

L A N G U A G E
I S A
Q U E E R
T H I N G

ECHOES BEYOND THE STAGE

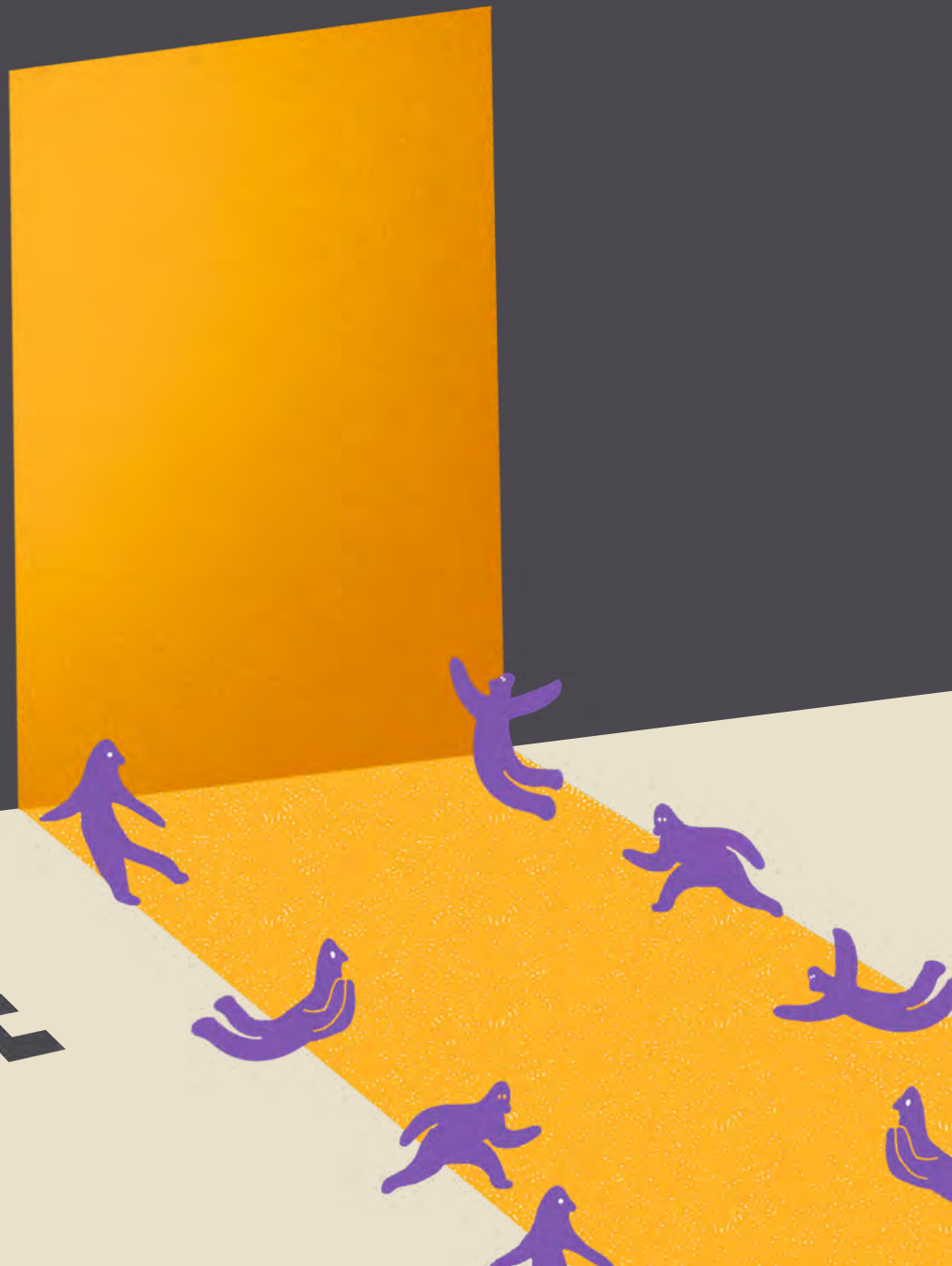




Photo: Simon Hadley, 2022

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Foreword

November 2022. A packed theatre at the NCPA in Mumbai. A houseful show. And a confession afterward.

A young man walked up to my colleague, still visibly moved. He spoke about what he had just witnessed on stage, and how it made him reflect on his own attitudes toward those he once thought of as “different.” In that moment, *Language is a Queer Thing* had done more than we could have imagined. Not only had audiences filled the Little Theatre on a Sunday afternoon, but many, like this young man, left carrying something with them — questions, empathy, a shift in perspective.

As we completed four remarkable years of this India-UK artist and community development programme in 2025, we wanted to pause and take stock. Together with Allcap Communications, we set out to trace the programme’s journey from 2022 to 2025. My sincere thanks to the Allcap team — Ruchira Das, Satabdi Sengupta and Sandip Roy — who helped shape this report through interviews with partners and alumni, archival materials, and extensive desk research.

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at The Queer Muslim Project — Maniza Khalid Khan

and Rachita Sai Barak — and to Imad Farooqui, whose work brings these pages to life.

My thanks to the British Council leadership team in India: Alison Barrett MBE, Country Director; and Hema Singh Rance, Director Arts. A special note of appreciation for Matt Beavers, Literature Relationship Manager, British Council UK; Jonathan Kennedy, former Director Arts, British Council India; and Roshni Rao, former Senior Arts Manager, British Council India as their support has been instrumental to the journey of this programme.

We have been truly fortunate to work with Stuart Bartholomew of VERVE Poetry Festival in the UK, whose collaboration has shaped the programme from the beginning. My gratitude also to our alumni and partners, who generously shared their time and reflections for this evaluation.

This work grew out of a simple but urgent reality. Queer poets, especially those working across South Asian languages, diasporas, and cultural contexts, still face barriers to visibility, support, and access to institutions.

Across four editions, the programme has shown clear patterns: artists growing in confidence and craft, stronger creative networks, and institutions beginning to shift their practices. This document traces that journey not as a neat line between intervention and outcome, but as a testament to the power of art. The impact of Language is a Queer Thing lives on in what follows: in relationships that last, collaborations

that travel across borders, and organisations that now programme differently because they have learned how to listen.

Rafiul Alom Rahman
Founder & Director
The Queer Muslim Project





The Story in Brief



A Cross-Border Poetic Movement

Can poetry change the world?

Language is a Queer Thing began in 2022 as a way to ask that question — by bringing queer spoken word artists and poets from India and the UK into a shared space of collaboration, care, and creative risk.

Led by The Queer Muslim Project in partnership with VERVE Poetry Festival, and supported by British Council, BBC Contains Strong Language, and a growing network of festivals, venues, and publishers, the programme creates rare, carefully held spaces where queer, trans,

and non-binary poets — particularly from South Asia and marginalised communities in the Global North — can meet, develop their craft, and claim space in mainstream cultural conversations.

Over four editions, the programme has evolved from a one-off collaboration into what partners now describe as a “framework of mutual learning” and “pedagogy in disguise”. Its impact extends beyond artistic outcomes, influencing institutional approaches, expanding audience relationships, and creating more sustainable space for queer voices in the cultural mainstream.



Why This Work Matters Now



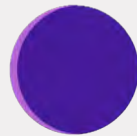
Young queer people are seeking safe, creative spaces that honour intersectional identities.



Institutions are under pressure to move beyond symbolic diversity.



Cross-border cultural relations increasingly depend on programmes that combine artistic excellence with social impact.



