CHAPTER 5

LIVING LIFE AS A QUEER PERSON:

ROLE OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AND QUEER COMMUNITY/S IN CONSOLIDATION OF IDENTITY

Consolidation of one’s identity as gay or lesbian is as much an interpersonal and social process as it is an intrapsychic one. In other words recognizing ‘difference’ in various areas of life while growing up, making sense of this difference, finding the language for articulating this difference in terms of sexuality and often gender expression, working through straitjacketed definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality are some of the intrapsychic (within the individual’s psyche) battles that queer persons fight to reach a point of self-acceptance and self-celebration. However in addition to this internal process, meeting other people like oneself, sharing life stories, forming community bonds, supporting each others’ struggles (personal and political), finding romantic/sexual partner/s are important processes that enable consolidation of a gay or lesbian identity. Thus experiences with interpersonal and social interactions are as much significant in consolidation of a LG identity.

The previous chapters have focused on non-normative gender and sexual expressions while growing up and ‘making sense’ of this non-normativity while living within the normative frame of family, school and peers. The later chapter explores the dynamic process of communicating this ‘non-normative/difference’ to the world around and making multiple choices of disclosure and non-disclosure along the way while looking for affirmations of one’s identity.

In this chapter, I explore the role of intimate relationships and meeting with the queer community as milestones in the process of identity development and affirmation. From ‘being gay’ to ‘being gay with someone’ i.e. developing an intimate relationship with another same-sex adult can often be an experience that further affirms one’s identity. Similarly, meeting with and being part of a queer community enhances commitment to one’s gay identity. In fact many people initially access the queer community/s in their respective cities or across cities and virtual or online communities in the hope of finding a romantic/sexual partner. In that sense meeting community and forming intimate relationships maybe closely linked processes.
**Same-sex relationships – mirror to self affirmation**

Being in an intimate relationship with a same-sex person can be an immensely affirming experience and can help crystallize one’s own sense of self as a gay or lesbian person (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Several respondents echoed this sentiment with respect to some of their initial relationships.

I was first involved with this woman who was a crack pot... she actually was so terrified by her sexuality. So after I left her, I met this other woman, who was pretty sure of herself. She was out and all... that relationship kind of gave me the strength to be confident about who I was. It gave me the courage to at least start calling myself bisexual

[Vidya, 35 year old lesbian woman]

… discussing with my partner, I gradually realized that this defense mechanism that I am using, saying that I am a bisexual and will get married one day is not right… because I haven't tried it and he encouraged me to try it and that’s when I knew that its not going to work and that I am hiding behind the label bisexual, when I am actually gay

[Atul, 33 year old gay man talks about his first long-term relationship at age 26]

For many respondents, being in a relationship for the first time was also their first experience of knowing another gay person closely. Hence in addition to self-affirmation and joys of first love and sex, which may be comparable to heterosexual couples, forming intimate relationships was also about the experience of reduced isolation, identification, shared experiences of ‘becoming’ and acknowledging one’s gayness, learning more about gay life and so on.

Karl was almost nine years elder to me, he spoke about a lot of things, not just about sex but he spoke about gay life, what homosexuality is and how it is not abnormal. He was very positive about himself and that helped me to feel very comfortable. I think that is why, I didn't have any problems with coming out

[Amit, 33 year old gay man talks about his first relationship at 22]

In my second year of M.A., I fell in love with this woman. And she was the one who gave me the language… she said that if you and me are in love with each other, we are homosexual. And I was like ouch, No No!... she was like yes we are and I was like, its an ugly fucking name (laughing), but then we started with saying that ok we are probably lesbian...

[Pradnya, 33, says about her first relationship with a woman at 22]

Deaux (1993) suggests that identity is both defined internally by self and externally by others. This implies that identity is not just about self definition (personal dimension of identity) but also about how
one’s identity is read or perceived by others. This external perception i.e. social nature of identity is important in construction of identity. Thus while being in a same-sex relationship can be an empowering experience for the LG individual, the flip side can be increased visibility of the gay or lesbian identity. Kaufman and Johnson (2004) point out that being in a relationship makes the same-sex couple more visible both to the family and society and this visibility often implies heightened homo-negativity and prejudice. Also being a gay or lesbian couple rather than just LG individual (often read as ‘single’ man or woman) adds another layer of negotiation to everyday interactions. As Goffman (1963) suggests, being in a gay relationship shifts the individual’s status from ‘discredible’ to ‘discredited’ due to heightened visibility. While this observation is partly true for LG individuals in India, there are other cultural and social realities that mediate this. Firstly, we live in a highly gender segregated society, which lays strict rules and norms for interactions between men and women both in the public and the private domain. Homosociality on the other hand i.e. intimate engagement and social bonds among members of the same-sex is encouraged. Homosociality, especially among women in literature is used to mean a continuum between homosocial and homosexual - women caring for each other, promoting each other’s interests, women’s friendships and bonds and women loving women (Sedgwick, 1985). Hammaren and Johansson (2014) argue that just like women’s homosociality, there can be a horizontal homosociality between men characterized by emotional closeness, intimacy and non-profitable forms of friendships. In India, there exists a cultural script for homosociality or close bonds among men and among women. Furthermore in traditional, patriarchal societies such as ours, there is a clear public-private divide with women often expected to operate primarily within the domestic and private realm and the public, economic and political sphere is seen as the male domain. Thus men engaging with each other on matters of intellectual and political concerns and spending a lot of their time in company of other men is encouraged. Similarly, women sharing their domestic chores and woes with each other is a norm. As a result intimate relationships between members of the same-sex are often interpreted in the Indian context in terms of ‘friendship bonds’ and deep emotional connections that are celebrated within the Indian culture.

One of the respondents discusses ways in which she and her partner engage in ‘PDA’ (public display of affection) in public spaces without being severely reprimanded.

It is a straight world yaar… So technically I and my girlfriend cannot hold hands in a mall or whatever, but we still do. I keep pecking her on the cheek or put my arm around her, basically we are our coochie cooing selves everywhere… and then if someone looks at me, I quickly call out to her, ‘didu’! Its a thing, like didi or didu (meaning sister). So people around are like, ‘oh they are like sisters’… I think you have to find your way out…

[Priya, 30 year old lesbian woman]
Hence developing a same-sex relationship and in that sense becoming a ‘gay couple’ does not necessarily throw up all the challenges that have been described above by Kaufman and Johnson, 2004, primarily because this relationship is read as or interpreted to be an emotional/intimate but a nonsexual one. However this does not mean that acceptance to homosociality translates into acceptance of homosexuality. In fact contrary to that; homosociality may invisibilise the sexual/erotic aspects of a relationship between persons of the same sex.

