studies should go 'out' and study. Pavel, who was doing well at the school was comforted by this. Once ze finished school, ze prepared to leave Manipur for higher studies.

Making of an activist

Pavel first moved to Vadodara for college studies, and this is where ze made friends, with whom ze shared likes and dislikes, things that ze could not share with zir parents. *“It is important to have people with whom you can share everything under the sun. Be it love, attraction or cigarettes.”* The connection with friends was of a special kind. There, Pavel also learned about running a household. At home, where parents encouraged individualism, ze was not involved in any family decisions. In Vadodara, this changed with the family of friends that Pavel had. When Pavel along with zir friends moved from the hostel to a flat, decisions akin to those taken in a household would have to be made. Even though ze was one of the younger persons in that household, ze would be involved in decisions. In Vadodara, ze had found zir first alternative family.

The only flip side in Vadodara was that there weren't any strong student bodies and movements happening. The students' movement in Vadodara was driven by power rather than ideology. Ze panicked at the absence of spaces to talk about students' rights and an overabundance of sometimes violent political factions. To be involved in something meaningful, in zir first year there, ze joined as many societies and clubs as possible. These clubs were created jointly by students and teachers, and they would be involved in literary and cultural activities. *“I loved it! My teachers saw leadership qualities in me since I was always ready to connect with different people and be out there. These teachers encouraged me to apply to various universities so that I could nurture my passion and get better platforms to express myself.”*

Pavel moved to Hyderabad next, where ze secured admission in the Hyderabad Central University. Here, ze found a group of friends who were queer – not because of their gender or sexual orientation, but because of their ideas and the kind of world they envisioned. *“These were the people who saw the passion for social work and took me in. They encouraged me to speak and move beyond talking about my family and state and talk about what was happening in my country, in the world.”* In Hyderabad Pavel discovered more conversations and dialogues happening around queerness and heteronormative norms in Hyderabad. Ze questioned the bro-code, the sis-code and the conventional ideas about monogamy and heteronormativity. *“We were all fascinated by the queer world and queer ideas. But the point is you cannot always be a spectator. You have to put yourself in the situation. Before you put yourself in a situation, you cannot really comment on it.”* It was in Hyderabad, amidst these conversations that Pavel found the encouragement to come out to zir family.

The language of the queer

Hyderabad had groomed Pavel into being a queer activist. Ze graduated from being a student activist to a queer activist. By the time ze became a queer activist, ze was spending more time with the queer (queer by gender and sexuality) community. Although ze found common ground with other queer persons, ze always felt closer to their straight friends, because direct and open conversations made for more intimacy than having common experiences. In the queer circles, Pavel found a lot of inhibitions that came from having to be politically correct.

"I arrived in Delhi as a queer activist. Delhi was the queer capital; it had a legacy of activism. I had a lot of expectations from Delhi. I thought I would make a lot of friends in Delhi, but I made a lot of political alliances. Pavel found that the activists in Delhi had been engaged with queer issues politically for a very long time, they had that language, they had that exposure, and they had that confidence. Personal is political is like a motto for many people in Delhi, but Pavel felt that not everyone had the capacity or the interest to mix the two and then present it seamlessly. After being tagged as an activist a boundary was created between many other people from the LGBT community and zir. People from the community themselves have a certain sense of alertness and fear when you tell them you are a social activist. Ze felt, people were afraid of showing their personal side to zir. But zir motivation of becoming a queer activist was to research, to learn and tell stories. "I try to break those barriers, those inhibitions. Especially when I meet new people, or people who are new to the community, I turn into a clown. I make jokes, I make some politically incorrect statements. Besides being political and critiquing policies, I also wanted to be recognised as human by other people. I aspire to make the more compassionate and empathetic side of my personality the foundation of my friendships, and create a space which was welcoming and non-judgemental for company and alliance." Pavel laughed.