Queer South Asian artists still struggle for visibility, legitimacy and long-term pathways in mainstream spaces.

Historically, queer literary spaces have centred Western or already mainstream voices, leaving little room for stories at the intersection of queerness, faith, caste, class, and migration. Within South Asia, institutional support for diverse and emerging queer voices has been limited. At the same time, major cultural institutions in the Global North, including the UK, have sought but often struggled to meaningfully support queer artists from diasporic, faith-based, and racialised communities. Language is a Queer Thing was designed to address this gap, not only as a fellowship, but as a broader framework for artistic empowerment and ecosystem change.



What the Programme Does

Language is a Queer Thing uses spoken word poetry rooted in South Asian traditions like dastangoi and ghazal, and contemporary slam to build a cross-border programme that values both individual voice and ensemble performance. The programme combines creative labs, dramaturgy and ensemble work; mentorship and peer feedback; residencies in India and the UK; high-visibility performances; and ongoing alumni support. Poets write duets and ensemble pieces, experiment with bilingual and multilingual work, and are guided on how to hold an audience and co-design the room, not just perform in it.

GOALS OF LANGUAGE IS A QUEER THING

Empower queer artists to find their voice and creative expression

Create sustainable career pathways for emerging queer poets

Build a global ecosystem of queer artists across Asia and the UK

Platform queer art in mainstream spaces, shifting who is seen, heard and celebrated



Scale and Footprint (2022-2025)

GEOGRAPHY:
7 CITIES IN 4 YEARS

- Birmingham
- Mumbai
- Leeds
- Delhi
- Santiniketan
- Kolkata
- Bradford

PARTICIPANTS

18 POETS
ACROSS INDIA
& THE UK

PUBLIC
SHOWCASES

- BBC Contains Strong Language
- Jaipur Literature Festival
- Kolkata Literary Meet
- Literature Live Mumbai
- Spoken Fest

BROADCAST
& MEDIA

- BBC Radio
- The Verb
- Festival recordings
- National press in India & the UK

PUBLICATIONS

3
ANTHOLOGIES
WITH
VERVE POETRY
PRESS

ECOSYSTEM

- Cultural venues
- Universities
- Community collectives
- Grassroots partners
- Film & movement collaborators



Themes at the Heart of the Work

Across the programme, poets trace how global questions of climate, gender, faith, migration, and mental health unfold within intimate, everyday lives. Through mother tongues, chosen kinship, domestic spaces, and inherited histories, their work centres voices often absent from public discourse. Together, these poems imagine new forms of belonging, care, and collective futures across borders.



Language is a Queer Thing has brought poets and partners from the UK and India into meaningful dialogue – reflecting lived experiences and showing how creative exchange can spark lasting artistic collaboration and social change. We are proud to be part of this journey.

ALISON BARRETT MBE, BRITISH COUNCIL



What Changed: Key Impacts

Language is a Queer Thing has shown a consistent pattern of impact across artists, audiences, and institutions, grounded in its seven foundational pillars*.

THE 7 PILLARS



Access & Discovery

Creates pathways for marginalised LGBTQIA+ artists to access international collaboration, mentorship, and stages that were previously out of reach

70% of the cohort accessed new craft traditions for the first time.

British Council enabled international mobility and cross-country cohorts, intentionally creating access pathways rather than one-off showcases.



Creative Development & Collaboration

Generates new, original work through queer-led, cross-cultural creative processes rooted in language, heritage, and belonging

100% created new original work.

Partners recognized collaboration as curriculum, prioritizing rehearsal time, dialogue, and creative risk over output-driven programming.

WHAT IT DOES

POET IMPACT

PARTNER ACTION

**THE 7
PILLARS**



Platforming & Presentation

Ensures queer poets are heard in mainstream cultural spaces, not only within queer enclaves

60% performed on major mainstream stages.

2M+ listeners were reached through BBC Radio and high-profile festival showcases.



Network & Ecosystem Building

Embeds poets within long-term literary and cultural networks across festivals, media, and institutions

60% built cross-border artistic relationships.

Bradford 2025 embedded Language is a Queer Thing into the city's cultural fabric, connecting poets with community spaces, institutions, and repeated local engagement.



Visibility, Media & Advocacy

Amplifies queer voices in public media and cultural discourse, positioning poetry as both art and advocacy

100% gained national/international broadcast visibility.

A Language is a Queer Thing poem in the official G20 cultural anthology positioned queer poetry within cultural policy discourse.



Community Engagement & Social Impact

Equips poets with tools for sustainable artistic careers

60% engaged diverse community audiences.

Partners were able to reach new, intergenerational audiences through poet-led dialogues in universities and community settings.



Legacy & Sustainability

Is designed for cumulative, long-term impact rather than one-off interventions

60% sustained relationships post-programme.

Partners upheld the value of archives, alumni networks, anthologies, and repeat editions in sustaining long-term cultural impact.

**WHAT IT
DOES**

**POET
IMPACT**

**PARTNER
ACTION**

*This evaluation is based on qualitative analysis of interviews with 10 poets, alongside mentors, partners, and organisers, mapped against Language is a Queer Thing's seven-pillar methodology, with quantitative indicators calculated only where outcomes were explicitly evidenced.



How Partners Experienced the Shift

Across British Council, BBC Contains Strong Language, Bradford 2025 City of Culture and other partners, Language is a Queer Thing has made them understand and consider:



Partners now see the programme as a working model for how large institutions can embed equity, diversity and inclusion as a lived practice, rather than a parallel initiative.



What the Evidence Shows

Across four editions, the evidence in this report shows that Language Is a Queer Thing operates most powerfully not as a time-bound programme, but as a durable framework for artist empowerment.

Its impact lies not in any single activity, but in the convergence of creative development, high-visibility platforms, institutional partnerships, and sustained peer networks. Together, these elements generate shifts that reach beyond individual poets — reshaping how institutions

programme, how audiences engage, and how queer cultural presence becomes part of the mainstream. Taken as a whole, the findings position the programme as a model that can travel across contexts while remaining rooted in artist-led practice and community accountability. Alongside strong artistic outcomes, Language is a Queer Thing fosters long-term social impact by linking creative practice to dialogue, civic participation, and shared imagination.

When you see that kind of response from audiences and artists, you know it's something you need to keep investing in, not just do once.

SUSAN ROBERTS,
BBC CONTAINS
STRONG LANGUAGE

There are no mangoes in this poem.
No mentions of honey being eaten while I
ponder my place,
and no bouquets of akara
being thrown at my feet.

I'm sorry to disappoint you but there are no
cultural metaphors in this poem.
So if I mention washing rice,
It is not an allegory for washing
away the pain of living as a minority,
It is because I wanted rice
the day I wrote this.

Excerpt from 'There are no mangoes in this poem' by Ife Grillo



Setting the Stage

Language is a Queer Thing took shape in 2022 as part of British Council's India/UK Together Season of Culture, initiated by The Queer Muslim Project in collaboration with VERVE Poetry Festival and BBC Contains Strong Language. It began as an invitation — across borders, languages, and lineages — for queer voices to meet, listen, and create together.

Founded in 2017, The Queer Muslim Project challenges harmful stereotypes while amplifying underrepresented LGBTQIA+ storytellers, creating safer cultural spaces where artists from marginalised backgrounds can shape their own narratives. Across South Asia, and particularly in India, emerging queer poets have rarely found the institutional support or visibility needed to grow their work or reach wider audiences.