Moreover in a same-sex sexual relationship, for instance among men having sex with men, the sexual subjectivity and practices may have little to do with claiming explicit identities or rights and may not be neatly aligned to any kind of uniform, ‘globally intelligible gay liberatory’ narrative (Boyce, 2006). Thus men who have sex with men in India may appropriate the term ‘gay’ in their own way to talk about themselves, but the use of this term may not mean the gay identity as defined in the western gay liberation discourse. Also many MSM may use other kinship, community notions to talk about their self and identity and may not see some of their sexual practices as linked explicitly with an identity label. Thus sex between men may not be differentiated from heterosexual practices in expected ways.

Another cultural aspect to be considered in the context of relationships is that marriage (read heterosexual) is seen as both compulsory for all and as a duty in India (Kakar, 1978). The Indian family severely limits experimentation in the choice of partners by adhering to the practice of arranged marriage (Beteille, 1993). Marriage (read endogamous marriage) and procreation are necessary to establish one’s social status within one’s family and larger clan/community. Even with respect to inter-caste marriage, often the structural distance between members of the two castes that intermarry is not too much in terms of the local or regional caste ranking (Kolenda, 2003). Thus the compulsory nature of marriage and rules about who can marry whom are quite rigidly defined. Vanita observes, “In India, most people have been, and many continue to be, married off at a very young age. Hence exclusive same-sex relationships are necessarily rare” (Vanita, 2002a: 3). Because of the great emphasis on marriage as a marker of adulthood in Indian culture, the consolidation of sexuality around ideas of individuated sexuality is less entrenched. In fact marriage is seen as a bond between two families and not individuals. As a result, relationships that fall outside of marriage and by extension outside of the family and community network are unthinkable for many. In addition with lack of any state support for welfare, individuals almost exclusively depend on family support for any crisis including ill health, disability, old age. As a result, I see two kinds of trends with respect to relationships. One is that almost all respondents faced pressure for heterosexual marriage mostly from ‘concerned’ family members. In some instances forcible marriages were conducted by family members, in others emotional blackmail by refusing to eat, crying, not sleeping were used to pressurize the LG child to get married. From among the respondents in this study, five of them were in heterosexual
marriages at some point, of these two continued to be married. In addition several respondents reported that their partners had been forced into or pressurized into marriages. Also some of the respondents were currently in a relationship with married men/women. This implies that force and pressure for heterosexual marriage despite of knowing about one’s sexual orientation is a serious concern in the lives of several LG individuals.

He came out to his parents about four months ago and their reaction was adverse… in terms of crying, not eating, asking him to change, asking him to cut off relations with me… in fact he promised her (mother) that he will change and get married. Then he comes up to me the next day and says, ‘I won't be able to keep my promise with you, if I want to keep my promise with them’...

[Vineet, 40, gay man]

She had to get married… there was too much pressure. I was still studying and neither of us had a job or money or a place to stay. We lived in the same building and so I could not even bring her home. Our parents, mine and hers would have killed each other if that had happened. So she got married and she called me on her first or second night and told me, she did not like that man, she did not like his looks, the way he touched her. At that time, she was in Amritsar and I was in Panchgani at boarding school… I knew I couldn’t do anything.

[Leona, 33, talks about her forced separation from her first lover at 18]

Right after college, my then girlfriend wrote a letter to me one day saying that this entire thing between us is a sin and it is abnormal and she has decided to get married and I should do the same. Pressure for marriage was high in my family too… you will not believe it, I said yes to the first man who came to see me at my father’s place for that baghnyacha karyakram (ritual of boys family coming to see the girl in an arranged marriage)...

[Seema, 31, lesbian, currently in a heterosexual marriage with a 3 year old child talks about the time when she was 21]

Second, in a few instances where family members did engage with their LG son/daughter’s life, they viewed their relationships/partnerships in terms of a heterosexual marriage. Two of the respondents recount that it was when their mothers engaged with their partners and saw the support and nurturance of these relationships that they were able to accept and respect their sexuality. They often equated these relationships with marriage and that made the relationship and therefore the individual’s sexuality more valid and respectable. It also alleviated parents’ anxieties about their LG children’s future. One of the respondents talked about his mother’s acceptance of his sexuality as a result of being seen to be in what may be termed as a ‘stable, respectable’ relationship with a man from a ‘good family’.

I think its our relationship and how she perceives it. She is very happy that I have somebody, who is always by my side no matter what happens… he is an inseparable part of my life and its a mature relationship. Its not like two boys coming together and having sex every night. So its more than that.
and she knows that he is from a good family background. So I guess it is the image of our relationship that has helped her, since now it has become more of a social relationship and the same thing has happened to many of our friends… they kind of look up to us and want to be like us. It was unintentional but it has helped us also. Its a kind of a moral boost for us and we take it as a compliment.

[Atul, 33, gay man]

A qualitative study on parental responses to their gay and lesbian children in Mumbai states that, parents worried about their children’s future and care during old age and this is often a barrier to accepting what are seen as their children’s choices. However if parents, especially mothers see that there is a ‘marriage-like’, stable, committed, nurturing relationship, although with a person of the same-sex, then the worry and resistance is likely to reduce (Ranade et. al., 2014).

**Same-sex relationships – living outside the heterosexual script**

The heterosexual script in the Indian context is tied in with marriage. Marriage in India is endogamous and there is a high social and institutional commitment in ensuring that marriages take place within-caste or castes that are of similar stature in the social hierarchy as well as within same social class and religion (Kolenda, 2003). In addition marriages are expected to be procreative and monogamous, at least for women. Queer relationships that fall outside of these marital norms and prescriptions may emulate them, challenge them, resist them and create a range of diverse intimate partnerships.

Several of the male respondents talked about their initiation into gay sex, cruising, relationships and marked ways in which these differed from the mainstream notions of love, marriage, romance. Many of them described their initial shock when they learnt about gay life.

A lot of people have different definitions of what a partner is. Some people want to live together, some want to meet only on Saturday-Sunday, like a weekend relationship, some want to meet only for pleasure, some people, actually two men I met just wanted care-takers, someone to talk to and take care of them, if they are upset or down… it took me a while to make sense of all this.

[Sunil, 32]

I remember the first gay man I met online. We chatted for a few weeks and then met at Deccan. I remember looking at him and thinking how handsome he is… I thought I found my husband! … you know like it is in hindi movies… that time I did not know anything about casual sex and all that. Initially I found it very difficult to adjust to all this

[Mihir, 30]
Respondents’ aspirations and experiences of same-sex relationships can be broadly clubbed under two main themes. There were those who wanted everything that their parents or siblings, friends had in their relationships and marriages. In this sense, while they transgressed boundaries of normative sexuality, they wanted to access all heterosexual institutions and practices and did not envision any change in these institutions except that they should be able to access them as freely and openly as their heterosexual counterparts. These responses can be broadly described under the umbrella term ‘marriage equality’ i.e. all relationships, irrespective of straight or gay have the same status and rights in the eyes of law, state, religion, family etc.

