

India: No going back

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India's first gay memoir shows how guarded gay people have to be, and how terribly isolated this makes them.

(This is a review from our December 2015 print quarterly, 'The Marriage Issue: Loves, Laws, Lusts'. See more from the issue [here](#).)

The book release of Siddharth Dube's memoir *No One Else: A personal history of outlawed love and sex* in New Delhi was most opportunely timed. It was at the crossways of three significant events related to issues central to the plot of Dube's personal narrative. Many of us were celebrating Pride month in New Delhi, marching the streets with courage and colours on 29 November 2015, followed swiftly by World AIDS Day, while also simultaneously organising in protest of the two-year anniversary of the 2013 Supreme Court judgment that upheld Section 377, the draconian colonial law that criminalises sexual activities that are "against the order of nature". Chronologically, the chapters draw a parallel to the sequence of events that (will) go into the making of a public history of outlawed love and sex in India.

I found myself at the book launch in a conference hall near the Lodhi Gardens, coincidentally located near where Siddharth Dube found "one of the greatest loves" of his life. It was here that one morning he accidentally ran into Tandavan with whom he went on to spend many years of his life, discovering love, desire and other hard truths. It was also here, that one of his greatest fears of "being discovered" walked up to him in the guise of the police invoking Section 377:

My tensions would cross into fear whenever Tandavan and I were being intimate with each other - whether it was kissing, having sex, or just cuddling together. I was aware that we were violating India's criminal laws - even if it was in the privacy of our flat - and we could be arrested and imprisoned as a consequence.

As we sat there, listening to Dube reading choice extracts from the book, talking about his college days at St Stephens that felt to him "entirely heterosexual, a universe of men and women attracted only to the opposite sex", and his affectionate friendship with his first female friends, Rosemary and Alka, my partner whispered to me that it sounded as if nothing had changed in Stephens in the two decades between their times spent there, as if only the world was moving forward but somehow all our lives had remained standing, how these stories of loves and lives, 'the personal history' of each of us still stood the same. In the same way, Dube sees himself in the intimately political testimonies published in a 1991 report by the AIDS Bhedbhav Vidrohi Andolan (ABVA) entitled *Less than Gay: A Citizen's Report*, and in the accomplished works and difficult lives of Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Federico Garcia Lorca, Virginia Woolf and James Baldwin. 'No one else' is actually all of us.

The memoir is an intimate history that is courageous as well as candid, and it left me wondering if there is any other way to talk about something that fills you with pride and shame at the same time? When asked what made him write about his personal and public life so openly, Dube said, that having lived a life of fear, one starts losing patience and begins to nurse a quiet kind of anger. That,

by the time he entered his fifties, he realised that silence is never worth anything.

The “no one else” in the title suggests loneliness and hopelessness of growing up in a country that not only constantly reminds you that you are a criminal, but also that you don’t exist. And if you do, you exist as a “miniscule minority”, which does not matter and is not worth the trouble. This is a feeling shared not just by LGBT persons but also by sex workers and the millions who are forced to be outcasts by virtue of a draconian law. For Dube, “no one else” began to find another meaning as he began writing the book. No one else but me - me, as in the all of us - Dominic D’Souza, Siddharth Gautam, Selvi, each of whom find space in the memoir, and various other activists and individuals, who not only stand up for themselves and others, but also fight back and keep passing the flame forward. A sense of self-reliance, faith in oneself, the sentiment resounded by a sex worker he met in Sangli, “Anything anyone can do, I can do better!”

“I was in turmoil. Had I made a mistake? Had I imagined the penis? A woman with a penis! It couldn’t be!”

HarperCollins has marketed the book as India’s first gay memoir and it reminds one of photographer Sunil Gupta’s *Wish You Were Here: Memories of a gay life*. While Gupta’s monograph tells tales through photographs, exploring race, gender and sexuality through related issues of access, place and identity, Dube sketches out a public history of homosexuality, of women sex workers, of injustice and brutality. Gupta’s book is autobiographical in that it tells his story through others, documenting memorable moments, capturing cityscapes and personal portraits and creating what looks like a family album, complete with touristy photographs. Gupta’s work, like Dube’s, is shadowed with AIDS, showing how gay lives are constantly preoccupied with fears that are familiar and often fatal. Both the books, through their different narratives and the texture of their stories go on to show how the public is private and the personal is political.