The programme was conceived to shift this landscape. **At its heart is a commitment to community: artists connecting across borders, sharing lived experience, and exchanging creative practices in contexts where queer voices are often silenced.**

Through mentorship, performance, and cross-cultural collaboration, the programme creates pathways for queer poets to build craft, networks, and visibility. In doing so, it redraws the contours of the queer literary landscape — opening spaces where voices once kept at the margins can speak and be heard across borders.

Audience reach & cultural resonance: BBC broadcasts (2M+ listeners) to sold-out festival stages

Institutional impact: Stronger safeguarding, community-led design, and renewed engagement with young people

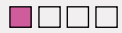
Cross-continental solidarity: Language is a Queer Thing as a learning curve in how to listen to community expertise and co-create work

Sustainable cultural impact: Alumni networks, new youth audiences, and recurring festival slots

wordupnorth.org.uk

Raising **UP**
voices,
stories
& writers





Language is a Queer Thing at a Glance



The Launch

Launched in 2022, the inaugural edition brought six poets from India and the UK to collaborate on a cross-border stage performance. The programme explored language, heritage, belonging, and the decolonisation of queerness, with workshops and ensemble sessions prioritising experimentation over immediate visibility. Poets worked across languages, collective authorship, and new performance vocabularies.

Early partnerships with British Council, VERVE Poetry Festival, and BBC Contains Strong Language provided institutional support and framing. Public showcases in Birmingham and Mumbai introduced the work to audiences, while recordings and press coverage documented the programme's beginnings. The first year affirmed that carefully held cross-cultural collaboration could be deeply transformative.

2022

2023

Expansion and Deepening

In 2023, the programme expanded while deepening its practice. Six new poets came together in Leeds, with additional engagements for select poets in Mumbai and Delhi, widening its geographical reach and bringing in partners such as Spoken Fest and BBC Radio Leeds. Alumni from the 2022 cohort returned as jury members, mentors, and performers, signalling an early commitment to continuity.

The new cohort's showcase leaned into experimentation, featuring protest songs in Urdu, circular poems, and interdisciplinary performance. One-to-one mentorship with poets including Ian Duhig, Chris Tse, and Kim Moore at BBC Contains Strong Language offered clearer artistic pathways. Recording sessions with BBC Radio 4's The Verb and performances at Leeds Conservatoire tested work in varied contexts, while growth remained rooted in intimacy.





Building the India–UK Bridge

By 2024, the programme's cross-border intent became structurally embedded. Poets across India and the UK stayed connected through online workshops, allowing collaborations to evolve between in-person moments. Six new poets presented showcases at Arthshila Santiniketan and Kolkata Literary Meet, placing queer poetry in culturally significant and unexpected spaces.

The residency in Santiniketan, a university town shaped by literary traditions, widened the programme's geography and imagination, while the shift to Kolkata introduced new audiences and networks. An early partnership with Bradford 2025 City of Culture also began, onboarding a local poet. Expanded recordings and documentation ensured the work travelled beyond the room.

2024



Community, Culture & Citywide Engagement

2025

In 2025, the programme marked four years of practice, a network of eighteen queer poets, and a decisive move into the life of a city. Anchored in Bradford as part of the UK City of Culture programme, six alumni engaged local communities through workshops, performances, and participatory events.

In addition to public performances at BBC Contains Strong Language, poets led sessions on textile histories, waacking, a lyrical walk, and a 'hennah gathering', shifting focus from showcases to collective presence. The year closed with strong media coverage and a VERVE omnibus anthology, showing how queer poetry can live across a city.



The Role of Mentors

Across its editions, the programme has built a rich web of workshops, performances, and shared learning shaped by both mentors and poets. Residencies blend **movement, ensemble training, dramaturgy, and writing circles**, led by mentors such as Jasmine Gardosi, Vikram Phukan, and Hanan Issa. Learning unfolds across bodily, textual, and collaborative forms, allowing each poet's voice and confidence to grow in relation to others. Mentors come from across disciplines — poets, dramaturgs, theatre directors, translators, and

former Poet Laureates — bringing varied lineages of practice. This breadth moves the programme beyond generative writing toward an exploration of how poetry travels through sound and reaches communities.

Translation is approached as movement across languages and contexts, encouraging poets to carry mother tongues and cultural nuance without flattening their specificity.

Mentors describe the programme as a rare space of trust within the queer literary ecosystem. Poets often arrive with strong ideas but few safe contexts to test vulnerable material; over time, they become more confident and willing to take creative risks. Mentors position themselves as facilitators holding space, offering feedback, and sustaining growth beyond the showcase.

Finding His Voice Across Languages

For Garfield Dsouza, Language is a Queer Thing was the first space that encouraged him to bring all his languages — English, Konkani, and Hindi — into one poem with confidence. In workshops and ensemble labs, he realised his multilingual instinct was a strength rather than something to pare down.

Performing at international showcases reshaped his understanding of audience reach, validating that his stories could resonate far beyond familiar geographies. The programme's biggest gift to Garfield was clarity: that his multilingual, place-rooted voice is not a limitation but a strength in contemporary poetry.

In Arabic words are made of root sounds
The most beautiful poetry plays with the root to get the most subtle
meaning out of it.

to live is شاع
'a sh

'Aisha
lifestyle, or the name of a woman

'Aish
lifestyle, or bread

'Ayyash
bread seller

Ma'ash
pension

Ta'ayush
living together

'A'ish
wealthy, alive

You repeat and you repeat,
truth is repetitive.

Excerpt from 'Improvements on living' by Abu Leila



Building the Set

Language is a Queer Thing approaches poetry not as isolated pieces but a set in the making — where individual poems are shaped into a live, collective experience.

The programme works deliberately at the intersection of writing and performance, where meaning is conveyed as much by presence as by text. Instead of centering poetry readings alone, it approaches the stage as a curated experience.

Ensemble performances, poetic duets, bilingual code-switching, improvisation, and poetic debate are core to the methodology.

Poets are encouraged to consider how a room is held: how energy moves between performers and audiences, how pauses, humour, and vulnerability build connection, and how crowd work and responsiveness can deepen impact. In this sense, the programme sits closer to live dramaturgy than to conventional literary presentation.