Some of these respondents talked about the need for a long term, committed relationship. One of the respondents described the time when he first met his current boy friend. He said,

I always believed that I am never going to have a LTR (long term relationship) and I am not made for that but I don't know how things changed and they changed for good… but in the meantime time I had a lot of doubts. I even went and slept with three different men in that period of six months before committing to him as I was not sure, but there came a point when I wanted us to be exclusive, monogamous…

[Atul, 33]

Another respondent said,

Because I have a twenty four hour broadband connection, I am just sitting late at night, checking out profiles, sending messages, receiving messages, meeting guys for sex and that just felt very sleazy after a point. I did not like it. I just wanted to settle down with someone who has a similar family background, similar values, with who I can share my life...

[Avinash, 28]

Both these responses imply the need for a monogamous, stable, ‘marriage-like’ relationship after having spent some time on sexual exploration or having lived a promiscuous life. The second respondent also describes the need for similar family background, shared values in their long term partner. This is very much similar to some of the matching of class, caste, religion and other background factors that are taken into consideration while arranging a heterosexual marriage.

The other theme in response to relationships is that of a critical stance towards hetero-patriarchy and is mostly from respondents who identified as queer and feminist or who had affiliations with groups that had a critical political stance towards not just queer issues but all issues pertaining to hegemonic power in social life. Some of the themes in relationships that these respondents described were non-monogamy or
open relationships, queering the idea of family and talking about families of choice as opposed to families through biological or kinship bonds. Research on developmental concerns of lesbian and gay individuals in adulthood states that, fundamental expressions of lesbian and gay adult relationships often in the form of families composed of nonbiologic kin, and nontraditional configurations of sexual and emotional intimacy, receive little if any social valuation and are unsupported by law or public policy (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 1990)

The following two respondents question the idea of fidelity and monogamy as necessary or even prescribed as compulsory to two individuals who are in love with each other. Both of them make different choices and reach different conclusions to the process of questioning.

I had an affair with a woman when she (partner) was out of town and it was supposed to be a fling but it carried on for some time and I really hurt her feelings and then she also got into a relationship and then we were contemplating a non monogamous relationship because we could see that we are still attracted to other people and then we were questioning whether you can be with one person all your life... but we kind of realised that we do care about each other a lot and we can’t really see each other with other people... so I think we are right now open to having friends, lots of friends but we are essentially monogamous

[Joanna, 40]

One year back we discussed about our relationship and we decided that we should explore other relationships too. Now she has a friend who is bisexual and we are in a open relation now. We are still sexually involved but not emotionally any more. Now I am also seeing someone for last two months

[Mithun, 35]

The idea of ‘family of choice’ or what has been referred to in literature as ‘personal communities’ (Pahl & Spencer, 2003) questions the notion that family can be defined only in terms of blood relationships or through an alliance of marriage. One of the respondents said,

I don’t understand this primacy given to a sexual relationship or blood relation in defining family. I have multiple people in my life who are as important as the person I am sexually and romantically involved with. These include my ex-lovers, my friends, comrades within the movement, my sister, who is extremely supportive of all my life choices and I access each one of them in a significant way for different things in life…

[Pradnya, 33]

Another respondent was married for several years and has two daughters. She came out to herself and
then got out of her marriage three years ago. She has come out to her eldest daughter, who is a teenager now but not yet to her second daughter. She currently lives with her parents and her daughters and has been seeing a woman for almost two years now. She described her living arrangements and relationship as well as family status,

… for the past two years this has been going on. I have been seeing K and I have been spending all my weekends with her, whenever the kids have holiday I go for a little time more, during the week sometimes… K has also started coming over now slowly… I mean for her it was a big thing because she was not used to being around so many people but there was a little adjusting time. My mom still doesn't look at her as a daughter in law thing, she still treats her as my friend, but at least she treats her well. Its not that she invisibilises what we share. She acknowledges her as a part of my life. And my elder one knows about us and treats her very well. The younger one is also very fond of her and K also makes the effort na...

[Claire, 41]

Apart from dealing with the stigma of breaking social and familial norms of love and relationships due to one’s sexual orientation, there were other complications that respondents described. For instance, one of the respondents, who works as a male commercial sex worker described his apprehensions about intimate partner relationships,

Since I am a commercial sex worker, I fear that tomorrow if we have a fight, he will say ‘arey tu tar paisa gheun dhanda kartos, tula kai re majhi kimmat’ (you take money to have sex, how will you know my worth). So I am scared. Its best to not get so emotionally involved with anyone. I have seen many people getting wasted because of this love addiction

[Akshay, 26]

Some of the respondents talked about their intimate relationships with straight persons or people who did not necessarily identify as gay or bisexual. These relationships included expression of love, concern, affection, at times jealousy. In a few instances these also included sexual expression. However it was never articulated or labelled as sexual or romantic. Often these relationships happened at a younger age when the respondents were still not sure about their sexual orientation and were part of the initial exploration for both people. At times, these relationships existed over several years, but without any explicit articulation of a sexual/romantic nature.

We used to share everything. We used to tell each other everything. He doesn't know I am gay or that I had sexual contacts or that I am so feminine. Many of his friends told him that this guy behaves like this but he fought with them and told them that its ok, he is still my friend. He would tell me that he will not get married and stay with me only. Then last year he went back to Nashik for a job and we both cried a lot… whenever he comes to Pune, he meets me. We still feel a lot for each other but we don't say anything. I feel that if I tell him how I feel about him, then whatever is there will also go away.

[Karan, 24]
I kind of kissed her and got physical with her once when we both were really drunk. I don't remember it very clearly but ya that kind of started it. She is essentially straight. But she didn't stop it, its not like I forced myself on her or anything. So it kind of continued over the years... Whether she was attracted, not attracted, whether it was experimentation for her, I have no idea. But I was definitely attracted to her.

[Aditi, 31]

These descriptions of intimate relationships with same-sex friends is an example of the homosocial-homosexual continuum described earlier. Same-sex friendships and same-sex intimacies, which border on the homoerotic have been discussed as being common to Indian culture/s (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000). It may not be labelled as odd or abnormal and maybe seen as part of sexual exploration, as part of male bonding or part of the overly emotional nature of women’s friendships. Diamond’s (2002) research with 80 lesbian, bisexual and unlabelled women in the age group of 18-25 years revealed that their closest adolescent friendships with girls involved possessiveness of friend’s time and attention, fascination and preoccupation with friend’s appearance and behaviours and gestures of intimacy such as massages, back rubs, playing with each other’s hair, holding hands and so on. These accounts indicate that the same-sex adolescent friendships contained many feelings and behaviours typically associated with romantic relationships. Similarly literature in India on sexual behaviours between men often referred to as masti (friends having fun), includes descriptions of mutual masturbating, group masturbation, relieving each other’s body tension and so on (Khan, 2001). This is often viewed as a natural part of development of masculine sexuality as well as acceptable form of sexual expression for men (Singh et. al., 2012).