Ze feels that social media must be given due credit. People now know about LGBTQ+ persons. Ze thinks that while IPC Section 377 being turned down is an important factor, but social media has contributed far more to increasing awareness about queerness. The same rhetoric which was there before 377 is still there. In this scenario, ze feels that Instagram and YouTube queer influencers are bringing a lot of knowledge through lived experiences. *"These are the ones who people turn to for learning about LGBTQ+ persons."*

Pavel also feels that moving forward, the larger conversation should be about challenging heteronormative structures. *"I am critical of the word dignity and respect of queer persons. I don't want a dignity based on what you think dignity is about."* Ze explains that the idea of dignity and integrity comes from a very moralistic perspective. Homophobia, transphobia, and patronising LGBTQ+ persons are something which ze finds highly problematic. Ze believes that there cannot be any affirmation for queer persons in a world that views things from a heteronormative perspective.

Pavel expresses zir vision for what the queer community would consider empowerment, *"Just like women empowerment is not just about access of facilities for women, but about what the world can learn from women. It should be the same for queer people. Come and learn from us. I hate it when someone just comes and asks to be taught about queer lives and experiences. I ask them what they are going to do with queer experiences. I tell them that I will speak about queer experiences provided that they learn something from them and change something about themselves and their thoughts on how the world should be."*



Chosen family, support systems and a defiance of systemic inequities

Dependence is necessary. As a disabled person, as a person with limited capabilities, and as imperfect beings that all of us are, expecting someone to be there is important. A conversation with Shivangi, a queer disability rights activist and a student, smashes some widely held beliefs about family and dependence.

Keeping it private

Shivangi never had a direct conversation with her mother about her gender or sexuality. When she was younger, barely into her double-digit years, she never questioned who she was. She did not feel any different in terms of her disability either. It was a childhood with fun-filled days spent with cousins.

It was only during her teens that Shivangi started noticing her disability more. All her peers were dating someone. All anyone would talk about was their boyfriends and girlfriends. Shivangi became very quiet. She would watch romantic shows where these things would happen, but she could not relate to any of them. There was no conversation about love or relationships at home either, at least not for her. *“The family always ignores the sexuality of a woman with a disability,”* says Shivangi. Where her brother and cousins were concerned, there would be inquiries about who they were going out with. None of those discussions extended to her. Her academic performance suffered, her grades dropped, and she failed her class 10th pre-boards. School years had become burdensome for Shivangi.

College gave Shivangi a chance to explore her identities and interests. She went to the United States to pursue her higher studies. It was in college that she was introduced to activism. Five or six months into college, she started working at the women’s centre there. The work was mainly demanding different facilities for students, and demanding representation of various groups. Along with her colleagues, Shivangi advocated for changing the name of the Women’s Studies course to Gender Studies. The administration eventually changed it to Women and Gender Studies. Before long, she got involved in student’s politics. They advocated

for the rights of women of colour, immigrants of colour, and international students. It was at this point that Shivangi started exploring her identity, her sexuality, her gender, and disability. She learned who she would date and who she wouldn't go out with. She also learned about activism, agency, and consent.

Shivangi returned to a Delhi which was more political than she had ever known it to be. On her social media, she wrote extensively about LGBT and disability issues. She expressed her opinions on political issues and about her own identity. There might not have been any direct conversations – save the letter she had penned to her mom telling her about her current relationship – but nothing was hidden either. Her mother followed Shivangi on social media and would read her posts. Perhaps seeing Shivangi writing openly about LGBT issues, and her relationship was too much for her. *“This is a private thing. You should keep it private.”* She asked Shivangi to not give any public interviews, and to not be so outspoken. *“So, I’ve blocked her from my social media and all,”* said Shivangi. *“I am not going to stop. I don’t want to stop. It’s just that I want to keep a distance. So, that was the only time when we had a verbal communication about it, otherwise it’s all been like a passive kind of a thing.”*

Those dangerous prosthetic shoes

Going out, especially using public transport has always been tough for both, Shivangi, and her partner, Nikita. Whenever they use the metro, there is a big conflict with Nikita– their gender is always questioned. For Shivangi, it is her disability, *“These prosthetic shoes. They’re dangerous. It’s always as if we are posing danger of some kind. It’s always at the security check where there is so much gatekeeping of gender and bodies.”* From public, they always face intrusive and insensitive comments and questions. The children are especially relentless, *“Ladka ho ya Ladki?”* (Are you a boy or a girl?). Shivangi has faced this discrimination for 15 years, so she can treat it as a routine – a part of going out of home. Sometimes however, it hits her like a huge wave. At one point when she was in 11th or 12th grade, she stopped going out altogether – that’s when she had depression and eating disorders.