B B C

BBC
CONTAINS STRONG LANGUAGE
THE VERB
BBC
RADIO 3

BBC CONTAINS
STRONG
LANGUAGE



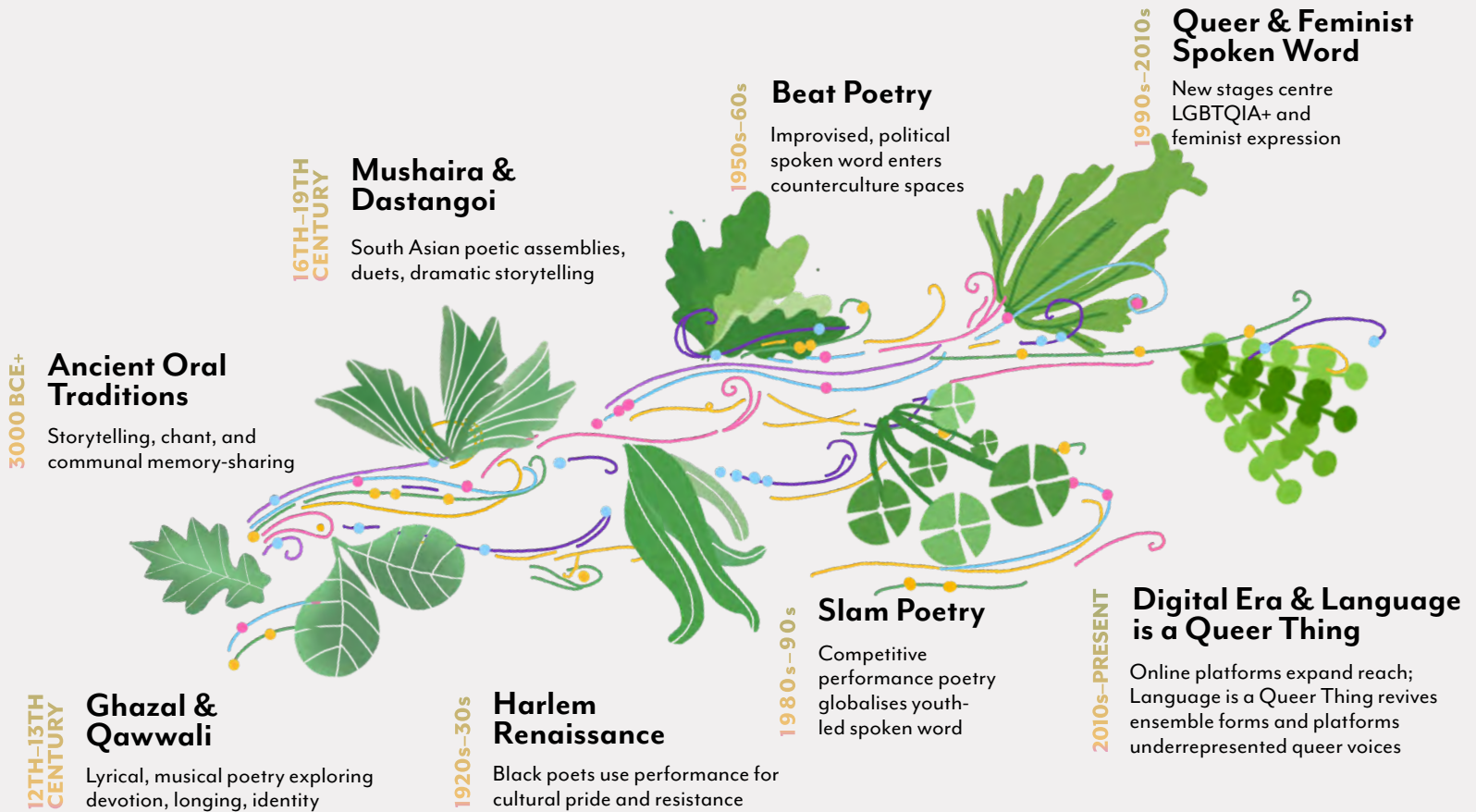
Photo: Tricia Yourkevich, 2023



Evolution of the Spoken Word

Historically, spoken word has played a crucial role in societies where written language was inaccessible or exclusionary. It carries memory, resistance, and political critique across generations, allowing communities to preserve narratives, share knowledge, and speak back to power. In South Asia, oral traditions such as dastangoi, poetic debate, and ghazal have long blurred the boundaries between literature, performance, and public life.

Contemporary spoken word inherits this lineage, combining storytelling, rhythm, and presence to reach audiences beyond the page. Language is a Queer Thing is grounded in this history. It understands spoken word as an embodied and relational practice.



Through workshops and labs, the programme focuses on co-creation and collective authorship, asking poets to compose with one another and with audiences in mind. Attention is given to persona, movement, sound, and staging alongside the written word, so poems are fully inhabited and invite community connection and open dialogue. This allows queer poetry to travel across languages, borders, and communities, while remaining rooted in the histories and sensibilities from which it emerges.



Behind the Scenes: Theory of Change

**Language is a Queer
Thing advances queer
artists' careers and
shifts institutional
practice through creative
development, high visibility
platforms, strategic
partnerships, and sustained
peer networks — embedding
queer cultural presence
in mainstream spaces.**

DELIVERY STRUCTURE

OUTPUTS

Conditions or Inputs

Queer-led programme design + safeguarding-led practice

Cross-border collaboration (India-UK)

Time + resources for ensemble creation

Access to institutions, venues, audiences

Virtual Collaborative Labs
Mentorship Programme
Cultural Exchange Residencies
Public Performances

Organisers

The Queer Muslim Project
 Verve Poetry Festival

Institutional & Funding Partners

British Council

Broadcast & Festival Network

BBC Contains
 Strong Language
 Multi-city festivals / venues

Immediate

New original work (solo/duet/ensemble)
 Mainstream showcases + public events
 Visibility assets (recordings/photos/broadcast links)
 Cross-border collaborations
 Diversified audiences

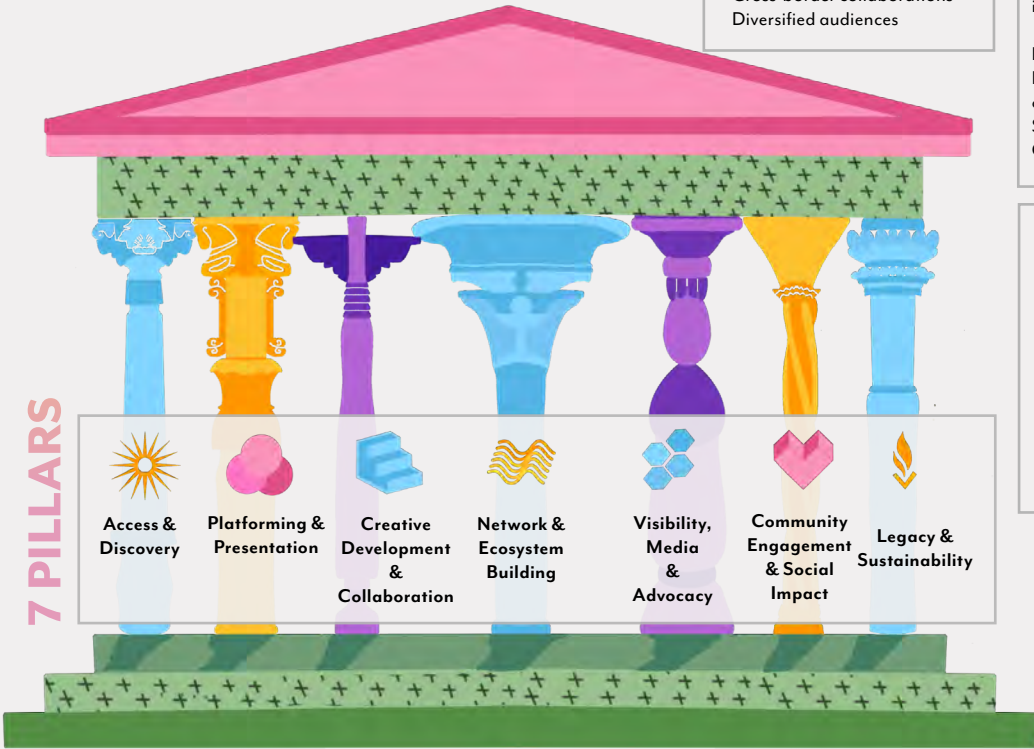
Short & Medium

Artist-level
 Stronger artistic identity + legitimacy
 Expanded professional toolkit & opportunities
 Sustained networks, invitations, commissions

Institution-level
 Deeper understanding of shared ownership
 Stronger safeguarding protocols
 Community-led design

Long-term

Queer cultural presence becomes structurally embedded in mainstream cultural ecosystems
 Sustainable queer artistic careers
 Durable institutional change
 Normalised visibility across audiences
 Replicable framework





Delivery Structure

The programme's delivery structure is designed to support depth over speed, and continuity over one-off encounters. Rather than treating workshops, residencies, performances, and publications as separate outputs, the programme understands them as interconnected moments within a longer arc of artistic development. Each phase builds on the last, allowing poets to return to ideas, relationships, and practices over time.



Virtual Collaborative Labs

Poets engage online — encouraging dialogue, knowledge exchange and co-creation of work.



Mentorship Programme

Established artists guide participants through creative growth and career development pathways.



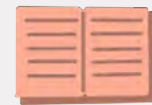
Cultural Exchange Residencies

Residencies are hosted in India and the UK, including workshops and live performances with local communities.



Public Performances

Poets are given opportunities to perform at major festivals offering valuable exposure and recognition.



Publication

Anthologies are published by VERVE Poetry Press, expanding the reach of the poets' work further.





The Seven Pillars of Artist Empowerment

Language is a Queer Thing is structured around seven interconnected pillars that together promote artistic growth, career development, public visibility, and long-term sustainability for queer poets. These pillars are grounded in what poets experienced, what partners observed, and what the programme successfully delivered across four editions.

1.

Access & Discovery

Opening pathways for underrepresented queer artists to participate



2.

Creative Development & Collaboration

Strengthening craft through ensemble writing and shared creation



3.

Platforming & Presentation

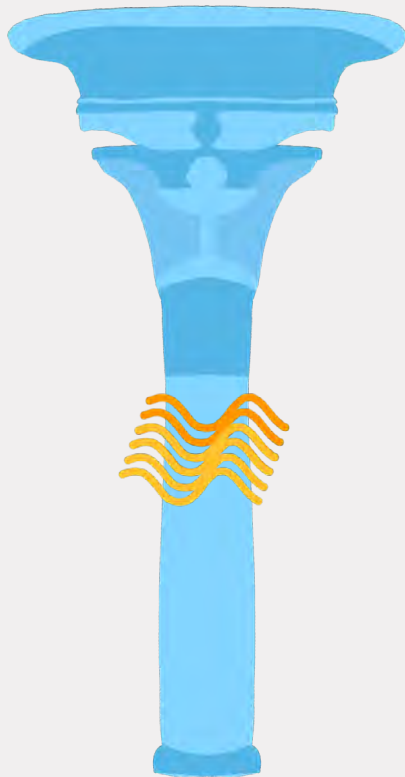
Showcasing queer poets on major public stages



4.

Network & Ecosystem Building

Building lasting relationships across arts communities



5.

Visibility, Media & Advocacy

Amplifying queer voices through media and public narratives



6.

Community Engagement & Social Impact

Creating dialogue and connection through performances



7.

Legacy & Sustainability

Ensuring long-term support, archives, and alumni continuity





Access & Discovery

Language is a Queer Thing creates intentional pathways for LGBTQIA+ poets to enter global literary and performance ecosystems. Across the cohort, poets gained access to new countries, new institutional platforms, new audiences, diverse performance traditions, and crucially a new sense of artistic legitimacy. At least one poet performed internationally for the first time; more than half accessed major mainstream events; and all poets engaged with cross-border peers and experimented with new forms and styles.

Partners from British Council, BBC and Bradford 2025 City of Culture noted that the programme helped them “widen access” and reach younger and more diverse audiences than their festivals typically attract. The inclusion of queer poets in mainstream public venues, such as the performance at St. Paul’s Institute of Communication Education in Mumbai, was described by participants as something that had been “impossible before,” revealing how access-making can shift public imagination around queer lives.

50%

of cohort gained access to new high-capacity mainstream institutions

70%

of the cohort accessed new craft traditions for the first time

50%

of the cohort received new or follow-on artistic invitations



Creative Development & Collaboration

The programme foregrounds collaborative and ensemble-based development. Poets repeatedly described it as a shift from “nervous to embodied performers,” enabled by a process of co-creation, multilingual play, and consent-based feedback. Workshops encouraged cross-cultural collaboration, where poets frequently worked across languages such as English, Arabic and Tamil — and across aesthetic traditions including duets, dramaturgy, and bilingual code-switching.

Every poet produced new work, and most discovered unfamiliar techniques through workshops, peer feedback, and ensemble processes. Many described gaining confidence, taking creative risks, and recognising themselves as artists. These collaborations now continue beyond the programme, forming a sustained, transnational queer creative network.

100%

created new original work

80%

gained new creative techniques/forms

60%

exposed to multilingual/hybrid creative experimentation



Platforming & Presentation

A central part of Language is a Queer Thing’s methodology is connecting queer poets to high-quality, high-visibility performance platforms. The programme placed queer poets on major, well-resourced stages that they had never accessed before, including British Council showcases, Jaipur Literature Festival, Literature Live Mumbai, and BBC-affiliated events. These platforms exposed poets to new and diverse audiences, strengthened their stage craft through professional workshops, and provided tangible visibility assets such as recordings, photographs and broadcast features.

For many, performing on these stages transformed their sense of legitimacy, helped them claim public artistic identities, and allowed them to present work that reflected the full depth of their creative and cultural expression.

Audience response reflected the power of this platforming. According to festival partners, venues were “back to the gills... people were hooting.” The scale of engagement ranged from BBC national radio audiences to local college auditoriums where more than 150 students attended a poetry show — many encountering queer poetry for the first time.

100%

received visibility assets (recordings/publication)

60%

performed on major mainstream stages

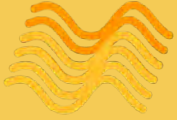
50%

performed in new audience contexts



Photo: Simon Hadley, 2022





Network & Ecosystem Building

The programme strengthens global queer arts ecosystems by building long-term relationships between poets, mentors, curators, and festivals. It actively nurtures connections across India-UK cultural landscapes, producing what partners described as “cross-continental solidarity.”

Institutions commented that meaningful shifts occurred when the programme “created the environment, rather than producing the work directly.” This shared ownership model — connector, broadcaster, and festival

— turned Language is a Queer Thing into a multi-partner ecosystem rather than a linear programme.

Mentors noticed something rare: collaborations did not end when the festival concluded. Poets continued working together across cities and countries, forming bonds that extended beyond residency or performance. Festival directors also reported that the programme helped them reach audiences they “would not normally attract,” diversifying their venues and public programming.

100%

exposed to expanded ecosystem overall

80%

built cross-border artistic relationships

70%

sustained collaboration after programme



Visibility, Media & Advocacy

Visibility is central to both The Queer Muslim Project's methodology and the design of Language is a Queer Thing. The programme ensures poets are showcased not only on stage but also across media channels — especially through national BBC broadcasts and festival publicity.

Partners reported that poets were “treated like celebrities,” reflecting strong audience engagement and growing recognition. Integration into BBC programming each year offered continuity rather than tokenistic representation, which

poets described as validating and professionally valuable. Multilingual performances also served as a form of advocacy. As poets noted, the programme demonstrated that language itself can be “queer... fluid, in motion,” challenging linguistic hierarchies and expanding public understanding of queer expression.

The programme significantly amplified queer visibility across broadcast, print, and festival ecosystems. Every poet gained

lasting visibility assets such as recordings, publications, and BBC broadcasts reaching nearly two million listeners.

These performances shifted audience perceptions, normalised queer presence in public spaces, and meaningfully extended the reach of queer narratives across India and the UK.

