

Review

Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics

Naisargi N. Dave. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012. 280pp.

Rahul Rao^{*}

The queer movement in India has been adept at documenting itself. A succession of anthologies compiled by leading voices from within the movement has made available to a wider reading public the lives and longings of many of its diverse participants (Sukthankar 1999; Bhattacharyya and Bose 2005; Narrain and Bhan 2006; Narrain and Gupta 2011). Naisargi Dave's book on queer activism in India offers something new and valuable. A book-length account of the queer political landscape with a focus on lesbian activism, this study is distinctive both for its longer temporal view and for the productively ambivalent positionality of its author. Based in Toronto where she teaches anthropology, Dave presents herself in her writing as both insider and outsider, as both participant in the groups and movements she writes about and critical observer of their everyday activity; sometimes she is neither, inhabiting the liminal position of the diasporic Indian. "Insiders" will read with amusement of her self-avowedly clumsy discovery that "lesbian sexual encounters were there to be had, often in the most

* **Rahul Rao** is lecturer in politics at SOAS, University of London. He has a law degree from the National Law School of India University, and a doctorate in international relations from the University of Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He is the author of *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2010). His research interests encompass international normative theory, queer and postcolonial theory, and the international relations of South Asia. He is currently working on a book on queer postcolonial temporality.

unexpected of places” (50), but will also be enlightened by this nuanced cultural history of their own subjectivities. “Outsiders” will find in this book a model of an intimate ethnography by someone who does not pretend to belong.

Dave understands activism as entailing three affective exercises: “the problematization of social norms, the invention of alternatives to those norms, and the creative practice of these newly invented possibilities” (3). Inherent in the opening up of new possibilities through normative invention is the shutting down of old ones. Much of the book can be read as an illustration of this dynamic, as Dave chronicles the shifting landscape of lesbian organizing in India and the constant reinvention of lesbian subjectivity. Her account opens with a chapter on Sakhi, the group founded in New Delhi by pioneering lesbian activist Gita Thadani, which spent its early years responding to letters written by women seeking epistolary respite from lives of compulsory heterosexuality. Dave describes how anxieties over proper lesbian subjectivity began to emerge as this community of letter writers made its first tentative moves towards face-to-face encounter. As she explains, “[i]n an imagined world created through the circulation of letters, time and space are not valuable possessions to be guarded; they are only dreams that inspire efforts to seize. It was only the creation of ‘real’ communities out of these ambitions that enabled lesbian women to begin to experience their space and time as tentatively shared, and scarce, resources that could be ‘taken up’ or ‘wasted’ at all” (57). Disagreements over whether to put newly created lesbian space to social or political use, reflecting differences in ability to engage in political dialogue, make apparent the centrality of class in constituting this emerging lesbian community. Dave also draws attention to the dynamics of reflective visuality in this process. Noting that in the faceless and imagined world of letter writing, the ability to see other lesbian women meant little for the process of identity constitution, she argues that face-to-face encounter brought a desire for similitude—a desire to see women like oneself—and a discomfort with difference (58–9).

Dave’s narrative is punctuated by a number of moments in which disagreement over the terms of proper lesbian subjectivity occasions the creation of new lesbian and queer spaces. For example, finding Sakhi to have become too much the province of foreign and NRI (Non-Resident Indian) women, some of its members split off to form Sangini out of a felt need for a more authentically Indian sexual subjectivity for women who craved a safe space of anonymity and social exploration rather than a Westernized

politics of identity (71). Sangini began by running a help line for women who desired the company of other women, resolutely eschewing the signifier “lesbian” and representing its constituency as threatened and vulnerable rather than as insurgent and political. Others would quickly call this self-presentation into question. The Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI) founded in response to the Hindu Right’s protests against the film *Fire* in 1999, viewing groups like Sangini as politically quiescent, championed a politics of lesbian public visibility and explicitly claimed rights as lesbians in the public sphere (74). Two years later, PRISM would share this public and political orientation, but offered a radical critique of identity politics as obscuring class, caste, religious and other differences under the sign “lesbian,” and called instead for attention to intersectionality and a politics of coalition amongst disadvantaged groups (89–96). Central to the arguments driving these successive shifts is a premise that Dave repeatedly makes explicit, according to which the market value of different forms of activism is judged in terms of their ability to penetrate further and larger realms of influence (29, 139).

