

YaariaN'99

A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

A report on the Yaarian '99 conference in Hyderabad.
that could change your life even if you could not attend.

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1. The Weekend of Love

The weekend of Valentine's Day, 1999, was celebrated by twenty men in the city of love, Hyderabad. That in itself would not have been unique; neither would be the fact that they were all gay. What was unique, however, was that they gathered from the distant corners of the nation. Apart from the twin cities, representatives had come from Mumbai, Bangalore, Calcutta, Pune, and even from rural Orissa. And they called their gathering Yaarian '99.

This was the second major conference of gays in the country. Earlier, Anno Domini 1994 had seen seventy gay men meet and chart out the course of their destiny in Mumbai. Although this conference in Hyderabad was a meeting of a lesser *physical* number of people, each of these individual men represented an active support group for gays in his particular region. Some other individuals represented groups of gay men who were emerging as a community but had not yet organized a support group. In this way, the collective was really not of individual men; but of gay support groups *and* individuals. This marked a great advance since the 1994 conference in Mumbai, and reveals how much hard work had been going on in various cities around the country in the intervening five years.

In a way the Yaarian '99 conference celebrated the earlier effort and took it some way farther. The very name, loosely translated means 'friendships', or a 'collection of friendships'. However, one would be hard put to find an exact meaning in a western language. Yaarian is the plural form of 'Yaar' (along the same pattern as pahadian, 'hills,' ladkiyan, 'girls,' or bastian, 'towns'). 'Yaar' is a Hindustani word, used equally in Hindi and Urdu; as much in neighbouring Pakistan as in a large part of India as far south as the Pearl of the Deccan, Hyderabad itself. 'Yaar' signifies a friendship which is almost love; sometimes love itself; and at other times a relationship, which goes much beyond 'love' as we ordinary mortals know it. As Ghalib once lamented,

Yeh na thi hamari Qismat keh wisal-e-yaar hota

Agar aur jeete rehte yehi intezaar hota

If only gay support groups had existed in Ghalib's time, he might not have had quite so much to lament!

These twenty men gathered at the venue near that celebrated beacon of culture, Ravindra Bharati in the 400-year old city of Hyderabad, on the morning of 13th of February 1999. The three basic objectives were simple enough: to revitalize the Hyderabad support group; to inter-network to coordinate the activities of all the regional groups; and to draw up a collective ACTION PLAN for 1999.

2. Behind The Spotlight

The Yaarian '99 conference was organized by Hyderabad's gay support group, SAATHI, originally an acronym for 'Society for All Active and Thinking Homosexuals in India'. SAATHI is actually the second oldest support group in India, having been formed in 1992 after the Bombay Dost / Humsafar Trust took shape in Mumbai. The group began as a growing up of a small archive of materials related to gay lifestyles. This was called Gay Information Center (GIC) and was run by Owais Khan. SAATHI, as it was later

named, consisted of a circle of friends who met regularly in a local restaurant. They decided to write up a charter of common goals, and take on the name, SAATHI. The next step to becoming a gay support group was to move their meetings from the restaurant to the Public Gardens, Hyderabad's central cruising ground. By working in Public Gardens, the group hoped to expand from a small circle of friends to become a formal organization that could work for the betterment of the whole gay community with all of its sub-groups and crosscurrents. The group elected an executive board of five members and continued the GIC post box to receive correspondence.

Through letters and personal friendships, SAATHI has reached out beyond Hyderabad into the wider Andhra region. The group tries to foster the emergence of other local support groups in Vijayawada and Vishakapatnam. Through the mail, hundreds of men have turned to SAATHI for emotional support and practical advice. SAATHI has an annual program of circulating safe-sex information, explicitly designed for men who have sex with other men, in Telugu, Hindi, Urdu and English, at cruising spots on the occasion of world AIDS awareness day, December 1. Although so far the group has remained low-profile and has steered away from media exposure and government contact, there is evidence that the normally conservative social attitude in Hyderabad is beginning to open up, and SAATHI is ready to take on a more vocal presence in the twin cities.

SAATHI originally conceived of this conference as a local workshop, then as a regional gathering of South Indian support groups. But as the conference took shape, the group realized that an all-India event had been delayed for too many years. Therefore, the conference expanded to a national scope. The goal was to invite one representative from each support group, and to keep the gathering simple and intimate. SAATHI hosted this two-day conference with minimal resources: a group of only six organizers worked for three weeks on a budget of only 6,500 Rupees. SAATHI hopes that model of arranging a successful event with the simplest of means will encourage other support groups to host and organize similar conferences and events in their own regions.

3. Wake Up Before You Go-Go

Ashok Row Kavi (of Humsafar Trust in Mumbai) inaugurated the conference by lighting the lamp and presenting his opening address. He lit the wicks with such grace, that nobody was prepared for the impact of his speech, which hit like a ton of bricks. Ashok offered the clear and stern warning that the uncontrolled spread of AIDS could decimate the gay community, just as our gay identity was becoming coherent and strong. He placed before us all the stark terms of this reality: that organizing gay support groups is not just a luxury, but our only means of survival as a community.

Ashok's opening speech about Homosexuality had most of us doing some number crunching in our heads. This is the gist of his speech -

The very existence of homosexuality was denied for a long time. The term was invented by Carol Maria, a psychiatrist, in 1887. It went by many terms - Urania, deviation and inversion. A significant change came in 1940 when the Iowa Women's student organization asked for a study on it. This led to Alfred Kinsey's historic study - Sexual Behavior in the Human male. He devised a scale wherein zero represented total

heterosexuality, six represented total homosexuality, three represented bisexualities, and the other numbers of the scale represented obvious degrees of proclivity towards homosexuality or heterosexuality. The report also concluded that 5% of a male population are permanently practicing homosexuals. The curve has long since been challenged by sexologists and may consider its findings to be too conservative.