**Discovering Community – Context of invisibility and silence of same-sex sexuality**

As mentioned earlier, the motivation to meet others like oneself and feel part of a community of people is as much about asserting a collective sense of identity as it is (often initially) about an opportunity to make queer friends and meet potential romantic/sexual partners. For almost a decade now, especially after the historic judgment of the Delhi High Court in 2009 decriminalizing homosexuality, there has been a lot of visibility to the LGBTQ community and articulation of our concerns. There have been many more books written about queer lives, many more interviews of queer people published in newspapers, magazines, many more films made about our lived realities, many more online and street based campaigns and pride marches that talk about LGBTQ rights. In fact, the Supreme Court judgment on Section 377 in December 2013 that re-criminalized homosexuality received strong resistance not just from the queer community in India and globally but also from straight allies and liberal minded activists and intellectuals across the
globe. Thus while instances of violence against the LGBTQ communities and a sense of fear of the law among the most marginalized within the queer community has increased, the overall visibility to the cause has been high. However this visibility and slogans of ‘No Going Back’ (in response to the Supreme Court judgment on 377) and ‘Bekhauf Aazadi’ (Freedom without fear) from the queer community in India has been an occurrence of recent times; while the struggles have been age old.

Historical accounts of LGBTQ collectivizing in India, specifically Mumbai tell us that there were a handful of initiatives by gay and lesbian activists to talk about LGBTQ issues in Bombay city in the decade of the 1990s. These included publication of Bombay Dost, first gay magazine that was brought out in 1991 in Mumbai, when there existed close to nothing in the form of gay literature in India. Later in 1998, Scripts, a zine that focused on issues of lesbian and bisexual women was started by Stree Sangam in Bombay. A few organizations such as Humsafar Trust and Gay Bombay to work with gay men and Stree Sangam (later named LABIA) that worked with lesbian, bisexual women were started in Bombay in the mid 1990s and continue to function even now. Some other initiatives in the cities of Bombay and Pune in late 90s and early 2000 include, Aanchal, a helpline and support group for lesbian and bisexual women that started in 1999 in Bombay. Humjinsi, a phone line, support group and crisis center for lesbian and bisexual women was started in early 2000s under a broader human rights organization, India Center for Human Rights and Law. In Pune, initiatives on LGBTQ issues started only in 1999/ early 2000s. Olava (Organised Lesbian Alliance for Visibility and Action) working on lesbian and bisexual women’s concerns was started in 1999 under MASUM, an NGO working on women’s health issues. Samapathik Trust, Pune, a men’s sexual health organization was started in 2002 to work with gay, bisexual men, MSM, transgender persons and hijras. Several of these organizations, especially those working on issues of LB women shut down by mid 2000s.

Writing on history of LGBTQ movement/s in India reveals certain events and forces that have played a significant role in the collectivization as well as visibility of the queer community in India (Ramasubban, 2008). Emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and an increasing recognition of diverse sexual practices within and outside heterosexual marriage that included sex between men is an important milestone that over two decades led to more organizing and visibilising of GBT issues in India. International and national attention to the HIV epidemic from civil society organizations as well as the state machinery formed a platform that lead to widespread collectivization among hijras, kothis and MSM across the country. The policy, program and research initiatives as well as the funds that came into the country for fighting the epidemic have played a vital role in highlighting issues of sexual and gender minorities, sensitizing the health infrastructure and empowerment of the hijra/kothi/transgender and MSM
community. In fact the first recorded queer protest in India was organized by Aids Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan and took place in 1992 against police harassment of gay men (Narrain & Bhan, 2005).

Assertion of human rights of LGBT from various quarters from the late 90s through the decade of 2000 is another such force responsible for visibilising queer issues in India. For instance autonomous women’s groups had begun talking about violence against lesbian, bisexual women within their natal and marital homes as report of lesbian suicides, women running away from home and marrying each other began to appear. One of the most visible articulation of this was seen during the protest demonstrations in the wake of the violence and controversy surrounding the release of the film ‘Fire’ (a Hindi language film depicting a same sex relationship between two middle class Hindu women) (CALERI, 1999). Similarly in 2001 human rights and HIV groups mobilized strongly to protest the arrests of HIV/AIDS workers working with Bharosa Trust, Lucknow under Sec. 377 (the section that criminalizes homosexuality under unnatural sexual offences) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Parallel reports of police harassment of hijras, MSM, gay men and violence against lesbian women documented by the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCI-K, 2001) was published. Around this time in 2001, Naz Foundation, an NGO working on HIV/AIDS filed a petition challenging Section 377 of the IPC. The campaign against Section 377 for over a decade and a half has been referred to as another significant platform that brought together groups, collectives, NGOs and individuals representing rights of LGBT, hijras, kothis from across the country. The current vibrant and visible state of the queer movement/s in India in the decade after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2009 and the re-criminalisation of same-sex sexuality in 2013 needs to be viewed within the above mentioned historical context.

Respondents in this study were mostly growing up during late 1980s and the decade of the 1990s (average age of study participants is 33 years and data was collected between late 2011 to early 2013), when this kind of visibility to same-sex sexuality was unheard of. Organizations and collectives on LGBTQ issues were only beginning to form in most parts of the country in mid to late 90s. Thus, respondents in this study were mostly growing up in social contexts where queer sexuality was largely invisible in the public domain. Since, it was the early beginnings of LGBTQ organizing in the country some spaces in the form of group meetings, social events like party spaces, some film screening, and a few newsletters existed but were often closeted and hence access to these spaces was restricted. The advent of technology such as the internet and mobile phones, its growing popularity and cheaper/easy access through the decade of 2000-10 has immensely changed the nature of networking among the LGBTQ community; this in addition to a shift from silence to assertion and pride around queer sexuality has made accessing the LGBTQ community/s much easier today.
In this section, study participants describe their pathways of discovering and meeting with the LGBTQ community/s and the impact it has had on their lives as queer people. Participants describe their extent of identification with, participation in community activities and events and ways in which these engagements with the queer communities shape their own self, identity and life choices.

- **Reading about Ourselves – Newspapers, magazines, agony aunt columns**

Several respondents stated that they heard the term, ‘gay’, ‘homosexual’ for the first time in newspaper articles, one off interview of an ‘out’ gay man in magazines or even in the agony aunt or ask the (s)expert section of newspapers. While several respondents stated that their first exposure to the term ‘homosexuality’ was often in the context of ‘disease/abnormality’, some also said that the articles they read mentioned name of an organization working with LGBT persons and their contact details. This became a gateway for many respondents to get in touch with the larger LGBT community.