Dube’s book also pays homage to a non-funded non-party organisation that began the fight against discrimination by spelling out the problems with Section 377 and asked for its repeal at a time when to even imagine a world that free and equal was an act of bravery. This movement to repeal the homophobic law was initiated with AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan with their historic publication *Less than Gay: A Citizen’s Report* in 1991. ABVA got involved in AIDS activism when government hospitals forcibly started testing sex workers for HIV, often leading to incarceration, brutality, a refusal to treat or rehabilitate sex workers who tested positive. In the book, Dube writes about his close friend Siddharth Gautam, a pioneer gay activist who influenced Dube’s views on why all forms of oppression and activism should be informed by alliances.

Dube is a journalist-activist and a prominent commentator on poverty, public health and development. He was born in Calcutta in 1961, into a family of liberal elites, with parents who were progressive and a circle that was not too hesitant to talk about sex and sexuality in the open. One of his earliest childhood memories is of a party in the opulence of the colonial-era Grand Hotel, where a woman wearing a shimmering bikini and a veil was dancing haughtily, entertaining men and women alike, a flirtatious and alluring figure. But something happens that leaves him completely confused at the end of the striptease: “I was in turmoil. Had I made a mistake? Had I imagined the penis? A woman with a penis! It couldn’t be!”

This first encounter broadens his imagination to the idea that gender can exist beyond its binaries and a later acceptance of his feminine characteristics as a gender-expansive person. The early chapters trace his journey from La Martiniere school where he realises that he is not like the other boys - a discovery that many non-heterosexual children make - of gender-fluidity before non-normative sexuality. The detailed description of his dreadful days at Doon school where a particular sort of Victorian British public schooling morality was enforced - hierarchical and fear-based -

depicts how sexually violent childhood can be and how truthfully it all had to be written. This was followed by a short stay at St Stephens, before he moved to the US to study at Tufts, which opened up a whole new world for him. As the chapters navigate from childhood to adolescence, Dube evolves from a young man consciously clad in a white kurta-pajama visiting a gay bar for the first time in Minneapolis to a conscious young journalist-activist discovering cruising spots in Nehru Park and finding solidarity with others on the fringes.

“Virtually every youngish Indian male, barring those with westernized backgrounds like us - who were burdened with a Victorian-era paranoia about homosexuality - was up for sex with other men.”

At a poetry-reading group, my friend, activist and academic Ashley Tellis commented that homophobia (guilt and shame) was an upper-class syndrome that mostly found expression among the English-speaking elite, whereas the non-elite Indian men “treated their desires with astonishing naturalness”. Dube writes about a similar conversation on class difference:

Fear and anxiety had dominated his young adult life, where even envisaging homosexual acts came with the dread of AIDS and a consciousness of criminality. One evening Dube nervously swallowed all trepidation like one large peg of whiskey, and in that daze, had his first sexual encounter with a stranger in an abandoned building in the streets of Bombay. His tryst signified that this aspect of their lives was too dirty for the sanctity of homes, and could only be enacted in the shadows, anonymously, like thefts. While the streets had always been an extension of private life, this was lost to surveillance and policing. The idea of sexual privacy, so deeply ingrained in public thought, forbids any signs of sexuality in open spaces and yet here were men exchanging pleasure like secret handshakes on street corners.

The book cover shows a very young Siddharth. But this is not just for nostalgia. It is a story of this “girly-boy” who is and has always been him. He writes about the “twin burdens” of being a feminine boy and of being gay, without any scruples.

A major part of this book, and it seems, that of his life, was fuelled by this sense of honesty, this need to come clean and tell his father the truth about himself, to reveal who he really was. The ‘truthfulness’ about sex and other personal stories comes from the fact that it is precisely because there is silence around sex that there is so much discrimination in its name. The crux of the book can be summed up in the crucial moment when he comes out to his father. “Dad, you have to treat me with respect. I’ve never lied to you, so don’t I deserve your respect?”