Based on these findings, the 1991 census in India gives us 13.5 million men sitting on point 6; they are self-identified gay men who desire to have sexual relations and emotional bonding only with other men. Between points 3 and 5, there are 37.5 million men, whose sexual orientation represents various degrees of bisexuality—they like to have sex with men just as much or more than with women. Because of the massive gender imbalance in the country, many of these men who are bisexual in orientation are acting more like gay men. In the beginning of the century, there were 972 females for every 1000 males; however, in the 1991 census this ratio has fallen to 927 females for every 1000 males. In large cities that host a population of young male immigrant laborers, this ratio of women to men is even lower. Therefore, many men who may be bisexual may not have access to women as sexual partners, and therefore behavior more like gay men in forming sexual and emotional bonds with other men. And finally, there is situational homosexuality in situations like prisons, hostels and dorms, where men who may not consider themselves gay or bisexual will, out of necessity, engage in sexual behavior with other men.

Proxy research has come up with discoveries that should startle the gay community. For every one woman who came into a Mumbai hospital for HIV testing and was found to be carrying the virus in her blood stream (meaning that her results were HIV positive), there were 32 men who came in for testing and were found to be HIV positive. Even after adjusting these statistics to account for social factors like gender imbalance in the population and the fact that less women have access to medical care and blood testing than men, the ratio of HIV positive women to HIV positive men was one woman to eight men. This means that the HIV virus is spread much more rapidly through sexual contacts between men and men than it is spreading through sexual contacts between women and men (or women and women). This does not mean that AIDS is a "gay disease" as it has wrongly been labeled in Britain and America. However, gay men need to acknowledge that our sexual conduct places us in risk of grave danger because of unprotected penetrative sex without proper condom use with multiple sexual partners. (Another research project records that the average gay man in India has sex with six different partners in the period of six months). Unless our sexual practices as a whole community change quickly, we can expect a rampant HIV epidemic in our community. This danger is compounded by the fact that the government does not recognize male-to-male transmission of the HIV virus in its campaigns to foster education and arrests the spread of the virus.

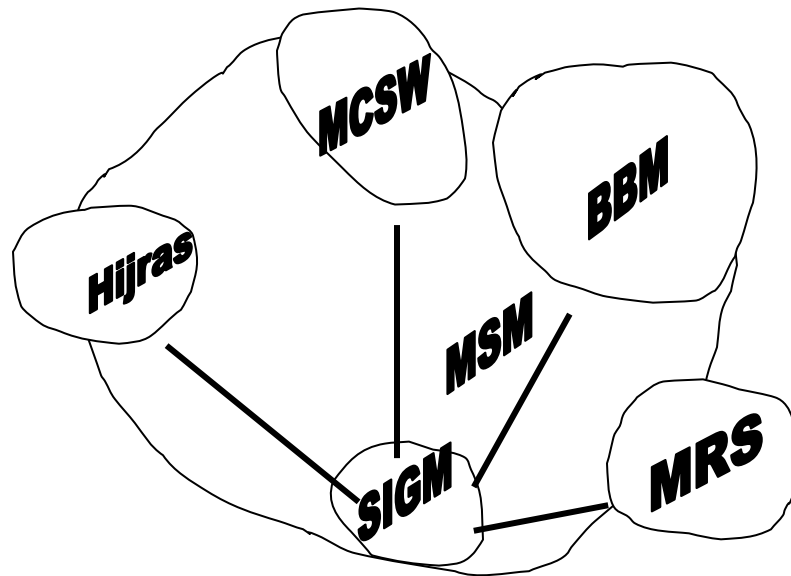
Already in Mumbai, probably 60% of gay men carry the HIV virus in their blood and body fluids, although only a few of them might show signs of the AIDS as of now). That is almost as high a percentage of HIV positive people as in the population of female sex-workers in Mumbai (at 68%). We need to educate ourselves and lobby the government

for recognition so that it will fund HIV prevention campaigns are make blood tests more available for people in our gay community.

The question is, who will lead the way in this work for safe-sex education? Education is only possible if there is a community to form support groups in the field of men who have sex with men (MSM). Out of all the sub-groups in this MSM field, only one is able to form a strong and cohesive community: that is the sub-group of self-identified gay men. In order to understand this point, it is crucial to review the variety of sub-groups that make up the wider groups of men who have sex with men (MSM). This breaks down into five major sub-groups.

- MRS - Men in recreational sex.
- MCSW - male commercial sex workers.
- SIGM - Self identified gay men.
- Hijras.
- BBM - Behaviorally bisexual men.

The figure shows the place the gay community occupies within the wider field of MSM groups.



The self-identified gay community interacts with each of these other groups. Yet SIGM are the only ones who can build a separate identity, who neither hide behind the façade of being married nor are excluded from society as men who appear as women. As such, self-identified gay men build support groups and reach out to build alliances with these other groups, in the process educating and /or protecting them. Self-identified gay men can reach these groups in ways that the government and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) cannot or will not do. Gay men can represent the whole wider MSM group to the government and wider society. The formation of a community based on our distinct identity is crucial for the survival of ourselves and all those other men who, for other reasons and in other ways, have sex with other men.

4. The conference agenda

4.1. Gay Support Groups (GSGs)

Why do we need gay support groups? What features do they have? How do they form and how do they survive once they have formed? How does a GSG benefit the whole community? Finally, can we really live without a GSG?