The paradoxes of the lockdown

Not having to go out definitely felt nice to Shivangi. At home, internet opened up a whole lot of new connections. She was able to connect with persons with disabilities from around the world which taught her many things. It was much easier for them to connect digitally. She realised the importance of digital access and safety for this community. Protesting and meeting through digital forums, online education, and workshops, are facilities for which a lot of people with disabilities had been advocating for a very long time. The lockdown and the pandemic that forced people to work and communicate online, also opened avenues for their inclusion in these facilities. Earlier, there wasn't much effort to include them in the digital world – without access they couldn't learn things online. This exclusion caused a lot of people to isolate themselves, making them feel as if they did not have the capacity or the skills to engage with the society. *"The pandemic has shown that this world is a possibility, now we need to advocate to ensure that those digital rights remain for persons with disabilities."*

On the flip side, Shivangi missed going out and meeting friends, and travelling. She felt that many friendships had been lost during the lockdown. There was only so much time that she could spend in front of the screen. She recalls her first outing after months of lockdown, *"I remember the first time when I left house after the lockdown for a few hours. I was so exhausted. I needed 1-2 weeks to recover, and I think that has become a constant now. When I am physically socialising, I need a week at least to recuperate. Coronavirus has changed our bodies in so many ways – being at home, not going out that much – has changed our minds. My mental health has been severely impacted. I never had too much stress, but now I have an anxiety disorder and a sleeping disorder, so I have to take pills for that."*

Thoughts on inclusion

Shivangi feels that queer bodies are becoming more visible, and not in a good way. Ever since the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the knowledge about the term LGBTQ+ has ballooned and so have the stereotypes associated with them. Whereas earlier people used descriptions, like, *'a woman with short hair', 'a boy with tattoos,' now people immediately put anyone who does not look traditional into the LGBTQ+ category. 'Those boys are holding hands; they must be gay.'* Shivangi feels that prevalence of such stereotypes is harmful for LGBTQ+ persons. Not only does their portrayal in mainstream media gets siloed, but it also gives rise to identity crises and imposter syndrome in people who might be exploring their gender and sexuality. People question the validity of their identities

based on these external markers. *"When I was first attracted to a specific gender, it was not like an identity crisis for me."*

The pride month celebrations by corporations and other organisations do not bother Shivangi a lot. If it is pride month and the airlines are giving discounts to LGBT passengers, she is happy to purchase the flight ticket. *"We are living in a capitalist world; we are engaged in capitalism. Especially as queer people, we should get the things we want."* She feels that corporate engagement for disability has also increased in the recent years. *"Honestly, if I were hired in a big organisation, even if it was through CSR or diversity & inclusion initiatives, I wouldn't mind because I need that money and I want to be independent in that way. If it is helping disabled people get jobs then it is really, really great."*

There are many transgender and queer persons who face extraordinary amount of physical, mental and emotional violence. It bothers Shivangi when they are not adequately covered and there are no discussions around these issues during the Pride month. *"That's when Pride starts feeling like a shame,"* she said. Issues that queer persons and their families face, conversion therapy and the disproportionate violence on queer and trans persons need to be discussed more during the Pride month.

Language is an important aspect for inclusion of marginalised persons. Academics use difficult to understand language in their reports, which makes it almost inaccessible to people with learning disabilities. Even people with a fairly good education and without learning disabilities can find reading academic and legal language a daunting task. Shivangi recalls signing a contract with a large corporation. The contract was in such a difficult language that she did not understand much of it but ended up signing it anyway. A few days later, when talking with a colleague, who had also received the same contract, it was revealed that the colleague requested for an easy version of the contract. Shivangi didn't even know that an easier version was available. There was no language, no indication that such an option was available. The language which makes marginalised persons aware about their options must, therefore be available. Otherwise, there is no scope for them to understand and avail any benefits or resources available to them.