In the 1980s, while AIDS became another excuse to further demonise gay men worldwide, something different began to happen in India. One of the country’s first HIV positive case was detected in 1989 when Dominic D’Souza, a resident of Goa, was found infected when he donated blood at a hospital. Not knowing how to handle this, the instinctive reaction of the state authorities was to incarcerate him. He was quarantined for 64 days into a room in what was a former TB sanatorium. However, his persecution was a result of ignorance and panic over the disease and his sexuality was not yet a topic of speculation.

Later, when six sex workers tested HIV positive, the real face of human-rights abuse became clear. The difference in the government’s response to D’Souza and of these sex workers was conspicuous. It showed how, unlike in the West, AIDS was not a ‘gay plague’ but associated with women (and not male or transgender) sex workers. It began to be associated with sex and affected only the already vulnerable sex workers who began to be incarcerated for unlimited periods of times.

The major part of the book talks about the spread of terror and AIDS, as Dube began to realise how

the fight to legalise prostitution is closely related to the fight to decriminalise homosexuality and that all oppression is related. He saw himself as a kindred soul.

In a landmark judgment in 2009, the Delhi High Court overturned the 150-year-old Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code saying it not only violates human rights, but also goes against the liberal values of India's Constitution, and the spirit of our times. The verdict came on a public interest litigation plea by Delhi-based NGO Naz Foundation arguing that the Section 377 provision, criminalising sexual acts between consenting adults in private, violated Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21 of the Constitution.

It began to look like the conversation was moving forward. Four years later however, in December 2013, we woke up to news of the Supreme Court's disappointing move to set aside this decision, recriminalising homosexuality, finding "no constitutional infirmity" in the law. The apex court argued that the courts could not decriminalise homosexuality under the existing laws, thereby shifting the onus onto the Parliament. The Supreme Court bench of justices G S Singhvi and S J Mukhopadhyaya stated that the Delhi High Court had "overlooked that only a 'miniscule' fraction of the country's population constitutes lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgenders and that in the last more than 150 years less than 200 persons have been prosecuted for committing offence under Section 377 of the IPC." Once again, our existence was dismissed and we were sentenced to living lives as unequal citizens. Yet another generation was to be instilled with the fear that their desires were immoral and criminal.

If India's old wrongs were not being righted, it was because our new rulers had themselves elevated these bad laws to the status of sacred cows, treating them as time-honoured Indian values rather than deplorable foreign imports.

Although one of the main agendas of the LGBT movement has been the annulment of this law, Section 377 is not concerned with just homosexual acts but all sex other than penile-vaginal. It not only criminalises various sexual minorities and curtails personal freedoms but also asserts that consent is not important by refusing to recognise these relationships and acts between consenting adults. A direct legacy of the colonial times "used solely to criminalize already marginalized people", such as the Anti-Trafficking Law and the Anti-Begging Law, it is not about how many have been persecuted because of the law, but how many face abuse in the name of 377.

ABVA viewed homosexuality (and heterosexuality) as a political issue and asked political parties to take a clear and unambiguous stand on the issue. It now seems that our demands are still the same - it is a political issue regarding which political parties have taken stands in the past and the present. For example, the Congress Party and the Aam Aadmi Party extended support to decriminalise homosexuality before the general elections of 2014. More recently, India's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, of the current rightwing government, which has an openly anti-gay policy, made remarks in favour of gay rights. Dube's words ring truer in the current socio-political weather: "If India's old wrongs were not being righted, it was because our new rulers had themselves elevated these bad laws to the status of sacred cows, treating them as time-honoured Indian values rather than deplorable foreign imports."

Things have changed interestingly since the Supreme Court judgment, with more voices coming together against 377. School and college students are engaging in protests and setting up reading groups and gender cells. As a friend and fellow-activist remarked "This judgment might just be the best thing that has happened to the queer movement in India." Dube's book sketches out a history - personal and public - of a people that are chanting, "*Konsa kanoon sabse battarr? Teen sau sattatar, teen sau sattatar. Which is the worst law of them all? 377, 377*" at protests and parades. They assert the idea that if this age speaks the language of growth and development, we should be ready to walk

the talk and be progressive. Consensual sex and consensual sex-work by consenting adults needs to be decriminalised.

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