4.1.1. Need

It is quite a struggle for anyone to make the transition from a man who has sex with other men (MSM) to a self-identified gay man. Everyone who starts on this journey from within needs some element of outside help to make it to the other side. It's a rare man who has initiative enough to form a strong gay identity of his own. GSGs help develop this identity in an environment that fosters community spirit. Such an identity is a relatively new phenomenon in India, though of course men have always been having sex with other men. However, Indian society is changing fast, and there are five social forces which create the conditions in which a separate "gay" identity can emerge. These given social forces are:

1. The breakup of large, extended families
2. The evolution of nuclear families
3. Industrialization and the changing nature of work.
4. Urbanization and moving from rural areas into towns and cities.
5. The empowerment of women through education and employment.

As India changes under the pressure of these forces, a new gay identity is becoming visible, and a gay community is becoming increasingly viable. The sole reason for a GSG to exist is to support, nurture and direct this emerging gay identity.

Gays in India are a disempowered community, just like women, dalits or other marginal communities. We all have been disempowered in relation to the social hegemony of heterosexual men who are mainly upper caste. Although women or dalits may not naturally understand and sympathize with gays, we must work to make these others groups our allies. Without allying with the feminist movement in particular in seeking legal rights, reproductive choices, and economic independence for women, a gay movement will lack wider social support.

As members of a disempowered community, gay men are at risk. We may live in fear of being “discovered”; our job situation may be unstable. We may be vulnerable to exploitation, blackmail or violence due to legal constructions that criminalize consensual sexual acts between adult men. Emotionally we suffer from loneliness, hopelessness and depression. Without support groups to strengthen our community, we may find sex partners but not find caring lovers. We may find gratification but not find friendship. We may live in our families but not be understood and accepted by them. If gay men are to lead secure, stable and fulfilling lives, we need gay support groups.

4.1.2. Characteristics of a GSG

- Does a GSG need to be formal?

The gay community is like a biological cell, while a GSG is like the nucleus of the cell. The nucleus is a small, tightly organized structure that guides and directs the energies of the wider cell. Formal groups are structured for a purpose with an agenda, leadership and regular meetings, while informal groups based on friendship or cruising lack this structure. Both of them use their collective energies to achieve a purpose. Informal groups are typically characterized by voluntary, motivated actions. While good, these types of actions are not really efficient and are difficult to sustain over a long period of time. A group has to be registered and structured to be able to achieve its goals effectively.

A GSG is a group that interacts with related groups. It must have a concrete agenda, which usually is achieved only by formal groups. It must be able to perform a plethora of functions – community health, media interaction, and countering backlash against gays. Informal groups typically break up over time, due to rivalries, factionalism, or lack of motivation. A formal group with an agenda, clear goals and leadership structure is very durable and leadership can rotate periodically without the group breaking up.

4.1.3. Issues in the formation of a GSG

- Size – It was unanimously decided that size doesn’t matter ☺. Most groups start small. Three people are enough to start a local gay support group. As meetings are regularly held and activities organized, the group will naturally attract attention and grow. Some groups have grown too large and have naturally broken up into separate groups. Keeping our ideas of what issues are important is more crucial than worrying about group size.
- Structure – A hierarchical pyramid generally applies to group organization. For example, a GSG could consist of the three layers: an Executive committee, a general body of active members and wider group of members who attend some meetings but who don’t formally belong to the group.
- Prioritizing of issues – Issues on the agenda need to be given weights – important ones need to be taken care of first.

- Infrastructure – the two key issues in infrastructure are having a safe, regular place to meet and having regular financial contributions by members in order to form a budget to carry out routine operations.
- Making your presence felt – Through sustainability and commitment, GSGs should be able to lobby support. In addition, organizing events attracts new members from the wider community who may initially only come for sexual contacts. Periodic events also provide a platform for representing the GSG to the media, NGOs and the wider society.

4.2. Diversity and Community

This session was kicked off by a game, which was simple but startling. All of us drew our perception of the room on paper. The facilitator compared drawings of people sitting adjacent to one another and showed us the radical diversity displayed in them. Some focused on the people in the room, some focused on the potted plant. Some drew architectural plans of the room from above, some drew the profiles of everyone in the room. The moral of the exercise was that, not everyone approaches being “gay” from the same angle. We can’t even agree on what the room looks like, even when we are all sitting in the same room. We need to expect diversity and respect it whenever we encounter it. Gender identification, cross-gender behavior, sexual preferences, age, class and marital status: all these factors intersect to create variation within our community. Just as we demand to be recognized as authentic people by non-gays, we need to carefully recognize the diversity within the gay community. We need to support those who might be very different from ourselves.

Gender identification is a major issue, which divides our community. Most self-identified gay men identify as men and want another man as a lover. But there are others who identify themselves as women in their desire to have a man as a lover. This may lead to a whole variety of cross-gender behavior in men, i.e., they may act or speak “effeminate” in order to express their essential difference from heterosexual men. All the participants suggested that our first step is to form a strong community of self-identified gay men (SIGM). As a formal group, this type of gay support group could then reach out to other groups, like men who behave more “effeminately” or men who identify as women, or men who have become, or are Hijras.

It is important to remember that the non-gay world identifies us all as “effeminate” despite the vast variety in our gender behaviors. Some present at the conference felt strongly that men who take on the speech or behavior of women were surrendering to patriarchal pressures in the surrounding society, which dictate that a man cannot love another man, for only a “woman” can love another man. Others disagreed and observed that “womanly” behavior was a courageous way of expressing their gayness to the straight world. These people felt that such behavior came naturally to them, and helped to challenge society’s preconceived notions of what “woman” means and who men can really be. This viewpoint was expressed by a piece of anonymous graffiti on the wall of the conference, saying “I wish Yaarian ’99 could be Saarian ’99!”