I used to read this magazine called Just Like That and there was this help section in it, where a girl had asked a question, ‘I am in love with my best friend, who is a girl’. So I was like, ya man, this is my story. They had given Humsafar's number in that and said that you can contact a gay helpline called Humsafar which is located at Santa Cruz in Bombay. I quickly took that number and thought about calling for like 5 months. When I finally called, they told me about Aanchal and Humjinsi helplines that worked with lesbian women.

[ Priya, 30, says this at 19 when she first contacted a gay helpline]

Another respondent talked about reading a book in Marathi about lives of lesbian women, when she was 29 years old and married for a few years with a three year old child. Reading this book helped her to make sense of the multiple sexual attractions that she had felt all through her growing up years towards women. She now had a word, a term for her relationship with her best friend in college and her current attraction for her sister-in-law. After reading this book, she contacted a gay rights organisation in Pune and also tried to get in touch with women, whose stories the book had depicted.

A gay man describes an article he read in the context of HIV/AIDS and in this article got information of a gay rights group.

Then I read an article which came on the AIDS day. It was an article about Gay Bombay and then there was information of Humsafar Trust, but no contact details. There was only an e-mail id of the author of the article. After this I remember, I opened an e-mail account and wrote to the author. He put me in touch with someone, who told me about G Pune, Gay Pune and I enrolled my name
there… I think this was in FY (first year of graduation) when I was just becoming net friendly.

[Mihir, 30, says about the time he was 19 years old]

A lesbian woman describes her attempt to access information about LGBT issues. She says,

My brother, who really likes books had once taken me to a bookshop and so we were reading and there I saw Bombay Dost. It was written, ‘gay magazine’ on the cover and since I had been reading the dictionary again and again (to understand the meaning of the term homosexual), I had read the word gay. So I remembered where this shop was in Khar and after two days I collected some money, went back, picked up the book and as if someone was watching me, I reached Khar station, went to the loo and read the whole thing.

[Parul, 34]

This shows the extent of invisibility and inaccessibility of information or any kind of images related to same-sex sexuality as well as the need to hide, keep secret and the implied fear and stigma experienced by this respondent in accessing information related to same-sex desires. The same respondent further points out that while she was growing up, even within the limited availability of materials and spaces to talk about and affirm same-sex sexuality, there were stark gender differences with lesbian women and their issues rendered even more invisible among the already marginal space for sexual and gender minorities.

I read the whole thing (issue of Bombay Dost) but I could see that there was nothing for women, everything was for men. I also remember around that time, Mid Day brought out some anniversary issue and Ashok Rao Kavi was there on the front page and his interview said something about he staying with this boyfriend and his mother being ok with it... much later I heard about Gay Bombay and while their parties are open for lesbian women as well, some of us started talking about creating separate social and party spaces for just us women

[Parul, 34]

As discussed earlier in chapter three under unique developmental challenges faced by young LG persons, affirmative literature and materials plays a central role in helping young LG persons work through feelings of isolation, alienation, emptiness, loneliness and thinking of oneself as abnormal. However this information about gay life and experience is not readily available and the individual has to actively look for this in managing what has been referred to in literature as self-initiated ‘gay socialisation’ (Leap, 2007). This reiterates the role of the active individual seeking to consolidate and manage their queer identity. In fact the last quote of Parul goes beyond finding affirmative spaces and people to creating such spaces along with others in the community.
- **Internet and chat rooms**

For many of the respondents, discovery of the world of the internet coincided with their discovery of the queer world. Several respondents described that when they had just been introduced to the internet and had learnt to surf the net, they came upon websites with information about LGBT issues, organizations, gay chat rooms, dating sites and so on. One of the respondents summarized the importance of the internet for the queer community in the following manner. She said,

… the internet is a blessing for all gay people in India... Honestly ... Because our society is so closeted.

[Mehak, 28]

I would normally chat on some site and then came to know that there are some rooms which are gay rooms and so I thought lets go and figure out and then I came to know that there are people like me, even in Bombay, not somewhere in the world, but right here!

[Sahil, 25]

Some of the respondents stated that the internet became a space to meet other gay people, make friends as well as find sexual partners. One of the respondents talks about being shocked when he found out that one could meet people online to have sex. Until then though he was aware of his same-sex feelings and had a couple of ‘flings’ in college, he was only aware of the heterosexual script of dating, being in love, proposing marriage as being the only route to have sex. He says,

As part of my course work in web designing, I learnt to use internet and learnt to chat on the net as well. I once chanced upon a gay chat room and found out that there are many people, who meet here and chat, I was not aware of this at all. I can say it was shocking for me that this happens... this was the first time that I realized, that you can meet people online just for sex. Later on I got to know that it is called a one night stand… then I got to know about dating and that there are these categories like top, bottom, and versatile that people talk about on the net and based on this make choices of sexual partners…

[Sunil, 32]

Online, I was pretty brave. I gave out my identity which is not advised. But most of the times, my trust was reciprocated and I met decent guys... I strictly avoided the a/s/l – age/sex/location kind of guys or the coffee, tea or me kind of guys, those corny lines… or your place or mine. I made some very good friends too.

[Ajay, 32]

One of the lesbian women said that, the internet became her first point of contact with the lesbian
So I started looking on all these websites. I started registering everywhere... And in Indiatimes, I met someone. She was a married woman and so close to my age. So I was like, ‘Wow!’... We started chatting and we met up a couple of times. She started introducing me to a lot of things and gave me a lot of information. We started talking about friends we met online, whether they were genuine. Then she told me about this support group called Aanchal. She was the first one who actually brought me out slowly and she introduced me to another e-list called SIP, Symphony In Pink, which had about 50 members at the time. I was just overjoyed to know that there are so many lesbian women in Mumbai.

[Claire, 41 talks about her initial coming out around 2005]

Another aspect of discovering a global community through the internet and ways in which that impacted his aspirations and dreams is highlighted by one of the respondents. He describes himself as net savvy and had an internet connection at home while growing up. This helped him to get in touch with a virtual community of queer persons across the globe, which in turn exposed him to situation of LGBT persons in other countries and cultures. He says,

You know, you would read about people... how homosexuals live in other countries and at that point, I was very internet savvy and I would read about Canada and Scandinavia, South Africa and the access that the homosexuals had there. For me the US was the 'ideal' place. I thought I would go there, find a million dollar job, get a perfect boy friend, get married and live happily ever after

[Abhijit, 28]

- Meeting another gay person

Meeting another gay person, who then becomes a link to the larger community was reported by several respondents. Some talked about hooking up with a stranger in the train, who introduced the participant to more cruising areas, party and social spaces and organizations that work for LGBT. Others talked about meeting an ‘out’ gay man or a dyke through their work place, who opened up a whole new world, a gay world to them.

