intensively my final exam (public concert) to obtain my Diploma of Virtuosity in the coming months.

I also was able during this time, to witness the progresses made by the other students: in four years, all have progressed, albeit at their own pace and capacities, and most importantly, all have acquired greater musical knowledge and deeper understanding.

Professor Milojkovic has honoured me, a few weeks ago, with the proposal of becoming his partner in the School he founded.

I am proud to inform the community that its members are most welcome to come and study with the School in Geneva. Our School is enabled by the State of Geneva to deliver the necessary diplomas at all levels: Bachelor, Master, Post-Master (Virtuosity), which are recognized for their prestige. We arrange accommodation in Geneva for the students joining the School, either for a few years in order to obtain a diploma, or joining us for a Master class (one week basis).

Our Master classes are generally held thrice a year, and all lovers of piano are welcome to rejoin us for a musical week.

Simran Shaikh’s story

by anahita mukherji

The word family brings a tinge of sadness to Simran Shaikh’s voice. When Simran, an attractive, strapping member of the Hijra community in New Delhi, sees fellow hijras living with their families, she is reminded of the middle-class Parsi household where she grew up in Mumbai’s Dadar Parsi colony, a family for whom she is as good as dead.

Simran, who oversees programmes for the Indian arm of an international non-profit, can’t help wondering how different life would have been if her family had accepted her the way she was. A rejection of her identity is what drove Simran to leave home and brave the mean streets of Mumbai, working as a bar dancer and sex worker.

“I would not have left home or changed my religion, had my family accepted me,” says Simran. But she has no regrets in life. “Despite the hardship and the humiliation I have faced, I’ve still made it in life,” she says. But even today, as a respected social activist in the NGO sector, she knows that she can never return home. For all attempts to contact her family are met with the same response - ‘Our son is dead for us.’

“I started life as a homosexual boy in a Parsi family. I ran away from home at the age of 14 because I felt that there was something terribly wrong with me, and that my parents would have to face a great deal of humiliation because of me,” says Simran, who does not wish to divulge her name before she joined the hijra community.

Simran still recalls the painful taunts thrown at her by friends and family while growing up. “I remember an incident that occurred during a terrace party that my father had thrown for his friends in our Parsi colony. I overheard my father’s friend mocking him for having a ‘pansy’ son. I can’t forget the humiliation I saw in my father’s eyes,” says Simran. Her navjote an initiation into the University of Geneva or by the Zoroastrian community.
Zoroastrian religion was no better. Simran can still recall Parsi Gujarati words like “baylo” floating in the air during the ceremony.

“I ran away from home when I simply couldn’t bear the taunts any longer. I only had Rs16 in my pocket when I left the house. I had no idea where I was going. For three days, I slept on the platform at Bombay Central station,” she says.

A Hijra found the young boy lying on the platform and made sexual advances at him. She also offered the boy food and shelter. “That was my first contact with the Hijra community, with whom I felt completely at home,” says Simran.

That’s where the young Parsi boy found a new identity as Simran Shaikh. “The Hijra who found me on the platform took me under her wing and taught me how to drape a sari. She would beg in railway trains during the day and solicit customers at night. I was very shy at the time and would not accompany her while she was begging. But at night, I would come with her to dance bars where she taught me the skills required to attract customers and get them to part with their money,” says Shaikh.

It’s during her days as a bar-dancer that Simran first met Zeenat, a Hijra guru from Kamathipura, Mumbai’s famous red-light district. “I was doing well in my profession and Zeenat offered to take me under her tutelage as her ‘chela’,” says Simran, who has worked as both a bar dancer and a sex worker.

She is not ashamed of her past. She says her role as a sex worker was neither completely voluntary nor through coercion. “It’s just something I had to do to survive,” she says.

Simran was part of a team that founded Dai Welfare Society, one of the first transgender community-based organizations in Mumbai. She later joined the Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust, after which she landed her present job with India HIV/AIDS Alliance, where she works as Programme Officer for West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Manipur and Tamil Nadu.

Her message to young people who are confused about their sexual identity is simple – believe in yourself. It took Simran over two years to believe in herself and accept her identity.

But believing in oneself can be a trifle difficult when faced with a homophobic world that treats transgender as an aberration. Simran is used to men scratching their crotches in front of her and women vacating seats in public transport because they don’t want to be near her.

“I don’t travel by the Delhi metro any more. It is extremely hurtful when the person sitting next to me gets up and walks away. Or when I’m told to vacate my seat in the lady’s compartment,” she adds.

29-year-old Anahita Mukherji has worked as a journalist with The Times of India for the last seven years. While she spent a large part of her career with the newspaper in Mumbai, she now lives in New Delhi. She has extensively covered a range of subjects including education, environment and the Right to Information Act. Her work includes stories on child labour, Mumbai’s remand homes as well as the truth behind India’s data on forest cover. She has also written stories from the country’s hinterland, and has traveled to villages in Maharashtra as well as one in West Bengal. She won the prestigious Sanskriti Award for journalism in 2010 for her work on the inequality in the country’s education system and was also the recipient of the first Australia India Council Young Media Fellowship.