4.3. Relationships

Do GSGs help in building a relationship?

They do, in the sense that they help build self esteem which eventually helps a person to be able to get along with someone. A common complaint is that guys leave the support groups when they get friends / partners from the group – a very valid point, but when the person's group agenda is stronger than his individual, probably selfish motives, he will not be doing this. Which brings us to the fact that making relationships happen lies a lot in the individual's hands – a group can indirectly support relationships, through a number of helpful side effects.

4.4. Role Models

Role models are the foundation stone for future aspirations. Presenting role models in a pariah group is very important for the simple fact that you know that there is always someone who has treaded the difficult path. Everybody's idea of a role model is different – my idea of a role model could be that of the couple across the street who have been together for 20 years - it could also be the older generation picking up ideas from the younger generation. The concept of a role model needn't be holistic too – I could look for different things in different people. There's so much of diversity around.

The session ended with taking up a vote on role models. It was unanimously agreed that people who are active in GSGs should be providing role models for those gay people who have not yet joined the group. We can best provide role models for others by being strong, decisive, honest, caring and knowledgeable, rather than by conforming to any particular pattern of sexual or gender behavior.

4.5. Coming out issues

Come out, come out, wherever you are. We all agreed that coming out is the best way to further the gay cause. It makes you stronger as a person, and challenges those around you to confront the issues you stand for, and hopefully come to understand gays as people. But coming out is hard, especially as gay identity is just emerging in India. Of course, without coming out, our identity will never really emerge!

- When does one come out? – The process of telling your parents, friends, and colleagues that you are gay is a tough one. On the other hand it could lead to closer, more honest relationships with them. Here is a checklist that can help people decide whether to come out and how:
 - Are you sure of your identity? (How long have you known yourself to be gay? How much experience do you have as a gay person?)
 - Do you want to come out? (Will you be happier if you come out?)
 - Why do you want to come out? (What are the clear goals that you want to achieve by coming out? Honesty with you family, a conscience clear of having to lie, a sense of having people you care about, know you a complete person, being able to better resist pressure to marry in the future?)

- Are you ready to face the consequences? (Think ahead about what the hardships might be and how long it might take for people to struggle to accept you as gay.)
- Do you have support systems? (Are you financially independent in your job? Do you have a safe place to stay for a while if you have to leave home? Do you have your local gay support group ready to meet you at short notice? Have you told your friends to be aware and ready that you are going to tell you family?)
- Is your situation positive at home? (Is it a good idea to come out if there is family tension over other issues, like a death in the family or a fight? Could you wait a little while until these issues clear up?)
- Are you coming out in order to get even with someone? (Are you using coming out a weapon to hurt someone in your family, or to pay them back for something they might have done to hurt you?)
- Put yourself in your parents' shoes and consider their reaction. (How can you help them to better understand who you are and why you are coming out to them?)
- How do you want to come out? (By writing a letter? By speaking face to face? By speaking over the phone? By speaking to one parent first before the other? By speaking to a brother or sister or cousin before speaking to your parents?)
- Typically your folks would go through the following reactions: shock -> denial -> grief. These reactions could take days or months or years, depending on your family situation. In the end, parents can either accept you as gay, or they can reject you, or they can willfully ignore the fact that you are gay. It is very rare in India for parents to throw their children out of the house for coming out, or for them to be able to actively reject their children for a long period of time.

The conference went on to discuss the examples of those at the conference that had come out to their parents. Out of a total of twenty men present, seven had already come out to their parents, some in recent past and some many years ago. Two others had already decided to definitely come out to their parents, but had not found the right opportunity yet to do so. Even more of us had come out to friends or co-workers. Most admitted that their fears about coming out were not confirmed in the actual experience of coming out.

Finally, the participants in the conference brought up the need for a support group for the parents of gays. Some of us have parents who have already spent years dealing with the fact that their child is gay. Some of these parents have, over time and long struggle, become very supportive and accepting of their gay child. If we organize these parents into a network, they could support and help the parents of those gay people who are just coming out. Parents who must confront this issue feel isolated, grieved, angry and ashamed. Another parent who has already gone through this could really help them.

They could correspond by phone or post as well as by actual visits. It would not take too much effort to compile the names and contacts of our own parents who have accepted our coming out, in order for them to help others.

5. Seeing is believing.

The Yaarian '99 conference featured not just interesting talk and educational games, but also a variety of media interactions through video, slide projection, and news coverage. Talking about gay issues behind closed doors where only a handful of concerned people meet is simply not enough. We have to engage with the media to reach out to other gay men who may not be aware enough or bold enough to join a support group, as well as to reach out to homophobic or ignorant people in the wider society. The more exposure that we get in the media, the more positive change in the public attitude toward gay people we will see. The curtain of negligence that shrouds our world will slowly be lifted.

The conference gave all the participants an opportunity to experiment with media interaction, an opportunity that was exciting and educative. Rajiv, a conference participant with a career in mass communications and film, presented two video programs. The first was a recording of a debate on gay rights that had recently taken place at the campus of Hyderabad Central University. One, two-member team argued in support of homosexuality and the concept of rights for gays and lesbians, while another two-member team, consisting of well-educated but belligerently homophobic men, argued against their position. The aggressiveness and hatred of these later two debaters was very sobering to see on film; one went to far as to argue that if homosexuality were socially accepted and homosexuals as people were legally protected, then straight men like himself would subject to rape in public - yuck! Conference participants who viewed the video reacted to the debate with pity, astonishment, rage and dismissive laughter. These statements were a startling demonstration of ignorance and miseducation, and gave all the viewers a clear idea of what kind of resistance our support groups are up against.