BBC CONTAINS STRONG LANGUAGE



Photo: Tricia Yourkevich, 2023

100%

gained national/
international
broadcast visibility

40%

described feeling
'seen' or legitimised

40%

mentioned a shift
in public discourse/
audience reaction



Community Engagement & Social Impact

The programme creates space for identity exploration, community dialogue, and social connection, which poets described as central to their personal growth. Many reported leaving the programme with “a richer, more nuanced sense of what it means to be queer,” shaped by cross-border dialogue on caste, class, faith, race, and sexuality. Several poets also described performances that sparked meaningful dialogue, shifting conversations from identity to craft, and moments where audience members felt

personally affirmed by seeing queer expression on stage.

Audience engagement formed a core part of the performances. Partners emphasised that oral poetry “has always depended on audiences,” and Language is a Queer Thing intentionally revived this reciprocity through interactive events, discussions and community performances. In conservative or heterogeneous spaces, these exchanges opened new conversations and increased public understanding of queer lives.

80%

**engaged in dialogue
across difference**

70%

**reported building
community within cohort**

60%

**engaged diverse
community audiences**

Community Engagement & Social Impact

Can poetry create lasting personal and social change?

Public Performance → Community Encounters

Poets meet new audiences across different cities

Queer presence enters mainstream public spaces.

Shared Global Challenges → Artistic Voice Deepens

Poems address caste, gender, diaspora, race, secularism, violence

Artists speak to broader social worlds, not just personal stories.



Diverse Cohort → Internal Community Emerges

Poets form bonds across caste, class, race, queerness, faith, and geography

This creates a micro queer community of mutual care and co-learning.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue → Expanded Worldviews

Conversations across India–UK–diaspora contexts reshape understanding of identity, politics, and belonging

Dialogue across difference builds solidarity and shared imagination.

Social Moments → Emotional Impact

Audience members feel affirmed, moved, or represented

Queer identities become normalised; craft becomes the focus.



Legacy & Sustainability

The legacy of Language is a Queer Thing is visible in the long-term confidence, artistic identity, and sustained networks poets carry beyond the programme. Partners described the poets as “the best ambassadors,” noting that the ripple effects of their work continue to expand into new cities, festivals, and artistic initiatives.

Programme stakeholders emphasised the importance of developing multi-funder models, scaling to Asia, and institutionalising care-based pedagogies so that Language is a Queer Thing can grow into a replicable framework.

Archival materials such as recorded performances, BBC audio, scripts, and documentation already serve as long-term cultural assets.

Many poets gained durable confidence and expanded worldviews, and all poets received lasting visibility assets — recordings, publications, anthologies — that reinforce their future professional trajectories. For several, the programme was a turning point, permanently reshaping their sense of themselves as artists and their role within queer creative ecosystems.

60%

sustained relationships with their peers post-programme

50%

described long-term shift in artistic direction

40%

mention lasting confidence transformation

Partner Priorities for Long-Term Sustainability of Language is a Queer Thing

Demonstrated Impact

100% poets gained visibility assets
60% sustained networks
50% changed long-term creative direction

*Partners say: Impact repeatability
= funding repeatability.*

Institutional Alignment

British Council & BBC affirm Language is a Queer Thing reflects:

- Inclusion
- Cross-cultural exchange
- Queer representation
- Artistic freedom

Partner quote: "Exactly the kind of work we should front and center."

Structural Gap Fulfilment

Partners agree the programme fills a missing space:

- Queer
- Multilingual
- Cross-border

Funders support unique, irreplaceable models.

Multi-Sector Partnerships

- Broadcasters
- Festivals
- Cultural institutions
- Community collectives

Diversified partnerships reduce financial risk.





When Art Became Friendship

London-based Amani Saeed and Bangalore poet Megha Harish were paired early in the programme. What began as a practical exercise — shared prompts and notes — slowly opened into something more. Drafts became conversations, stretching into late-night calls across time zones. Fears surfaced, forms were questioned, and they began to recognise the same instincts in each other's work.

“Art became friendship,” Megha said. “And friendship became art.”

Ownership loosened into trust. Rehearsals felt less like two voices and more like a single presence. When the programme ended, the connection remained: poems still travelled between them, check-ins became routine, and growth was held gently. For Amani, it was finding someone who spoke her artistic language “in a different accent.”

the world must die
for a love like ours
to live,

not an accidental death due to negligence
but tendons pressed and muzzled
between the thumb and the finger,
all its sorrys hanging like dead
birds on a banyan tree,
its literature fed to squirrels as crumbs,
scriptures and curses rafoo-ed together
all over its tongue,
gagging and choking on its own hatred.

Excerpt from 'The World Must Die II' by Rachit Sharma

The performance did not end with the final showcase; its effects carried forward into the poets' lives and practices. Beyond technical abilities, the experience of Language is a Queer Thing reshaped how poets understood their creative identity, networks, and public presence. Through collaboration, expanded craft, and new forms of visibility, they described the programme as a turning point that continues to shape their professional trajectories and personal lives long after it ends.





Poets in Motion: Artist Impact

80%
of poets

ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT
& CRAFT EXPANSION

reported significant growth in craft, including editing, performance technique, multilingual experimentation, or political articulation

40%
of poets

CONFIDENCE & IDENTITY
TRANSFORMATION

explicitly stated that the programme gave them lasting confidence or made them finally feel “legitimate” as poets

50%
of poets

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH
& CAREER DIRECTION

described a major long-term shift in their artistic direction or professional goals

100%
of poets

NEW OPPORTUNITIES
& VISIBILITY

gained durable visibility assets — recordings, anthology publications, festival footage, or BBC broadcast exposure

COLLABORATIONS &
PARTNERSHIPS BUILT

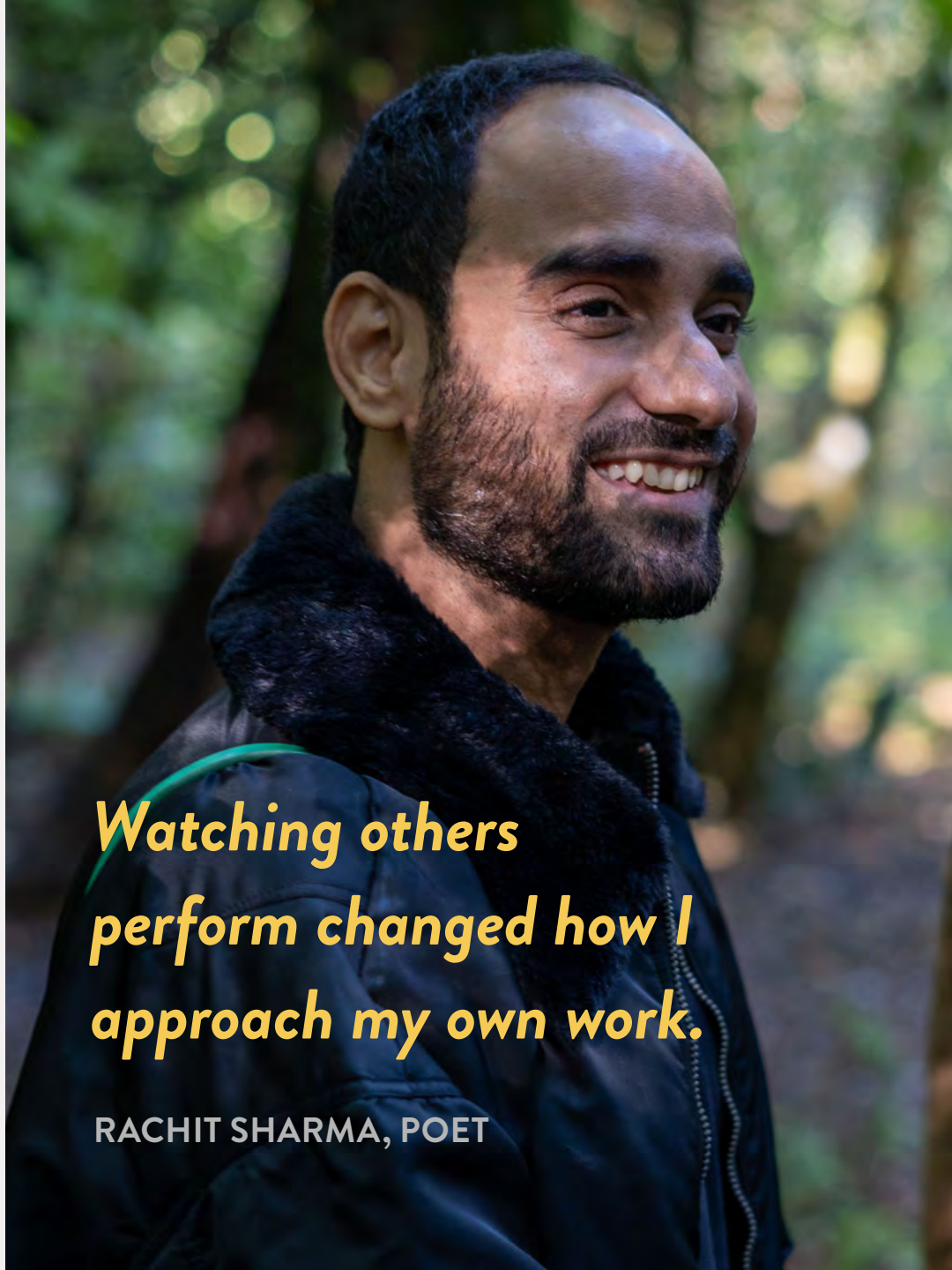
60%
of poets

continue active artistic or emotional relationships formed during the programme (India-UK and intra-cohort)

PERSONAL GROWTH &
EMOTIONAL IMPACT

70%
of poets

described the programme as emotionally transformative using words like healing, affirming, grounding, or life-changing



Watching others perform changed how I approach my own work.

RACHIT SHARMA, POET

WORLDVIEW EXPANSION & CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

40%
of poets

experienced a shift in worldview — learning about race, caste, diaspora, migration, or faith through cross-border peers

LONG-TERM LEGACY & SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS

30%
of poets

now apply programme learning in other contexts — teaching workshops, community organising, or collaborative practice

The audience laughed, cried, clapped out of turn — that was the best part. It wasn't polished; it was alive.

MEGHA HARISH, POET



PUBLIC PERFORMANCE &
AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

90%
of poets

performed for larger or
more diverse audiences
than they ever had before

MULTILINGUAL ARTISTIC
EXPRESSION

40%
of poets

wrote or performed
in multiple languages
during the programme,
strengthening creative
confidence

*I mix Tamil with English
when I perform...*

*I want people
to feel the sound of Tamil
even if they don't
understand it.*

GAYATHIRI KAMALKANTHAN, POET



Photo: Andrew Smith, 2023



When Families Begin to Listen

For Sara Haque, queerness travelled home through her books. After the programme, an anthology of her poems moved quietly among family members — read, passed on, but never discussed. At first, the silence felt like misrecognition. Over time, it became something gentler: a way of being seen without interrogation. Still, a small ache lingered, the gap between public honesty and private language.

For Aadrit Banerjee, the negotiation unfolded on stage. Performing in Kolkata meant his parents were in the audience. He prepared them softly: “You might see me differently.” Afterward, nothing was said, yet everything had shifted. Both stories trace queerness entering family life through presence — books in hand, bodies on stage — where listening begins quietly.

*The programme
made
connections
between 18
poets who
would never
have had the
chance to meet
one another.*

**MATT BEAVERS,
BRITISH COUNCIL**





Skills & Practices Built Through the Programme

COLLABORATIVE WRITING TOOLKIT

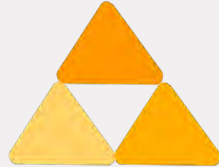


Shared docs + real-time duet/trio writing

Consent-based feedback loops

Blending diverse styles into one piece

CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION TOOLKIT



Sensitive sharing of personal histories

Code-switching as craft

Transliteration + contextualising metaphors

PUBLIC PRESENTATION & FESTIVAL TOOLKIT



Understanding festival formats + tech needs

Performance-ready solo/duet set creation

Professional communication with curators

CAREER DEVELOPMENT TOOLKIT



Building bios, media kits, reels

Pitching festivals + producers

Basics of teaching + workshop design

PERFORMANCE & STAGE CRAFT TOOLKIT



Blocking, posture,
presence

Breath +
voice control

Ensemble/duet
performance methods

CARE & SAFETY TOOLKIT



Consent-led
critique

Wellbeing +
bandwidth check-ins

Group care signals
+ reset pauses

PEER EDITING & FEEDBACK TOOLKIT



Structure-first
critique

Tone-matching for
ensemble coherence

Clear boundaries for
personal content

ALUMNI & ECOSYSTEM TOOLKIT



Maintaining cross-
cohort creative networks

Returning
as mentors

Archiving scripts
+ performances
for future use



Shifting the Field: Partner Impact

The programme shifted how partners approach queer art, audience development, safeguarding, programme design, and cultural diplomacy. It demonstrated that queer-led, multilingual, cross-border storytelling can reshape institutional practice and become a long-term cultural model. These shifts show that Language is a Queer Thing is not just impactful, it is structurally transformative.





Programme Design

Partners were open to redesigning elements of their internal processes.

Key Learnings:

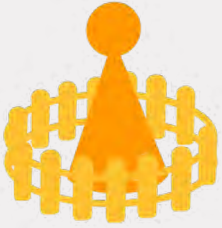
Move from top-down programming to artist-led co-creation

Prioritise queer, multilingual, intersectional voices in programme architecture

Build workflows that centre artistic autonomy and community expertise

It's so important to co-design elements of the programme with the poets as each cohort brings unique energies. Everything from pacts of trust to feedbacking scratch performances.

MANIZA KHALID,
THE QUEER MUSLIM PROJECT



Safeguarding & Emotional Care

Partners grasped the value of strengthening safety and care protocols.

Key Learnings:

Introduce clearer pre-performance briefing for identity, pronouns, and labels

Ensure emotional check-ins before and after showcases

Increase sensitivity to sexuality, diaspora, migration, and faith identities in cross-country contexts

We realized there is so much for us to improve on how we build safe spaces... it has been an incredible journey of learning.

**ROSHNI RAO,
BRITISH COUNCIL**



Audience Strategy & Understanding

Partners saw new audience behaviours and are open to recalibrating outreach.

Key Learnings:

Showcases attracted younger, more diverse, cross-cultural audiences

Audiences moved from identity-focused questions to craft appreciation

Queer–non-queer mixed audiences engaged with unexpected openness

*At the showcase,
you could see people
from Bradford
to Bengaluru
laughing together.
That's where
change begins.*

HARRY JELLY,
BRADFORD 2025
CITY OF CULTURE



Scale of Reach & Cultural Footprint

Partners recognised the programme's unique audience expansion potential.

Key Learnings:

BBC broadcasts reached 2 million+ listeners

Anthologies + recordings created a lasting digital and cultural archive

Strong uptake across social and digital platforms

It opened up that door for us... suddenly we had remarkably different, younger audiences.

**QUASAR THAKORE-PADAMSEE,
LITERATURE LIVE MUMBAI**



Institutional Values & Cultural Diplomacy

Partners understood how queer art fits into international cultural exchange.

Key Learnings:

The programme fits directly into British Council's values: inclusion, freedom of speech, cross-cultural exchange

Partners saw queer South Asian poetry as a legitimate cultural export

G20 presentation demonstrated the programme's capacity for policy-level influence

We were really interested in how this could work as an international collaboration, rather than something that was led from one place and delivered somewhere else.

**JONATHAN KENNEDY,
BRITISH COUNCIL**



Long-Term Strategy & Ecosystem Thinking

Partners now see Language is a Queer Thing as a model, not a one-off project.

Key Learnings:

Recognise the value of a cohort-based, multi-year model

View the alumni ecosystem as self-sustaining infrastructure

See the programme as a blueprint for future bilateral creative programmes

The real value started to show when we stopped thinking about it as a one-off programme and began seeing it as something that could keep evolving with the artists and the partners.

**STUART BARTHOLOMEW,
VERVE POETRY FESTIVAL**

A Packed House at 9 AM

Quasar Thakore-Padamsee describes the collaboration as transformative for both mainstream festival audiences and unexpected institutional spaces. At Literature Live Mumbai, he recalls the poets performing to a packed house with an electric energy that drew in far younger and more diverse audiences than the festival typically sees.

The biggest surprise came at St. Paul's Institute of Communication Education, a Catholic college, where 150 students attended a 9 AM session — numbers the institute had “never experienced.” Faculty who were initially unsure of “how the fathers would react” were deeply moved and later asked, “When are you coming back?”. For Quasar, these moments showed how the programme claimed space and met “the need of the hour,” shifting who engages with poetry and where it can meaningfully belong.

I just want to live a beautiful life. Expand beyond this bedroom corner of the universe. I want to be to god what waves are to the ocean. I want to trust that these feet, once lifted from the sea floor, will propel us forward. Come,

let me measure your lips with mine, four across, two high. Open your mouth, let me place a piece of halwa inside. It's not so hard, is it, to split a cardamom pod and spill the seeds into your hand. To cut through the air like a stream of mint tea into a waiting glass.

Somewhere there is a sky for us. There is a world that you and I are allowed to simply enjoy. In this world, we'll know how to love and be loved, how to surrender and be surrendered to. One night, I swear, I'll come home with nothing but good things to tell you.

Excerpt from 'Omen' by Amani Saeed



The Next Act

The next act builds on what has already taken root. Over four years, Language is a Queer Thing has evolved from a cross-border collaboration into a robust framework for developing queer artists.

Just as importantly, the programme has modelled ways of working grounded in care, experimentation, and reciprocity. In doing so, it has influenced not only individual careers, but the broader conditions in which queer art is created, hosted, and received.





Seeds for the Next Chapter

Across interviews, participants noted that while the programme has been successful, future editions could deepen impact. More in-person mentor time, clearer collaboration briefs, and protected writing periods could strengthen artistic development, while tighter logistics and intentionally designed informal spaces could build stronger cohort bonds. Partners highlighted opportunities to expand audience engagement

beyond final showcases, explore translation and employability pathways, and better prepare institutions for potential resistance. Mentors valued continuous touchpoints, live feedback during residencies, and clearer links between mentorship and career opportunities. These insights are offered not as shortcomings, but as part of a learning-led model that continues to evolve.



Queer Poetry as Cultural Policy

The programme's inclusion in India's G20 Culture Summit marked a rare moment where queer South Asian poetry entered a global policymaking space. As Roshni Rao notes, British Council pushed for Language is a Queer Thing to be highlighted "at a governmental level," recognising the programme as a living expression of their values.

A poem was also selected for the official G20 cultural anthology, with Jonathan Kennedy emphasising the importance of placing this work "front and center." Together, these actions positioned queer storytelling as a form of cultural advocacy.



Where the Work is Headed

The next phase of Language is a Queer Thing focuses on deepening its seven pillars while expanding the programme's ecosystem footprint.

GLOBAL SOUTH-LED



Continue UK-India association and expand to a wider Global South network

MULTI-WEEK RESIDENCY



Allow time for reflection, editing, ensemble building and deep community work

CROSS-GENRE PRACTICE



Integrate theatre, drag, music, rhythm, movement, dramaturgy and indigenous oral traditions

FESTIVAL STANDARDS



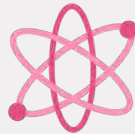
Shift industry practice so that festivals learn from the programme's methodology, not just host its output

DIGITAL REACH



Create livestreams, recorded performances, digital archives and short spoken word films

SUSTAINABILITY



Build multi-city & long-term institutional partnerships for residencies, visibility, community access and artist support

ALUMNI PATHWAYS



Build a long-term alumni network supporting them as co-curators, facilitators, jurors and community convenors

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Collaborations with queer groups, cultural organisations, colleges, and community spaces





Partnership Pathways

The programme has already established a working ecosystem across India and the UK, connecting cultural institutions, broadcasters, festivals, venues, and community spaces. The next phase clarifies partnership pathways — defining the roles institutions can play in sustaining artist careers and mainstream platforming.



Mainstream cultural stages and festivals

that can commission, programme and repeatedly platform queer work as part of core sessions (not special initiatives)



Broadcasters & media platforms

that convert performance into durable visibility assets and extend reach to audiences beyond the room



Publishers and literary platforms

that support textual afterlives such as anthologies, commissioning, editorial development, and career credibility



Academic institutions

as hosts for public culture (audiences, venues, dialogue)



Funders and institutional supporters

who underwrite the connective tissue: multi-year runway, safeguarding, access, documentation, and the behind-the-scenes labour that makes high-visibility work possible



Community and grassroots spaces

that keep the work porous, accountable and locally rooted



What Long-Term Support Makes Possible

For artists, the most visible outcomes remain new work, stronger craft, expanded networks, and the legitimacy that comes from being platformed well in mainstream contexts — alongside the practical tools that support long-term practice. For institutions, the impact is equally consequential: partners report shifts in audience composition, programming confidence, safeguarding practice, and the ability to host queer work with greater depth and accountability.

Over time, this produces a broader ecosystem outcome: **queer cultural presence becomes less**

episodic and more structurally embedded through repeat platforms, cumulative archives, and institutional practices that normalise queer work across audiences.

This is the long arc the evaluation points toward: not just successful editions, but **durable conditions in which queer artists can build sustainable careers and be seen in the mainstream without losing ownership of their stories.**

What endures is the echo — what travels after the curtain falls and minds are moved by verse. Queer stories carry forward into new rooms, new audiences, across borders and into bookshelves, screens, parades, and conversations. In a world increasingly shaped by narratives of scarcity and division, the spoken word quietly seeds more abundant futures.

The Queer Muslim Project is an award-winning cultural platform and Asia's leading digital network for queer and diverse voices. It uses art, culture, and media to build the power and visibility of underrepresented LGBTQIA+ storytellers across the region, enabling them to shape their own narratives.



@thequeermuslimproject



tqmp.in

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FOUR YEARS
EIGHTEEN POETS
ONE SHARED LANGUAGE





**THE QUEER
MUSLIM PROJECT**



**VERVE
POETRY
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