Family, and Co-dependence

Shivangi is learning about caste issues and the privileges that are attached with belonging to an upper caste person. Especially in a business caste family – where the knowledge is passed on to her about finances was something which a lot of other people didn't have. *"Family relations are so transactional, it's always give-and-take. If they are giving me something, I have to return the favour. I don't believe in all that,"* she stated. Shivangi believes in anti-capitalist sort of families where focus is on disability justice, where focus is on inter-dependence – it's about who needs more support at that moment of time. Families can exist out of biological ties and caste-relations. *"My chosen family are my cat, my partner, the people whom I choose to be with. Not just people, my plants, I like gardening and taking care of my plants, and my cat."*

She is surprised at why co-dependence carries such a negative connotation. She feels that needing someone to be there and expecting someone to be there is an important part of relationships. That is what a lot of people with disabilities expect. *"They (persons with disabilities) expect not only their caregivers, but parents or partners to be with them. If they are not given that, then it is as if that right is being taken away. If an able-bodied person is able to function on their own, they can travel on their own. But for a PWD, travelling on our own means being able to rely on someone. Being able to ask for that kind of interdependence is important for every relationship. Why shouldn't we have that expectation of needing?"* Need, Shivangi feels, is central to seeking out support. People seek out relationships, friendships, others who understand them, are there for them and with whom they can talk. She feels that more people should understand that if they cannot do something on their own, it does not mean that they are incapable. They just need support and that's alright.



05

CONVERSATION WITH SUKHDEEP

Opening up and sharing to build communities and fight isolation

There is something wanting when one is aware of their sexuality but does not have the vocabulary to express it. Speaking with Sukhdeep about his journey of learning about sexuality, finding connections, and later creating them through his magazine, brought out how language enhances awareness and lends expression to identities that most do not understand.

The LGBT information vacuum

Born and brought up in Barrackpore, Kolkata, Sukhdeep lived with his parents and three elder sisters. As his father was an ex-Serviceman, having worked with the Indian Airforce, he was educated at the Army School in Barrackpore. Sukhdeep was quick to dispel notions of hyper-masculinity associated with army schools. *"It was a normal, co-ed school. Nobody was training us to be soldiers."* Even as a child, Sukhdeep was aware of being attracted to men. Therefore, his awareness of his sexuality was a gradual process. He would try to catch glimpses of underwear models on the market billboards. In school, he was in love (one-sided) with one of his friends. Sometimes he felt guilty, about not being able to bear children, but that was it. By the time the new millennial began, the 2000s started, Sukhdeep knew about his sexuality but did not have the vocabulary to express that part of his identity. Those were the days of an information vacuum on LGBT issues. The Telegraph newspaper was the only reliable source for Sukhdeep. It was only when he joined the Indian School of Mines in Dhanbad that he got his first laptop and had free internet access (a rarity back then), he started reading up about being gay.

Learnings from beyond The Telegraph

Back in 2006–2009, before Facebook could leave its mark, Orkut was the social media platform to create waves in India and for Sukhdeep, Orkut with its forums became a platform to connect with other queer individuals. He used the internet to explore more about LGBTQ+ issues. Being a person who believed in expressing his thoughts, and who loved writing, Sukhdeep also started a personal blog and was publishing the newsletter for his college. It was when Sukhdeep was in his final year in 2009, that he thought of coming out. The Oscar-nominated movie, Milk, based on the life of gay rights activist and politician, Harvey Milk, encouraged him to talk about his identity. Sukhdeep was also moved by the Oscar speech of the screenwriter of the movie, Dustin Lance Black, and decided to pen his thoughts on his blog. That blog post was also his first public coming out. When he wrote but with a handful of subscribers to his blog, there weren't any instant reactions. However, when the attention did come, he wasn't quite prepared for it.

Why are you gay?

With no initial reaction on the blog about his coming out, Sukhdeep was unaware of how the news had spread through his college. Therefore, when he joined his college after the summer internship in 2009, he was rather surprised to find out that almost everyone was aware that he was gay. His colleagues prodded him with questions on his blog and about what he wrote there. While the reason he wrote the blog was precisely so that people would know about his orientation, he wasn't quite sure of how to deal with his batchmates on a personal level. First, the barrage of questions was centred on whether he was gay, and disbelief about how he could be gay. Some queries were abysmally insensitive and accusatory, *"Are you saying you are gay just because you want to be popular?"* and *"How do you know you are gay when you haven't been physically intimate with women?"* His college friends would not believe him – he had spent three years with these people, in an atmosphere where everyone was exploring sex, and none of them had an idea about his sexuality.