While the conference was running, Rajiv was also busily engaged in producing a new documentary film on the social predicament of gays in India, entitled "Voice of Silence." Some documentary films have already been produced which aim for a largely gay audience, yet this one intends to have a wider audience. The goal of the film is to reach out to homophobic men by interviewing gay men and presenting them in a humane light. The film revolves around the story of one older gay man who has been "out" in public long before there were gay support groups to offer a sense of community. His story will be interwoven with interviews by gay activists engaged in the work of building support groups. The goal is to confront head-on, the stereotypes and misconceptions about gay people that have lodged in the homophobic corners of society. The shooting of the film is now complete and the editing is in process; we are all waiting for the initial screening here in Hyderabad, which is tentatively scheduled for April 1999. Those interested in acquiring the video for screening in other locations should contact Rajiv care of SAATHI.

The conference moderator, Ranjan (of Counsel Club in Calcutta), also staged two educational media interactions through color slide presentations, dealing with diverse yet interrelated topics. The first presented a narrative about how a gay support group comes into being, based on the story of Counsel Club's astounding growth in Calcutta over the past five years, entitled "A Story of Hope." The presentation provided a lot of helpful tips to other individuals who are striving to build a group within their own local communities. Seeing how Counsel Club grew from a network of sexual thrill-seekers into a gay support group with professional counseling services, a responsible focus on AIDS education, and an in-house journal (Naya Pravartak), was truly inspiring to us all.

The second slide presentation focused on sexual health education. Its goal was to make talking about condoms fun, and the conference participants hardly knew how much fun they were in for. The slides presented the history of the condom and a guide to its conscientious use. It left us flushed, excited and much more educated than we had been before the viewing. Whoever except Ranjan would have thought of using vivid photos of three live male models to demonstrate all the steps of opening, wearing, using and disposing the humble condom? This was a courageous and imaginative feat by itself, to focus sexual desire into educative channels. Leaving the sensual titillation aside, the slide show itself was an eye-opener. We all talk about condoms, but how many of us know the condom's long and twisted history as a way to prevent the spread of syphilis and other diseases? The ancient Egyptians used condoms made from animal bladders and my, are we happy to have latex these days. The slide show made us all appreciate the much-despised condom as evidence of human sophistication, imagination and ingenuity! The presentation gave full attention to how to check the expiration dates when buying them, how to store them in cool, dark places, and with what lubricants to use them (no oils please!). Then came the climax of seeing the models actually go through the motions of opening the condom with care not to rip or puncture it, slipping it on without trapping air inside, and rolling, rolling, rolling. The photos were natural and brilliantly produced, and invited oohs and aahs from the sympathetic crowd. How great it was to celebrate with a whole group of men the joys and benefits of the simple condom. It was education beautifully combined with entertainment, and left a long-lasting effect on the senses and reasons of the audience. The conference participants thought that the slides ought to be copied, and sets sold to other regional support groups for their own sexual health education projects! Counsel Club should consider this request and let us know if copies are available.

Yaarian '99 also sought media exposure on a grand scale. In conjunction with the conference, SAATHI organized a press conference at the Press Club in Bashirbagh, downtown Hyderabad. Participants at the conference considered this media stunt to be an integral part of the conference itself, as a way to spread information about our support groups and their on-going work, and to challenge the wider society to recognize and respect our community. At the press conference, Ashok Row Kavi and Owais Khan represented the participants of Yaarian '99, and playfully faced over twenty representatives of local newspapers and TV stations. Some of the questions of the journalists were admittedly nasty, which the two spokespersons deflected with flirtatious answers.

The media response to this press conference was enthusiastic, in both the English language and vernacular media. All in all, the press coverage was factual and positive in reporting about the conference. This contradicted the fears of some of the conference participants that engaging openly with the media would only invite negative responses and condemnation. The Yaarian '99 experience should encourage other groups to publicize their events as widely as possible in the news media, for the culture of condemnation which used to surround gay and lesbian activities in India is now breaking down. The more media exposure we can generate, the faster this facade will break down. The following is a list of media responses to the Yaarian '99 conference.

Sunday, Feb 14 - TV spot on the Telugu news program.

Monday, Feb. 15 - *The Deccan Chronicle* (twin cities' leading English daily) carried a front-page story in English entitled "Gays Meet in City to Raise Funds, New Members." Although this title was misleading as to the aims of the conference, the contents of the article were quite positive.

Monday, Feb. 15 - *Vartha* carried a small article in Telugu, entitled "Gays Raise their Voice."

Monday, Feb. 15 - *Hindi Milap* carried an article in Hindi, entitled "The Repeal of IPC Section 377" which focused attention on the political and constitutional demands of the conference.

Monday, Feb. 15 - *Indian Express* carried a small column in English noting the conference event.

Tuesday, Feb. 16 - *The Deccan Chronicle* carried a second article in its "Reporter's Diary" column, which gave the personal reaction of one journalist present at the press conference.

The organizers of the press conference were very proud to have received coverage in the vernacular papers as well as the English ones. However, the Urdu press was conspicuous in its silence. There were representatives of Urdu papers at the press conference, but no article in Urdu made it to the press (There are three major Urdu papers in Hyderabad with a wide circulation). We expected a negative reaction from the Hindi Milap, in keeping with its earlier condemnation of the gay scene in Bangalore; however their article was surprisingly positive.

