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## Press Release on Political Outreach by Queer Azaadi Mumbai

In the run up to national elections Queer Azaadi Mumbai (QAM), a network of groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Mumbai, has asked political parties their positions on queer issues. A group of QAM activists delivered a letter with three core demands to all leading political parties in Mumbai:

The three core demands made by QAM were:

- 1) To read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code so it no longer applies to consenting adults. S.377 is currently used to criminalise & persecute queer people.
- 2) To end discrimination and violence based on sexuality or gender by passing effective anti-discrimination laws
- 3) To ensure that transgendered people get equal status, rights and recognition as citizens of India, and to set up a Transgender Welfare Board on the lines of what has already been done in Tamil Nadu.

QAM is happy to note that most of the parties that were approached were very willing to listen to the group. QAM was able to have in-depth interactions with the Congress (I), NCP, Janata Dal (Secular) and BJP. (Letters were delivered to the offices of the Shiv Sena, Republican Party of India and Bharatiya Republican Party Bahujan Mahasangh, but no one was available for in-depth interactions) .

In all cases the political leaders that the group interacted with agreed that the issues being raised were important. Since parties have finalised manifestos it was not possible to include the demands, but leaders assured QAM that they would take them up post the elections.

For the Congress the party's spokesperson Shri Husain Dalwai assured us that his party leadership was progressive and that the current manifesto upheld the rights of all minorities. He also stated that the Equal Opportunities Board recently set up by the state government would respond positively to the issues of people from sexual minorities and marginalised genders. Shri Dalwai added that they would include some of the issues in the manifesto for the upcoming Assembly elections, and would facilitate meetings with elected representatives.

For the NCP the party's spokesperson Shri Prakash Binsale was unable to meet QAM that day, but agreed to speak the next day. At that interaction Shri Binsale stated that his party felt that social change was needed on this issue before undertaking political change, but he added that they respected individual choices. He stated that the party could not comment on the S.377 demand since the matter was sub judice (in the Delhi High Court), but that the party would abide by the court's decision.

For the Janata Dal (Secular) Shri Prakash Hiwale, President of the Janata Dal (Secular) in Mumbai, gave us a very supportive hearing. He agreed that LGBT people have always been part of Indian society and that his party was totally supportive of our fight to have the same rights of all Indian citizens.

For the BJP, party spokesperson Shri Madhu Chavan gave a long hearing and had a frank discussion with QAM. Shri Chavan was undecided about whether what the group represented was natural, but he agreed that discrimination and violence should not happen. He also claimed nothing stopped two people of the same sex living together, but he had problems with gay marriage (not one of QAM's core demands) and did not discuss the need for non-discrimination laws.

In this, as with the other parties, the interaction with these political parties may have fallen short of all that QAM hoped for, but on a more basic level we are satisfied that we were able to engage our basic right of being able to raise our issues with our political representatives and be given a fair hearing. Such an engagement with the political process is a major step to normalising queer issues and to ensuring that the time when queer people will enjoy the same rights of all Indians will not be far away.