

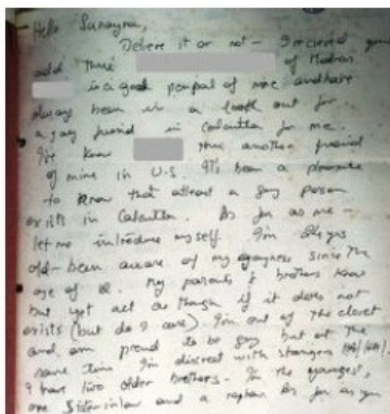
The QAMRA Newsletter

Queer Archive for Memory, Reflection and Activism

Bengaluru

An Update From QAMRA

The Queer Archive for Memory, Reflection and Activism(QAMRA) is a physical multimedia archival project which aims to chronicle the genesis and growth of the struggle for the rights of sexuality and gender minorities in India. QAMRA's objective is to bring together and provide access to the stories of individuals, communities, organisations, lawyers and activists who have lived through and played a part in the queer rights movement of the last few decades.



In This Issue

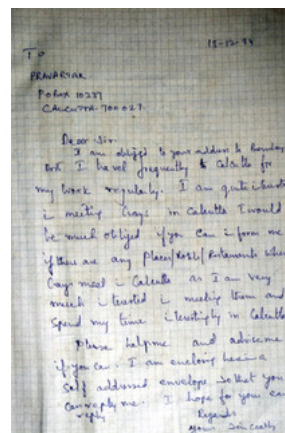
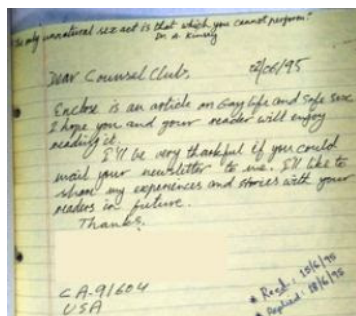
In the second issue of our newsletter, Pawan Dhall writes on the importance of archiving queer history. Pawan Dhall has been engaged in queer activism since the early 1990s. He is a Founding Trustee with the non-profit Varta Trust in Kolkata, which undertakes research, advocacy and publishing on gender and sexuality.

The Counsel Club Archives

by Pawan Dhall

Historians Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanita (in *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, 2000) and other social researchers have documented that queer social and sexual networks, often invisible to the public eye, go back a long time in India. This possibly holds true for queer people across the gender and sexuality spectrum and across locations – urban or rural. But when the first of the queer activists and support groups took up organized mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, one of the challenges they faced was reaching out to more and more community members as well as queer allies. A major barrier was that most of the activists and groups were based in only a few urban centres.

Apart from word of mouth (such as in queer social and sexual networking spaces or through individual connections), the only option was the post box numbers of queer support groups being mentioned in newspaper or magazine articles. Whenever this happened, it led to hundreds or even thousands of letters being received by early groups like Counsel Club in Kolkata (where I was a founder member). This was the pre-internet era when even acquiring an analogue telephone connection was an ordeal. Counsel Club functioned from 1993 to 2002. But about 3,000 of its letters, greeting cards and emails from the early Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited era still survive among material that is part of an informal archives maintained by Varta Trust, a non-profit organization based in Kolkata.



Emerging from the Shadows by Parvez Sharma and Soul Sisters by Mitra Phukan, July 3, 1994, feature articles published in the Miscellany section of *The Statesman*, proved to be among the first big media stories about and for the Kolkata queer movement. These articles were accompanied by a listing of queer support groups in India and USA. Counsel Club's post bag address was also included and within three weeks of the articles being published, the post bag was flooded with dozens of letters from Kolkata, other places in India and beyond – quite symbolically when the monsoon was at its peak.

There were several such media outings through the 1990s, helping Counsel Club's network to expand exponentially. The letters came in sealed yellow envelopes, light blue inland forms and even open post cards. Most were hand written and in English, but Bengali, Hindi and Gujarati were also represented.

The representation was also diverse in terms of age, gender (even if letters from women were few and far apart in the earlier years), occupations, religions, locations and other social markers. The writers were looking to find friends, sexual partners and space for having sex; many wanted to share stories of loneliness, oppression and their struggles around living out queer relationships; some were looking for health and legal support, a few were even looking for career advice.

A closely related phenomenon was the practice of Counsel Club's letter writing meetings. They served the purpose of strengthening friendships, quite unlike any social activity that today's queer generations may experience. Debates and discussion on how the letters should be answered, sharing romantic stories and sexual escapades, meals together at group members' places or in restaurants, Scrabble games and outings created a team spirit and bonds that were sometimes as strong as family ties.

Emails and e-cards gradually replaced the letters and greeting cards received by queer support groups in the early 2000s, and were before long themselves replaced by multiple other forms of digital communication. All these developments were part of rather recent queer histories of India. Yet, given the pace at which the means of communication are changing, they may seem from an era long gone by and there is a real danger of innumerable queer stories from this period being lost for good.

Overall, the letters constitute not just a treasure trove of stories of queer lives but also a society trying to come to terms with its sexual self (or selves) – if one can use such an expression. They have in them records of thousands of queer micro histories as well as reflections of larger social developments during the 1990s as well as in the decades preceding. Quite invaluable for anyone trying to build up an argument that queer people exist in all social strata in India, and that they are 'miniscule' neither in numbers nor in the intensity of their lives!

Issue 2: May 2019

Connect, contribute

QAMRA is an independent archive. We are not affiliated to any institution or organisation. We welcome contributions to the archive in the form of material, labour or funds. We also have a wishlist of books and equipment.

Visit us at www.qamra.in

If you would like to offer us help in any way, or get in touch with us with queries, suggestions or just good wishes, you can:

Write to us: qamraarchive@gmail.com

OR

Call us: +91 9513353046 or
080-25487557



Located at:
#1 Lewis Road
Cooke Town
Bengaluru 560005
India

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0
International Licence