This positive response from the newspaper media may have been due to a written statement that was circulated to all the journalists at the press conference. In addition to the scintillating questions and answers, the journalists could take home the written statement for reference as well. This statement tried to explain the nature and role of gay support groups as a positive contribution to the health and welfare of Indian society as a whole. An excerpt of this written statement is provided below.

"This conference addressed the issue of gay rights as an integral component of a healthy civic society. Civic society is a plurality that embraces all the diversity across the spectrum of class, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. The strength of a civic society lies in the public's willingness to respect this natural diversity and to protect minorities. The formation of gay support groups in the last decade in India is a significant part of the growth of India civic society. Gay

support groups promote dialogue about sexual awareness and health in the wider society while also challenging its patriarchal norms which rule against self-empowerment for gay men, lesbian women, and women in general.

This conference focused on the emergence of a distinctly gay identity among men in India who harbor sexual desire for and emotional commitment to other men. Gay support groups help such men to acknowledge their distinct identity and to overcome their alienation and isolation within society. They try to build bonds through sharing experiences, life stories, and practical advice about sexual health and self-esteem. Support groups are also the first line of defense for gay men against discrimination, abuse or violence directed against them by strangers, employers, family members, the police, or the public at large. Support groups try to overcome the isolation that many gay men feel having grown up without role models or having been forced into unwanted marriages. They overcome this isolation by taking up positive projects to build a caring community and to encourage other gays to live honest, healthy lives. The support groups strive to create a community for gay men in which those who feel rejected can contribute to society in a positive way, as accepted family members, loving partners, working people, and citizens active for social change. "

This written statement released to the press was a one and a half page long. It is reproduced in this report since it may serve as a model for other support groups to use in making their own press releases on the occasion of any meeting, cultural event, or conference.

6. Going Home with An Agenda

The final session of the conference was the most important of all: Reflections and Resolutions. Each participant was asked to reflect upon the topics discussed as an individual and as the representative of a distinct regional support group. Out of these reflections, the conference discovered a common agenda shared by all the groups. Each was asked to make personal resolutions about what they would do in the upcoming year, both personally and at an organizational level. These reflections formed the basis of our common agenda, ACTION PLAN 99.

6.1. Reflections at the regional level:

The members of the conference discovered many common features shared by each group. The most important of these was the need for each group to formalize its organization and leadership structure. Each group stressed the need for outreach through more professional relations with the wider gay community, with gay men who may not participate in the support group itself but could benefit from the group's activities. The groups also agreed upon the need for some members of each gay support group to have formal training in counseling in order to initiate peer counseling programs (whether in the form of a drop-in center, a telephone help-line, or social work at cruising locations).

All the groups resolved to find a second level of leadership and encourage them to take on responsibility for new projects. Second level leadership refers to people who are young in spirit (and perhaps also in age) who will ensure the continuance of the group when the original members are not able to contribute as much time and resources as they have in the past. Our achievements in community building up to this time depend on our fostering a new generation of leaders. Members of support groups who have been active for several years must be sure not to view their groups as their property or their social club, for such views will lead to the decay of the support group from within.

In reaction to Ashok Row Kavi's challenging opening address, all the groups resolved to network with their state's AIDS prevention and control organizations. These organizations might be run by the state government, the national government or as NGOs. By networking with these groups, we mean that the support groups need to maintain contact with such health organizations, so that the gay community can benefit from information, safe sex guidance, and disease testing provided by these organizations. In addition, the support groups must represent the needs of the gay community to these organizations, for they may be ignorant of the community or resistant to recognizing its urgent needs. All in all, our support groups need to "come out" to the health organizations and force them to recognize us for who we are, citizens at risk.

All the groups located in metros agreed that they must establish a telephone help-line by the end of the year. This is a necessity in terms of making sure that gay people have a safe place to turn for health advice and referrals, as well as emotional support and questions of sexual identity and orientation. A telephone line exponentially increase the amount of community access we have, when compared with the more conventional strategy of holding group meetings. There are many people who would never step foot into a meeting and who would gladly call up a phone number. Those groups who have already established such telephone help lines will give practical advice to others on how to start such a project. Currently, Humrahi in Delhi, Humsafar Trust in Mumbai, and Counsel Club in Calcutta administer such help lines.

All resolved to encourage those groups that are still informal organizations to register as formal organizations with government recognition. Those groups that have already gone through this process must lend practical aid and advice to those who want to register. Everyone agreed that there can be a great deal of fear that keeps an informal group from registering. However, registering is the key step to building a formal infrastructure. Without registration, it is difficult to secure funding to start drop-in centers, help-lines and facilitate access to public health services.

All regional groups will try to identify an indigenous Indian terminology for the concept of "Gay." There are so many people who may feel different in terms of their sexual desire or gender identification, but who do not have words to describe that difference. Where the words exist, they are usually derogatory, having been imposed upon us by the surrounding society. It is integral to our growth as a community to identify positive names for ourselves. We don't just need one name, but can expect a whole bouquet of fine and fragrant names.

As an example of what concrete resolutions one local group has passed in this session, the resolutions of the SAATHI group are presented here in detail. SAATHI has come up with some concrete ways of implementing the common consensus that regional groups need to formalize and professionalize their mode of operation. Firstly, the SAATHI group will change its method of conducting meetings. We will now hold two different kinds of meetings. The first will be a monthly general meeting for all members and interested non-members to have discussions on a topic announced in advance (such as coming out, dealing with STDs, or strategies to approach the issue of marriage). In addition, SAATHI will conduct a weekly working group meeting for those leaders on the executive committee and others who are responsible for specific on-going projects. In these smaller meetings, we will conduct our routine business of correspondence, archiving information, and financial transactions. This division between general meetings and working meetings will keep the general meetings organized and interesting and will help attract new members who would be put off by the routine business of running an organization.

In addition, SAATHI has resolved to delegate to younger members the authority for specific kinds of projects. This is a way to foster a second level of leadership. We will ask for a volunteer from outside the executive committee to take responsibility for sexual health issues, and ask for another to take responsibility for counseling issues. These two voluntary leaders will then make sure these issues are dealt with in a sustained way, through discussions in the general meetings and through concrete outreach projects in the working group meetings.

SAATHI has also taken the weighty decision to register itself as an organization with the government, hopefully by March 20, 1999. After registering, SAATHI will secure an office space, telephone line and maintain its e-mail account. The decision to register and open an office will promote a more formal structure and professional interaction with the wider community, including both gay people and non-gay social organizations like the media, NGOs, and the government.

6.2. Reflections at the national level

Finally, all the group representatives present at the conference agreed unanimously on the urgent need to form a collective at the national level. Such a collective body would represent all Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered support groups in India (whether those groups were already registered, in the process of registering, or were just emerging as informal regional groups). So far, support groups have been connected in a loose web of friendships and chance meetings. Everyone agreed that personal networking leaves a lot to chance, and that many opportunities are missed due to the limitations of friendship and rivalries. Often the efforts of a maturer group could help other groups in solving some of the problems they are facing, yet communication is irregular and one group may not know the initiatives or experiences of other groups. We need a national collective body in order to harness and focus our diverse experiences, so that all of us do not need to invent our own wheels for ourselves, over and over again.

To answer this evident need, the conference participants announced the spontaneous creation of a formal collective. The collective baby was born on that day, Valentine's Day 1999, and the conference participants named it 'LGBT India'. This name is provisional, and stands for 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Support Groups of India'. The possibility is still wide open to come up with a more creative, more inspiring, or a more *desi* name. The only requirement is that the name expresses the open inclusivity of this collective body.

LGBT India will be an inclusive collective. All support groups working on identity formation, sexual health, and community building belong to the collective. As an inclusive body, LGBT India will rise above our personal likes and dislikes, our personal friendships and rivalries, as well as our divisions along the fissures of gender, sexual practice, and regional dispersion. The collective will also help us overcome the animosity that sometimes comes from having multiple support groups existing in the same city or region.

LGBT India was born spontaneously during the final session of the Yaarian '99 conference. The participants of the conference represented many different support groups, but certainly did not represent all of the various groups in India. *The conference organizers have expressed their sincere apologies to those groups or individuals that could not be informed in time for them to attend the conference.* The collective was launched with the clear intention that all groups, including those who were not present at its inception, could and would join it at the earliest possible time. A formal invitation to join the work of LGBT India has already been circulated through the Internet and the post, in the hope that all support groups would join the collective. If, through some error or oversight, any groups have been missed, they are requested to please forgive and to contact the LGBT India working committee as soon as they can.

The work of LGBT India is to ensure that there is effective communication between the various groups and individuals that make up the collective. All constituent groups and individuals will share monthly updates with each other on their activities. LGBT India will be the organizational conduit for this constant flow of information and experience. In this way, we can attend each other's functions and share in each other's experiences and grow into a stronger community as a whole. LGBT India will also organize regular conferences of an all-India scope, hopefully once every six months, but definitely at least once a year. The next conference will be during the final week of December 1999, and has been dubbed Yaarian 2000. (Both Bangalore and Mumbai were suggested as venues for this upcoming national gathering. Some members of the conference suggested that a city with an emerging support group, such as Pune, Surat or Baroda, be encouraged to host it. As the collective takes its full shape, this decision can be made in a final form. Mumbai was voted as the most probable venue, to be ratified by the Mumbai groups). Members of support groups who were not able to attend the February conference are especially invited to come to Yaarian 2000, or 'The Alternate Y2K'. Participants at the next conference will have to gaze into the crystal ball and set the agenda for the new millenium/century/decade/year, and the final week of December 1999 will be the perfect stage for such an undertaking.

To invite the full participation of all support groups in LGBT India, and to organize this upcoming national conference, a WORKING COMMITTEE has formed. Participants at the Hyderabad conference have nominated Owais Khan to be the initial convener of the WORKING COMMITTEE, due to his organizational skills, personal integrity and his experience with a wide range of different support groups. Owais Khan will act as convener until such a time as LGBT India takes on its full membership; then a more formal selection of its leadership can take place. The convener has already invited all support groups in India to nominate one or two representatives to sit on the WORKING COMMITTEE. Since the collective body will function as the ideas-cum-action bank of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities in India, all the nominees are expected to be the leading ideas and action folks of their respective groups.

There is currently an e-mail communication network that will allow all the representatives to talk freely to each other, to share ideas and launch proposals. Those who are already members of the WORKING COMMITTEE can communicate to all the other members directly by sending messages to lgbt_india@egroups.com. Sent messages will be distributed without any human intervention to all other members of the WORKING COMMITTEE. Those persons who are not members of this committee but who want to make suggestions or proposals can send their communication to lgbt_india@hotmail.com; the convener will duly reply to such requests, and if necessary, post them on the LGBT India's distribution list. (Please note that there is an 'underscore' between lgbt and india. Please reserve this e-mail channel for the work of LBGT India exclusively. There already are other e-groups available for those who just want to talk to any gay person(s) in India, such as <http://www.egroups.com/list/khushindia>). The full list of all those currently participating in this e-mail WORKING COMMITTEE can be seen by members of that committee at http://www.egroups.com/list/lgbt_india.

It will be the responsibility of the various support groups to nominate their representatives to LGBT India. How they internally do it will be their outlook. The convener of the WORKING COMMITTEE of LGBT India will include those who come up as their group's or their own nominee. The procedure is detailed below.

The collective by the name 'LGBT India' is meant to be a communication framework for all the lesbian, gay, bisexual or Transgender groups active in India. Therefore nominees from such groups are included as full members to 'LGBT India'. It will be the responsibility of these persons to communicate activities happening at the national level to the other members of the group. This will include workshops, conferences, newsletters and miscellaneous activities taken up by other groups around the country. Individuals who are active and working for the cause in India will also be included as full members irrespective of their affiliation to any group.

Additionally, LGBT groups of Indian / South Asian origin outside of India are also included as observer members. Non LGBT groups and individuals resident in India who are not L,G,B or T, but are friendly towards the cause are also included as observer members.

The difference between full members and observer members is only technical. It has been kept to define and differentiate the activities taken up by LGBT groups in India, and those by LGBT friendly groups within India and by LGBT groups outside of India. The need for that arises because LGBT India has taken upon itself, among other things, to ensure that we meet every year at least once and chart out our RESPECTIVE and COMMON courses for the coming year. LGBT India has also taken upon itself to make the communication framework effective, and to ensure that groups who are not connected on the e-mail / internet get to know what is happening nationwide. Towards that, the full members will need to regularly post updates onto lgbt_india@egroups.com or send snail-mails to the address given below. These will go towards the periodic report that LGBT India will prepare for ALL its members.

Temporary Snail-mail Address:

C/o Owais Khan, Old No 32, New No 8,
Cline Road, Cooke Town, Bangalore. 560005. India

In other words, the full members will receive and need NECESSARILY to post periodic updates to LGBT India, either electronically, or otherwise. The observer members will receive all the updates from all the members and from LGBT India; but will NOT NECESSARILY need to post updates.

The differentiation has been made so as to develop the resident Indian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities from WITHIN. It has also been done to form and strengthen L, G, B and T identities.

In addition to networking, communication, and the organization of regular national conferences, LGBT India will undertake many other projects. The collective will compile a NATIONAL RESOURCE BOOK, a pink digest of friendly doctors, psychiatrists, hotels, STD clinics, HIV testing centers, ayurvedic and Unani practitioners, sympathetic religious leaders, in every city where visible gay groups exist. We can call this the annual 'Gulabi Granth', our very own little pink book that can lead us to salvation in the face of any type of crisis. In this digest, we can also republish the best articles that have come out over the previous year from all the various gay, lesbian and bisexual periodicals in India. This will give us the chance to translate into English any important pieces that have come out in the local language section of these periodicals. This digest can also be the forum for groups who do not publish their own newsletter, or for individuals not affiliated with a particular group. This resource book will act as a confluence of our many streams of experience, the permanent record of our collective knowledge as a community with a national scope.

As a collective body, LGBT India will also administer a trust fund, called the National Lambda Fund. This will be a pool of financial resources to help gays help themselves. During the conference, Ashok Row Kavi collected the first token of commitment of Rupees 25 from all the attendees. The fund will go toward organizing the national gatherings and publication of the resource book. It could also used to help emerging groups hire office space or staff persons in order for local support groups to gain a more permanent infrastructure.

Beyond these concrete activities, LGBT India will be valuable as a forum for national-level communication and coordination. It will help to coordinate training programs, outreach initiations, and cultural events. As a collective body, LGBT India can help create a common platform for representing the hugely diverse LGBT communities to the government and international organizations. All of these groups share common concerns based on their demand for human rights, the repeal of Indian Penal Code 377. (Which labels many forms of consensual sexual activity between adults as "unnatural acts" and attaches criminal punishments to them). These groups also strive for increased funding for HIV awareness and prevention within these communities. The collective body will help map those states where no active groups exist and to better connect emerging groups to the existing groups in a more sustained and effective way. At present, individuals who are not members of any support group may correspond with whoever they happen to hear about, without knowing that there may be a support group in local city or an emerging community in a near-by town. Such individuals may correspond with many groups at once and receive contradictory advice. To eliminate all these duplicated efforts and wasted energies, the LGBT India collective can map and coordinate these outreach efforts, so that an individual can be more easily placed in touch with others in their local area and together they might emerge as local communities. Establishing such a map will eliminate contradictory advice and duplicated efforts in an effort to create sustained, formal and constructive links between smaller emerging communities and formally organized support groups.

All the support groups represented in the Yaarian '99 conference recognized the need to support individuals in their up-country locations to help them organize support groups. LGBT India will be a communication channel to strengthen this resolve. All the groups present also acknowledged that they must make stronger channels to either include non-English speakers in their support groups, or to support the formation of separate non-English speaking groups. This intra-group resolve will also certainly help the in the outreach effort to get emerging communities in smaller towns and rural areas to organize, for people from these areas often feel excluded from urban groups on the basis of English language use.

Finally, the LGBT India collective can provide the organizational infrastructure to represent India's diverse sexually alternative communities to international bodies. Through the LBGT India collective, we can get international organizations like the GHC to recognize and validate our needs assessments done through transparent open meetings instead of working surreptitiously under other names. Once LGBT India is operational, it can make a bid to host the international meeting of the International Lesbian and Gay Alliance in India, hopefully, as early as the year 2000. This international gathering is usually held in Europe or North America. Imagine what a stimulating event it would be to host this international conference in India! Imagine the effect of such media coverage in pressuring the government to recognize the needs of our communities!

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