One of the respondents talked about being invited to a gay wedding during his stay in UK as part of an exchange program. Here he met people, who told him about the community in India.

Jim told me that in India too we have NGOs (working on GLB issues) and he knew about Mumbai,
about Gay Bombay. So I called up the people at Gay Bombay and went to meet them. Coincidentally the day when I went there, there was a meeting taking place. It was Sunday and I took part in that meet and that was my first coming out to a lot of people together. I told them about my story, got to know people present there and also about NGOs in Pune that work on gay issues.

[Mansoor, 33 at age 26]

Another respondent stated that they had a group of friends since school, who were effeminate, would like to dance, dress up in girls clothes some times and who would use feminine pronouns for each other. They said,

Once we were all sitting in a park and were addressing each other as aga-tuga (feminine pronouns) and gossiping and laughing and our gestures were effeminate only. That time this person, much older to us came there and asked, ‘tu sadi ghaltos ka?’ (Do you wear a saree?). I was surprised. He was dressed in pant-shirt, but he then told us that there are many of them who cross dress, feel like women and like to have sex with men. He then introduced us to a lot of kothis and told us about parties in Pune where cross dressing happens…

[Dilip, 24 years at age 22]

Many of the lesbian women in this study said that their first contact with a lesbian woman/activist was through a helpline number or at some conference or event and then they were invited to a party where they met others. Social events, especially a house party, where people went only by invitation, were cited by many respondents as a space to meet other lesbian, bisexual women.

… best part of this community is that when a new person gets in touch, there is a gathering to meet this new person. So people gather and go out pubbing or just drinks and dinner or somebody's house or whatever. So the same thing happened to me and that's how I met all these people.

[Leona, 33 about meeting other lesbian women at age 25]

And then she threw a party and she said I am going to call all the lesbians I know in Bombay. So that is where I met so many people. I had been in this intense and closeted relationship and now I was coming out to this group of people, actually a full thriving community. That was an amazing feeling!

[Joanna, 40 about her first time meeting community at age 30]

• Doctors and counsellors referring to LGBT organisations and support groups

A few of the respondents stated that when their parents found out about their sexuality, they were taken to doctors, psychiatrists, counsellors for curing their homosexuality and in a few cases after attempting
cure and seeing that there was no change in the respondents same-sex desires, the mental health professionals themselves referred clients to LGBT support groups. One such respondent was severely depressed and attempted suicide after failed attempts at conversion of his sexual orientation. The social worker in the hospital, where he was admitted gave him address of an NGO working with MSM and gay men. Another respondent describes how his doctor gave him the phone number of a helpline for gay men and encouraged him to call. Kumar, 30 year old gay man says,

I thought I should try calling, maybe something will come out of it as the medicines that my doctor had given were not helping, but it was 10 and the timings on the card were till 8. I still decided to try and to my luck Vicky sir was there and he spoke to me and I immediately felt relaxed. He called me to office in the morning... I came here and I saw these photos of men together and I was like my god this is like a treasure I have found. It was such a relief.

Collective Identity and Selfhood - Meeting community and meaning making for personal identity

Theorists working on concepts related to selfhood such as self concept, esteem and identity describe the self as being born out of reflexive action or a result of a person’s interactions with others. In this context Mead describes two components of the self – the ‘I’, who is the knower and actor and forms the dynamic, spontaneous part of self and the ‘Me’ or object refers to one’s ability to imagine oneself from the standpoint of another person and includes all the learned perspectives a person takes towards oneself (Mead, 1934). The second aspect of the self, which is ‘self’ as ‘reflected by others’ is significant to this discussion on personal identity being influenced by community. Literature on internalised homophobia describes the mechanisms by which gay persons tend to internalise negative social attitudes towards homosexuality (Herek et. al. 2009). Growing up in a homo-negative/hostile society and being exposed to stereotypes, prejudices and silences about same-sex sexuality from all significant institutions such as the family, religion, law, education, media can significantly shape the ‘Me’ part of the queer self leading to internalising of homophobia and homo-negativity.

In this context, meeting with the queer community and seeing positive affirmations of oneself as mirrored/reflected by others can mean what self psychologists refer to as ‘corrective emotional experience’ that was lacking in their families and missing from their childhoods (Beard & Glickauf-Hughes 1994). Meeting a large number of people, who are similar to oneself in their sexual and or gender expression can be an experience of ‘coming home’ for many. This is not to suggest that LGBTQ communities are one homogenous group. There is a lot of diversity within the LGBTQ community and hence while one would identify with similarities there also exist differences, especially based on other
identities of religion, region, caste, class, gender, ability and so on. Yet engaging in collective thought and action over rights of the LGBTQ community can both be an act of empowerment and assertion as well as an attempt at changing society’s attitude towards LGBTQ and thereby reducing stigma and gaining a better fit within society. The following section explores the various meanings and function that engaging with the queer community serves in the lives of queer persons.

- **Sense of belonging and identification**

Isolation and loneliness is a common experience for many queer persons while growing up. As one of the respondents stated, ‘until you learn the word gay and meet someone who calls themselves that, you are pretty much on your own, figuring out what is going on with you...’ – [Mehak, 28]. Thus a sense of alienation from the heterosexual world and its web of relationships within family, educational institutions, peer networks, work spaces is almost a universal experience for all queer persons. Meeting and engaging with community can become an experience of identification and reducing isolation. Meeting community can mean many things; seeing someone like oneself in person, who does not easily fit into the gender binary of man and woman, hearing someone use the term ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’ to refer to themselves, meeting two women, who are in love and openly talk about it, seeing someone in drag, seeing photographs of men loving men, exchanging notes about cruising areas and places to meet people for sex, love, romance, knowing about queer-themed films, books, organizations working on LGBTQ rights and so on.

One of the respondents talked about her first experience of calling on a helpline that worked with lesbian, bisexual women.

I was like, I think I am a lesbian and I think I would like to talk to you about it…. I thought she was a doctor... I really thought that and somehow we always feel that doctors are the only ones we can talk to about these things na and so I told her, ‘I think I am a lesbian...’ She said, ‘you know what? You are talking to a lesbian right now’. I was like on the ninth sky or whatever you can say. I was so happy!

[Priya, 30]

Another gay man talked about his first experience of visiting a drop-in-centre for MSM, gay men and transgender persons.

Then I came here. I spoke to Vicky sir, I met so many people and I felt that I am not alone and I
began feeling comfortable here. I came here and I saw these photos of men together and I was like my god this is like a treasure I have found.

[Kumar, 30]

Two lesbian respondents, who belong to a voluntary queer collective talked about how this collective has become a space where they experience personal affirmation, understanding and comfort in contrast to a heteronormative world, which can often seem alienating.

Over the years I have felt increasingly alienated from the mainstream world around me. The collective then becomes a place where what I say/feel/express is immediately understood. People just get it. They think the same way. I don’t have to explain anything. Whether its feeling disillusioned about the right wing politics that the country is headed towards or feeling let down by family members because they invisibilise my queerness… I can rant about it here and it is understood. Even if something is not accepted, the arguments come from a place of being on the same page and that is very important to me.

[Pradnya, 33, member of a voluntary queer collective]

The collective is a place where one can share happy things… for example, my work on gender… be it a published report/paper/book is either looked down upon as 'not real work'… some stuff we crazy political people do, is seen as too ‘hi-fi’ by family and friends alike. It is a similar story with any other sort of political organizing - be it around caste oppression or the Free Binayak Sen Campaign or this campaign we ran *Humari Zindagi, Humari Choice* (a campaign about right to love)…

[Mithun, 35 years, member of a voluntary queer collective]

One of the respondents who was violently outed to his family and had been taken to many doctors for curing his homosexuality and had subsequently attempted suicide, talked about the first time he met with peer educators of an NGO that worked with MSM and transgender persons on HIV prevention. He said,

I can talk to them as in whatever feelings I have in my mind I can tell them. At home I cannot tell anyone. Even if I talk to any guy a little, my family members think that I am thinking differently (sexually) about him… After coming here, I have improved a little. Now I don't cry as much and my eating and sleep has improved. These people are different from me and their lives are very different from me, but I still feel understood here and don’t have to feel ashamed of who I am.

[Sandip, 24]

Interestingly along with a sense of feeling understood and not judged, the respondent also talks of ‘difference’. Most of this difference is that of class, caste, education and occupational background. The NGO peer educators were from backgrounds of poverty, low education, having dropped out of school
before completing their SSC and many belonged to oppressed castes. Some of them are also engaged in sex work in addition to working as peer educators on a HIV prevention program. It is important to note that LGBTQ persons have multiple identities and being queer is one kind of identity that in intersection with other identities has differing impact on lives of individuals. Thus any discussion on community and especially identification and belongingness with a community would be incomplete without recognising intersectionality of multiple identities. Another illustrative example of this is described in the following quote of a married lesbian woman, who attended a party organised by a local queer group.

When I went there I saw all drinking and smoking and it was all about fashion. I went in a punjabi dress and I had my mangalsutra (necklace worn by most married Hindu women) on and I really felt very odd that time that I am the only one here who is like this. I felt that you have to look this way, only then will someone take interest in you. I really didn't like that place and left immediately.

[Seema, 31]

This respondent said that she had grown up in a lower middle class, Brahmin, Hindu household in a conservative locality in Pune. She married after her college girlfriend broke up with her and chose to marry a man and told her what they were doing was sinful. She had never heard of the term ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ until one day several years after marriage she read about lesbian women and their lives in a book in Marathi. It is through this book and its author that she had contacted a queer women’s group in Bombay. In the above quote it is clear that differences in marital status, class, region, language, age, exposure to cultures and ways of living other than the one that one is born in are some of the things that set this respondent apart from the LGBTQ community that she interacted with in this instance. Thus an individual’s identity or self includes a range of multiple identities and hence while there may be a sense of identification with other queer persons on some aspects, there can be a marked sense of difference based on other identity positions that the individual may occupy. This will be discussed further in this chapter while looking at collectivisation in the queer community to bring about social change.

- Safe Spaces and Support

Several respondents discussed the need for physical spaces, where they can be themselves without judgment, reprimand or punishment. As stated in the chapter on childhood and growing up, most queer persons were severely reprimanded as children for their ‘inappropriate’ gender non-conforming behaviours or their lack of interest in opposite sex or their unusual interest in same-sex persons. Physical spaces created by the LGBTQ community in the form of social meeting spaces, party spaces, drop-in-
centers, support group spaces, where members of the community do not have to hide who they are or pretend to be someone they are not have thus been described as vital by many respondents.

One of the respondents talked about the need for safe space, where one can party and have fun. Another respondent talks about the need for a safe space to have ‘shameless fun’.

The reason why we go to gay parties is because that's the place where we could be on our own. We can drink and dance and be like Meena Kumari or Akshay Kumar and do whatever you want to do. If you hold hands and walk around or engage in ‘PDA’ (public display of affection) with your boyfriend, no one is going to mind...

[Atul, 33]

A queer space for me is a place to have shameless fun and laugh. For those of us assigned female at birth, there are so many restrictions… but in a queer space I can really let myself have fun. Drink, smoke, talk about sex, have sex, write erotica… basically all the morality that weighs down on me, I have been able to challenge personally by being within queer collective spaces. And then I can generalise to more settings. And that has been freeing. Unlearning shame is what I call it… safe, queer spaces have helped me do that!

[Pradnya, 33]

Another respondent talked about the importance of ‘Friday Workshops’ in the NGO where he works. During these workshops, the office staff and others from the community get together for fun after office hours. He says,

... basically its free in the sense that what we can’t do in our house we can do here in a room. If someone likes to wear a sari, he can’t wear one and dance at home… here he can

[Amol, 34]

Respondents who were from a lower socio-economic background and often shared small houses with other members of their family did not have enough privacy to live out their sexual and gender expressions. Thus a Friday Workshop space, drop-in-center within the NGO, other community events become the only occasion where these respondents could be queer openly. Respondents who were living on their own, with their partners or with parents but with enough privacy also talked about the need for affirmative social/public spaces, which are free from violence. They discussed the need for spaces where they can be with their partner/lover without being stared at, passed comments on, bullied, blackmailed or beaten up. Thus the social/party spaces created by LGBTQ groups such as Gay Bombay in Mumbai were seen as significant by most respondents.
A lesbian woman underscores this point of need for more social/public spaces that are friendly towards queer people.

I came out when I was studying in the US. There I could go to a lesbian coffee shop, lesbian book store, lesbian restaurants, lesbian clubs and lesbian health centers and then I went to a lesbian strip joint too... So I was really stressed when I was going to come back. I did not know anyone and anything queer in India. But then I met someone online and wrote to her and we met up when I got back and that was great. She and her partner had arranged a small party for newer dykes, who were really not part of the community. They got us introduced to other women…

[Mithun, 35]

Safe spaces do not always imply segregated physical spaces, where all queer persons, even those, who are not out can feel safe. Safe space can also be about accessing and claiming public spaces (which are often cis-male centric and heterosexist) and doing so on the strength and the power of the collective. It may also imply interpersonal, relational spaces that are safe and non-judgemental for all irrespective of a person’s gender expression, sexual preference, HIV status, ability, age, caste, class and so on.

In a heterosexual world, family, both natal and marital are seen as the primary source of support during all major life events. Life events in adult life itself are so centrally defined by one’s sexuality and marital status; marriage, pregnancy, children, children’s health, education, career achievements and so on. Life events in adult queer life are rarely discussed, for instance coming out to self, decisions about coming out to others in natal family, work places, friends, looking for partner/s in a heterosexual world, dealing with romantic relationships that fall outside heterosexual marital scripts, stresses and strains of ‘invisible’ and socially unsanctioned relationships, dealing with multiple losses of relationships, friendships after coming out, dealing with ill health and hostile health care systems. The mainstream world often remains ignorant of these life events in queer lives and hence support during these times of difficulty from community members, queer friends, families of choice (consisting of queer persons and allies) become significant.

One of the respondents talked about support from queer friends as well as straight allies in the process of coming out to family.

... basically my gay friends spoke to my sister on the phone and told her. Even my straight friends rather my female friends who are straight, even they offered to speak to her. One of my friends Asha, her brother is gay, so she spoke to my sister and told her that its ok and she told her that even she was in denial for a long time and now she is fine... So all these people and my gay friends have played a very important role in my life

[Ajit, 24]
We always go to Nerul as one of my friends has a bungalow there and we always go there. As in generally dance the whole night, booze the whole night, so it is fun. Or then every weekend if this doesn't happen, we have these get-togethers, we meet for lunch. We have these two friends who are a couple and they live together so they invite us for lunch, they cook for us and so it is fun.

[Sahil, 25]

Community as a collective for social change and political action

Community or a collective identity is a result of a sense of connection, ‘we-ness’, shared experiences and a sense of shared destiny among individuals (Owens et. al. 2010). In that sense collective identity is based on common bonds and attachments to individual group members. However, Prentice et. al. (1994) distinguishes between identities based on attachments to individual group members and those based on attachments directly to the group or category. It is the second kind of attachment that is essential to produce a collective identity. In other words, identity commitment to the experience of and the category ‘queer’ or ‘sexual minority’ would be salient in the development of a collective identity. Most definitions of collective identity include a notion of identification, commonalities of interests along with recognition of shared opportunities and constraints that serve as a foundation for joint mobilisation and action. Thus collective identities includes the affective and relational elements of being a binding force, a social glue, which enables individuals to form a sense of collective self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) as well as an opportunity to collectivize for joint action and change.

While describing their experiences of being part of the queer community, respondents in this study referred to the various implications of collective identities described above. For some respondents, being a part of the LGBTQ community was about feeling a sense of belonging, a safe space and accessing support. Many talked about the queer community as the network of gay friends that they had. Some viewed the LGBTQ community as a forum (irrespective of individual friendships) for coming together and articulating rights of queer persons as a group and working towards joint action for change. This change meant multiple things for different people and the process of this change was articulated differently by people. As mentioned above there were study participants, who talked about being part of collective action, which in itself was empowering for them and brought about change in their own self-perception, self confidence, in their relationships and so on. There were others who talked about change in terms of securing state attention through programs on HIV, health care, vocational training. There were those who wanted change in discriminatory laws and talked about instituting anti-discrimination
mechanisms. For others, collective action included developing a critical analysis of an unequal heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist society and a demand for a just, equal society not just for queer persons, but for women, oppressed castes, the poor, the disabled and other marginalised sections. This position is based on not merely on an understanding of oppression and privilege vis-a-vis sexuality and gender, but with respect to other oppressed identities too. Some of the responses below are indicative of the multiple meanings of change that participants talked about.

One of the respondents talked about how he has been able to draw strength from the process of collectivization.

It is often exhausting to be queer in this heteronormative world. The unfairness really gets to you sometimes. That is when I feel I can draw strength from collective thought and action. Learn ways to cope, feel heard, feel comforted and even role model sometimes...

[Vineet, 40 year old gay man]

Another respondent elaborated on the idea of the process involved in collectivization and what it meant to her. She stated,

What it means to me is using a non-hierarchical, consensus based approach to produce collaborative and collective work. Also, using feminist methodologies in work and allying with other groups fighting oppression/(s) and marginalisations… that is important to me

[Mithun, 35]

One of the respondents elaborated on the position stated above about the need to be critical of power structures such as hetero-patriarchy,

I am part of this collective not just to make friends or socialize… I come here because there is a queer perspective not just on your personal life and relationships but on the world around you. It is important to destabilise patriarchal institutions of marriage, family, religion… We are here to talk about that in our campaigns, research, our support work… I think if one is not doing this, then one is wasting the gift of being queer…

[Priti, 31]

Another respondent takes this argument forward and suggests that not only is it necessary to be critical of heteronormativity, but it is necessary to be reflexive within our own communities and look at
homonormativity as well. She says that even among LGBT communities just like any other space, dominant ideologies of caste, class, hindu majoritarianism, nationalist jingoism exists in plenty. She says,

There are oppressions germane to the LGBT community such as transphobia, butchphobia, biphobia, which need to be questioned. For example, a popular party organizer, after a few parties, decided to modify their rules for entry and listed that drag wasn't allowed (especially skirts above a certain length). MTF (male to female) transpersons were turned away. When pressed for an explanation the official line was that the club was owned by a family and transwomen dress skimpily. Unofficially, we know that gay men are bothered a lot by transwomen…

[Mithun, 35]

While collective identity has an individual and group dimension to it, the collectivisation itself is occurring in a context. Thus there are contexts that are more enabling or more oppressive for collective marginalised identities to be consolidated and asserted strongly. As stated earlier, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the campaign on Section 377 and the Delhi High Court verdict of 2009 are some examples of contextual factors that have enabled the collectivizing of queer identities. One other such factor that I wish to point out here (on the face of it seemed an oppressive factor) was the (re) criminalisation of homosexuality through the Supreme Court judgement on 11th December 2013. While I had completed my data collection for the study by this time, it is my observation that this event led to both a sense of threat and fear as well as further consolidation of the collective identity of being queer in India. The visibility to LGBTQ issues around this event and the support from across the globe from queer and straight allies was unprecedented. The Supreme Court verdict became a reference point for a renewed assertion of sexual rights and freedom of expression among the queer communities in Mumbai and Pune. Several of us within the community including some of the study participants talked about being angry and outraged at this outright denial of justice. Some of the responses included collective action such as street protests, online campaigns under the banner, ‘Global Day of Rage’ and with the slogan ‘No Going Back on 377’ referring to the earlier Delhi High Court verdict of 2009. Many more conversations about sexuality, right to love started taking place even outside of the queer collective spaces; within college campuses, work spaces, in mass media and so on. Many more people decided to come out as queer and as queer allies in their personal spaces and even on national media as a response of both anger and assertion. Britt and Heise (2000) argue that emotions, especially negative emotions that are high in energy and potency such as anger can motivate individual participation in collective action. In fact they state that participation in gay rights movement/s could include efforts to transform shame and fear to anger and pride in an effort to construct an energized collective identity. Collective action among the LGBTQ communities across the country after the Supreme Court judgement seems to be an example of this.