In narrating each of these shifts, Dave is scrupulous in her attention to the investments of antagonistic participants. She is unafraid to criticize; but her critique is always leavened by an empathy with all of her subjects, born of a realization that the contrasting models of lesbian subjectivity on offer all came with possibilities and limits. Thus, she is critical of Sangini’s self-representation as apolitical and vulnerable, describing the many ways in which the presentation of an external face deemed to be publically acceptable had censoring effects on the internal life of the group (88). But she readily acknowledges that Sangini’s support services were frequently a lifeline for women trapped in lives of violence and desperate for avenues of pleasure (78–9). And while she is cognizant of the liberating potentials of PRISM’s anti-identity politics, she records the dissatisfaction of those of its members who bemoaned the affective loss inherent in a demotion of identity from narrating a truth of the self to the status of a strategic tool meant for occasional use (96).

In contrast to some critiques of gender and sexuality activism that mourn the passing of old sex/gender orders under the colonizing sign of what has variously been described as the “global gay” (Altman 1997) and the “Gay International” (Massad 2002), Dave is not nostalgic about this passing. In part this comes out of a general sense that new possibilities are always premised on closures. But it also comes from her methodological inclination to take seriously the judgments of her research subjects about

the very questions she is investigating. In remarkable excerpts from her interviews with women about the moments and processes by which they felt interpellated as “lesbian,” she describes how these women narrate and experience their subjection to norms as freedom. Dave describes how a woman named Veronica characterized her life as one of freedom in conversations with her before becoming a lesbian, but retrospectively reframed this account after “coming out” to insist that she had become newly free as a result of this speech act. Dave makes sense of this by invoking Judith Butler’s observation that we tend to defend the normative orders to which we are subjected (whether heterosexual or lesbian) in order to reconcile ourselves to the loss of possibility that we psychically experience when subjected to particular ways of being (68–70). A less empathetic writer might have deployed this insight to explain the troubling contradictions in Veronica’s narrative as a form of false consciousness; to her credit, Dave is concerned to unpack, understand and explain, withholding the rush to judgment.

Perhaps inescapable in a book on this subject is the eternal bogey of cultural authenticity that has long bedeviled queer activism in India: Is lesbianism Indian? Dave draws attention early in the book to the range of women outside elite, middle-class, urban contexts who were writing letters to Sakhi as “lesbians,” apparently untroubled by the foreign provenance of the term (41). Such concerns seem to have been more salient for elite activists, partly as a consequence of their vexed relations with the broader women’s movement in India. Dave describes how as women’s movement activists became more professionalized and better compensated with the advent of economic liberalization and privatization in the 1990s, the objects of their intervention came to be constructed as increasingly poor and “grassroots,” as if to distract from and compensate for the elitism of the activists themselves (99, 123). One effect of these moves was a distancing on the part of mainstream feminists (particularly those affiliated with political parties) from lesbian politics, which tended to be characterized as bourgeois, elitist and Western. As lesbian groups continue to rely on the women’s movement for organizational scale and legitimacy, they have had to comply with the politics of cultural authenticity—an imperative that has manifested itself in a variety of ways including the occasional exclusion of foreigners, an investment in archival strategies of legitimation, etc. Perhaps the most iconic photograph of the protests and counter-protests that attended the release of *Fire* in 1998–99, was one depicting a woman carrying a placard that read simply “Indian and lesbian.” Dave explains that this slogan functioned as a protest against both

the right-wing claim that lesbianism was foreign, and the liberal left preference for defending the film on grounds of freedom of expression rather than by affirming the existence and belonging of lesbians in India (152). Rather than ceding “India” to the Hindu Right, the sign sought to reclaim and transform the terrain of the nation in ways that rendered it inclusive of lesbians.