If probing questions coming from the place of ignorance weren't enough, Sukhdeep was informed by his close friends that rumours had been flying around that he has multiple partners in Delhi and other regions. His close friends also tried to talk him out of being gay. The initial 2–3 months had been difficult for Sukhdeep. The Delhi High Court's verdict of 2009, which decriminalized homosexuality, had also come out and was followed by a lot of media coverage, and his college mates had other sources to be informed as well. The questions had ceased. Sukhdeep had a project in the pipeline that wasn't associated with his studies.

"The court rulings can't really dictate the attitude of people," stated Sukhdeep on the striking down of section 377 of IPC. He felt that the real profiteers of the significant court verdict in 2018, have been the capitalists. *"Now, they (capitalists) think, it has become mandatory to show their solidarity during the pride month with their rainbow logos and advertising is done mainly to target a new segment of customers,"* he said.

However, he also highlighted that the dilution of the aforementioned section has given impetus to LGBTQIA+ individuals to express themselves more openly. *"Whether it is movies, you have LGBT characters in web series on Netflix or Amazon Prime. The mainstream media is covering a lot more on the LGBT movement and the social media is flooded with the pages on LGBT rights and consequently more people are coming out."* Ever since 2018, it has been much easier and there is a truckload of information today on LGBTQIA+. But for Sukhdeep, the journey started when being gay was being a criminal, when the internet was at a nascent stage, LGBTQ+ issues had not gained any mainstream attention in the media, and most of all, a time when LGBTQ+ individuals were not afforded much protection from the various kinds of violence that they faced.

Sharing experiences

Post his 5th semester examination, Sukhdeep wanted to write down his experiences and share more thoughts on being gay. He did not want to limit these experiences to his personal blog. He wanted to start a magazine. He knew he had little chance of getting his work published in one of the mainstream newspapers because of his previous experiences of writing letters to the editors and not receiving any replies from them. He explored the internet for LGBTQ+ magazines and found Humsafar Dost, but it had ceased its publication. The Queer Chronicle seemed a lot urban to him and he felt that the Pink Pages was okay but didn't quite have everything that he wanted in a magazine. Thus, began the first edition of his magazine. Money was an issue, and with only two people by his side, the first edition of Gaylaxy featured 7-8 articles. One of his college mates, who came out after Sukhdeep, also contributed an article in the magazine. He also had a friend, who designed the newsletter, and Sukhdeep approached him. Sukhdeep also learnt the software and designed a few pages himself. Gaylaxy Magazine first came out in 2010, and Sukhdeep hosted it on a free website, issue.com. The second part was about telling people that such a magazine existed and to introduce dialogue in the LGBT community. And so, he used Orkut forums and Planet Romeo to share the link to the magazine. Soon, the word got out and people started writing congratulatory messages to him.

Why the world needs a Gaylaxy magazine

The magazine wasn't about him and his thoughts alone, it was a comprehensive project aimed at documenting gay stories and experiences, news and happenings, LGBT-based movie reviews, health articles, NGO directory, quizzes, and more such sections that gave LGBTQIA+ individuals, a source of information they could relate to, particularly in the times of information-crunch on LGBT. In 2010, the mainstream media was reluctant in covering LGBT news –Pride Month was the only exception to the rule but even in the Pride month coverage, the newspapers just dedicated a small snippet and one single image. With Gaylaxy, Sukhdeep was able to provide a source for LGBT news and it eventually became the magazine that broke the LGBT news before any other portal could. And the reason why people would share and like the magazine was that he covered news or articles from the LGBT perspective and not from the straight perspective, which is where sensationalism around LGBTQIA+ existed in the mainstream media. Then, he was also aware that if the person is not out then not to reveal the details.

Sukhdeep also was aware of the fact that language played a very important role. He was cautious of how he wrote. For the next couple of months even after the first issue that came out, he wasn't sure why people were liking it. He wanted to know why people were praising the magazine. Also, initially, he wasn't much aware of LGBT politics, ideologies, or words. Even today, he doesn't claim to be a know-it-all, so whenever people pointed out any mistake, he would rectify it because he knew he had to learn a lot. Since around then the articles on LGBT weren't dealt with care, so Sukhdeep became even more responsible about his content. He felt that if an unknown platform had to become known then obviously, you had to give something better than the rest. When he worked on his second issue on transgender struggles, he shared the article with an external group that had more awareness about transgender issues and rights, so that the article doesn't come across as insensitive and inaccurate.

Between the pre-internet boom and the information overload of social media, Sukhdeep had created a personal space and a trusted source of information for LGBTQIA+ individuals. His Gaylaxy continues filling up the vacuum that exists for young LGBT persons who are exploring gender, sexuality and issues that others from their community face.





06

CONVERSATION WITH VARSHA

Breaking societal barriers with self-reflection and understanding

Society has a way of putting labels on people. When you don't associate with the generic societal rules, you are made to feel uncomfortable and sometimes ostracised. It's quite a journey to come to terms with your identity and then coming out while facing everyday struggles like getting stopped from entering the ladies coach in the metro because your hair is cut too short. How does one navigate their way through the noise of the society? Here's a voice expressing that.

A mutable identity in rigid clothes

Discrimination and non-acceptance begin from home, and they start early. For Varsha, who identifies as gender fluid, it began at the tender age of 7. Little Varsha was combing her short hair and asked one of her aunts, how she looked. The aunt was quick to reply with a hint of amusement that Varsha should stay like a girl. Varsha recalled this incident as seemingly innocent and typical of family members to pass remarks like that but something that could impact your childhood.

While Delhi-based Varsha wasn't affected by this remark or bullied at school per se, as she mostly followed conventions, it was clothes that had begun to affect her. The outfit one wears is among the most gendered things. The distinction between masculinity and femininity usually starts with the school uniform. Varsha was pretty comfortable till she was 10 years of age, as she wore pants to the school. However, when she reached class 6, she was required to wear salwar-suits – she preferred pants but had to follow the rules. However, she was relieved that it wasn't skirts.

The uniform rules were applicable at school but at home, Varsha was free to wear trousers and shirts. Well, almost free. The rules at home came in the form of functions and parties when she would be asked to wear feminine clothes. She wouldn't have minded the conventional feminine clothes for a few hours, but it disturbed her to wear those for the whole day. Varsha found the traditional women clothes uncomfortable. It bothered her even more that there was nobody she could talk to about her frustration at having to wear these clothes. However, wearing women clothes weren't the only thing that troubled Varsha, the conversations centred around crushes in school days, also made her feel left-out.

Relationships, identity, and fitting in

Varsha, who uses the pronouns She/They now, wasn't aware in school about why she felt what she felt. During her teenage years, her school friends talked about their crushes on male students and who was the good-looking one, Varsha would feel withdrawn from the conversation. She couldn't reveal her true feelings for the fear of being outed by her friends and she equally thought, she would lose her friendship. Initially, she felt that there was some problem in her because she didn't feel the same way about boys like her female school companions.

She remembered that when she was in class 7th, she had a crush on a girl in her school. The girl had a mutual friend and Varsha would travel with them in the bus to school, but she couldn't muster courage to start a conversation.

Unlike school, her college days offered more exposure and had a liberal setting. Varsha studied in Delhi's Lady Sri Ram college where she could express herself more openly. Not being restricted to a certain set of clothes was a huge relief. She also had more access to social media which she could endlessly explore and learn about different terminologies associated with LGBTQIA+ and search extensively to find out why she felt different from everyone around her. So, while she did have more information in college and freedom, a part of her wanted to fit in. She dated boys in the beginning because that's what everyone around her was doing – but very consciously only for a couple of months. That short dating period allowed her to blend in with the others without compromising with her identity.

As time passed and Varsha felt more self-assured, she thought of coming out to her friends. Her friends, she said, were mostly supportive. Her best friend told her that she already had an idea. But some of her friends distanced themselves from her, which was pretty hurtful. There were other LGBTQ+ persons in her social circle. However, friendship and camaraderie depend on a lot of factors. *"Friendships within LGBTQIA+ community are dependent on class. If the friends are from upper class, you don't feel connected and feel even more isolated because of not fitting in with your own people."* She sometimes felt more connected with her straight friends.

Amid all the trials and making sense of friendships, relationships were still something that she explored. Looking up people across dating sites, she discovered that comfort is the main ingredient of a successful relationship and that one shouldn't label their identity from the get-go. *"Thoughts and perception around your orientation can change with time. If you are rigid, then you somewhere shut down the idea of exploring more in relationships."* Varsha had once fallen for a transman but contemplated the future of relationship with that individual and hence, didn't even give it a chance.

Netflix and relate

"A lot of ideas and perspectives around relationships come from the Hindi movies but when it comes to the portraying of homosexual love, the Bollywood movies make a real mess of it," Varsha lamented. Far from projecting the realities and touching upon the vulnerabilities, these movies stereotyped same-sex relationships and portrayed highly flawed depictions of homosexual relationships. Straight people in gay roles were also a factor which contributed to the movies' overall flaws. Dostana, for instance, Varsha felt was a regressive movie with a mockery on gay relationships. Songs like Maa Da Ladla Bigad Gaya, further showed gay relationships as something problematic. Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan was a movie that couldn't capture the real struggles of being in a same-sex relationship. However, for Varsha, Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga, was a refreshing take on lesbian relationships, and one to which she could relate. Here she felt a bit disappointed that it had to be a man who was at the centre of the movie – the saviour of a relationship between two women. In any case, watching this movie with her family made for a lot of quiet fun for Varsha, as her parents got increasingly awkward during the course of the movie.

Disappointed in Bollywood, Varsha switched to watching the western shows and movies. Feel Good, a comedy-drama series on Netflix, was right up Varsha's alley.

She could identify with the lead character, Mae Martin in the series. Mae is a gender non-binary comedian and actor who plays the role of a stand-up comedian in the series. Watching Mae Martin as the stand-up comedian in the series, Varsha felt her life playing out on the screen. Like Mae in the series, Varsha also recalled the time, when she would only sport gender-neutral hues such as black and grey. For Varsha, sporting the neutral hues was just another way of expressing her identity. However, with time and more understanding on gender identity, now she feels comfortable flaunting hues like pink as well, which are associated with femininity.

Beyond IPC Section 377

Varsha was quite unaware about the section 377 and came to know about it only when it was struck down. Surprisingly, she was told about it by her straight friends. She welcomed the move by IPC in 2018, as it paved way for more dialogues and conversations around homosexual relationships allowed people to be in love without having to fear for their lives. However, for her reading down section 377, should've also meant inclusion of same-sex marriages, as the constitutional rights. *"A lot of feminist organisations say that queer persons should not want marriage as it is a patriarchal construct. But, when a person is given rights for the first time, they would want to take a more conventional route. They would first want to have the same privileges as everyone else. It is very validating to have a legal right for LGBTQ+ persons. You can tell people that the constitution allows it and question if they believe in the constitution. The debate about patriarchy of marriage is valid and can continue, but that is a gradual process. First bring everyone to the same starting point."*

Even after reading down of section 377, there's a long road ahead when it comes to changing the attitudes of people. Often at the metro station, Varsha is stopped at the lady's queue because her hair is short and at public offices, she said that she doesn't use washrooms for the same reason that she's stopped. Even at work trips, when she travelled by train, the use the binary Mr. or Ms., and people using wrong pronouns made her feel reluctant to travel. At the airport also, Varsha feels the security checks are binary. All these incidents are not only bothersome, but repetitive, the constant misgendering and fear are points of discomfort for a person whose gender is fluid.

However, armed with her ever-increasing knowledge about gender and feeling secure in her own skin, Varsha is able to demand respect. "I very sternly told the people at my workplace to call me by name and not sir or ma'am." Navigating public places is still a major headache, but for now, she is happy navigating the city and her dating life on her scooty.

Disclaimer:

Please note that the interviews and narratives presented in this book were conducted and compiled in the year 2021. The experiences, opinions, and circumstances described herein reflect the context and reality of that specific period. Readers need to be aware that the situations, views, and perspectives of the individuals featured in this book may have evolved or changed since then. Therefore, this book should not be considered a current representation of the ongoing and dynamic experiences within the LGBTQIA+ community. We encourage readers to consider these narratives as a snapshot of a particular moment in time, understanding that the journey and evolution of everyone's experience is an ongoing process.

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