Critics of the movement have faulted this investment in national belonging. Echoing critiques of homonormativity in the West, Ashley Tellis (2012: 156) has remarked of sexual minorities: “We are situated lowest in the pecking order and have the least to lose. Instead of a place at the table, we need to pull the tablecloth to the floor and disrupt the bloody pleasures of the neoliberal dinner.” Marx and Engels’s claim that “the working men have no country” is often cited as evidence of the inherent internationalism of subaltern consciousness that is alienated from the bourgeois nation. Yet the writers of *The Communist Manifesto* urge in the same paragraph that “the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation” (Marx and Engels 2004: 29)—in effect, outlining a strategic case for the capture and utilization of the instrumentality of the nation in wider struggles for social justice. Virginia Woolf (1998: 234) makes a very different move with words that sound misleadingly similar: “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.” But this makes it urgent to ask a different question: Can lesbians afford not to have a country? In her work on the public culture of South Asian queer diasporas, Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 14) notes the persistence of the tropes, *not* of “coming out” or leaving home, but of “staying put” and remaking the space of home from within. Interestingly, Dave says exactly the opposite, noting the salience of leaving home in her subjects’ accounts of lesbian interpellation (24). In part this discrepancy may be a function of the very differently situated demographics that Dave and Gopinath are studying. But whatever the reasons for this difference, it seems plausible to suggest that for those most marginalized, the price of leaving the space of home/nation—whether literally through migration, or figuratively by casting oneself outside the relational space of the nation even while remaining within its absolute space and vulnerable to its violence—may be too high to pay, leaving no choice but a strategy of imaginative and subversive reworking from within: an insistence, in other words, on being “Indian and lesbian.”

In her final chapter, Dave offers an account of lesbian and queer groups' engagement with the law, paying particular attention to the campaign for the decriminalization of sodomy, as well as a fraught and ongoing debate over gender neutrality in rape law. In both these realms, Dave reads attitudes towards legal reform as a function of the vulnerability felt by particular groups vis-à-vis particular laws at any given time (171). When lesbian activists first heard of Naz Foundation's proposed constitutional challenge, they were outraged that a petition ostensibly being filed on their behalf had not been the product of consultation within "the community." Moreover the petition's emphasis on a right to privacy seemed to link sexual pleasure with access to private property, disenfranchising women and non-elite men. In addition, the phallogocentric sodomy law simply was not a priority for lesbian groups for whom issues like compulsory marriage were far more pressing. The polarizing presence of Ashok Row Kavi, founding figure of the gay rights movement but long perceived as anti-Muslim and "communal" by many, did little to assuage these tensions. What emerges in this chapter, necessarily unfinished not least because of the uncertainty surrounding the Supreme Court's pending decision on the constitutionality of the anti-sodomy law, is a portrait of a "community" rent by differences of religion, class, and gender, but struggling to work across these lines—a microcosm, if you like, of the same fissures that mark the abstraction we call India. This surely is the ultimate, if troubling, proof of a movement that is quintessentially Indian.

REFERENCES

- Altman, Dennis. (1997). Global Gaze/Global Gays. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3(4), 417–36.
- Bhattacharyya, Subhabrata and Bose, Brinda (eds). (2005). *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Gopinath, Gayatri. (2005). *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press).
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich (2004 [1848]). *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin).
- Massad, Joseph A. (2002). Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World. *Public Culture* 14(2), 361–85.

- Narrain, Arvind and Bhan, Gautam (eds). (2006). *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press).
- Narrain, Arvind and Gupta, Alok (eds). (2011). *Law Like Love: Queer Perspectives on Law* (New Delhi: Yoda Press).
- Sukthankar, Ashwini (ed). (1999). *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing From India* (New Delhi: Penguin).
- Tellis, Ashley. (2012). Disrupting the Dinner Table: Re-thinking the 'Queer Movement' in Contemporary India. *Jindal Global Law Review* 4(1), 142–56.
- Woolf, Virginia. (1998 [1938]). *Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks).