

Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (editors)

## Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India

New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005, 288 pp.  
ISBN: 81-902272-2-X (paper) Rs 295 / US\$24.95

reviewed by [Niladri Chatterjee](#)

1. It started in 1977 with the publication of a book by a woman who is better known as a mathematician. Shakuntala Devi's *The World of Homosexuals* can be said to have inaugurated social-reformist homophilic Indian writing in English. She concluded her book by calling for not only the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India, but also its 'full and complete acceptance' by the heterosexual population so that the Indian homosexual may lead a dignified and secure life.<sup>[1]</sup> Then for a long time nothing. A magazine article here, an interview with a homosexual there, but no serious in-depth engagement with this invisible Indian minority. In the 1990s, however, the tide began to turn. In 1991 came Arvind Kala's *The Invisible Minority*, a book which has since been so discredited because of its sensational style and a cynical prurience, that it doesn't find any mention in the otherwise comprehensive survey of Indian writing on homosexuality that is Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. Another period of silence followed until the publication of Giti Thadani's *Sakhiani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (New York: Cassell, 1996). Then came *araana: Gay Writing from India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999), edited by Hoshang Merchant, and that same year *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian writing from India*, edited by Ashwini Sukthankar.
2. The dam seems to have burst now. These days the Indian queer's bookshelf is fast filling up with titles such as the volumes edited or authored by Ruth Vanita,<sup>[2]</sup> novels set in India in which the central character or one or more of the main characters is queer, magazines that regularly run cover stories on homosexuality and DVDs of Indian films where the homosexual has an increasingly positive rather than comic, ergo negative, presence. As of 9 March 2005 eunuchs can type 'E' to denote their gender while filling a form for an Indian passport. Mainstream Indian cinema has managed to produce a film like *Rules: Love ka Superhit Formula* where two men kiss each other on the lips to mark their status as each other's lover. A TV programme opinion poll recently had 95 per cent of viewers supporting a call for the decriminalisation of homosexuality.<sup>[3]</sup> It is in this scenario of an ever-growing public acceptance of sexual minorities that Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan have produced a volume of theorisings, readings and personal narratives under the title *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005). Not since Vanita and Kidwai's 2000 book has there been such a close-reading and such a sustained scholarly attempt at representing the Indian queer.
3. The book is divided into three sections. The first, and arguably the most pleasurable section in the book, attempts at theorising the Indian queer by positing conceptual approaches to sexual politics in the subcontinent. Pertinent rhetorical questions are posed against the heteronormative. The questioning starts in the introduction itself with Narrain and Bhan wondering 'why the "tag" of Western (however wrongly applied) is construed as an invalidation of passionately felt sexual desires and strongly defended identities, *only* when it comes to sexuality?' (p. 16). The question has rich consequences for the fast-congealing discipline of post-colonial queer studies—a discipline that has been the subject of at least two books already, albeit both published in the U.S.<sup>[4]</sup> The term 'post-colonial' is present either overtly or covertly in several essays. Arvind Narrain and Vinay Chandran examine the pathologisation of homosexuality and expose the

subcutaneous homophobia in an Indian psychiatrist's eagerness to treat 'ego-dystonic homosexuality' (the condition where a homosexual wants to change his orientation to heterosexual) and sees this has a legacy of western medicine's 'colonial project of pacification and control of the Indian subject' (p. 55). Akshay Khanna tries to 'name "sexuality"...as an effect of our post-colonial condition, where the options we have, to understand and address our realities[,] are regulated by our colonial histories and our imperialist presents' (p. 91).

4. Nivedita Menon asks in her essay, 'If "normal" behaviour were so natural, [why would it] require such a vast network of controls to keep it in place?...Are there laws forcing people to eat or sleep?' (p. 37). In possibly the best essay in the book, Muraleedharan T, reads Malayalam cinema against the heteronormative grain and constructs a sophisticated queer reading of male friendships in Malayalam films much like Gayatri Gopinath has done with commercial cinema produced in Mumbai.<sup>[5]</sup> The rest of the volume documents queer activism, queer self-knowledge, queer expression. But what prevents the other two sections from becoming a mere collection of essays telling essentially the same tale but only setting them in different parts in India, is the clear-sighted identification of the several fissures that run through the Indian queer movement. Hyphenated queer identities emerge. Elavarthi Manohar is queer and leftist, Pawan Dhall is queer and environmentalist, Alok Gupta is queer, city-dwelling, English-speaking and 'straight-acting,' whereas Anis Rai Chowdhury is queer and a resident of a small town in Bengal. Just as Bina Fernandez and Gomathy N.B. tell us that among the lesbians they surveyed 66 per cent did not practice their religion because their religion came across as homophobic, we have Mario D'Penha constructing himself as 'gay and Catholic' and Ali Potia trying to reconcile his sexuality with Islam. Just as Chayanika Shah believes in the need to use the word 'lesbian' to describe herself, Deepa V.N. begins her essay by citing a case of two women who wish to live with each other but deny a romantic relationship, like Hasina Bano and Fatima in Maya Sharma's moving narrative. If Famila says in Ashwini Sukthankar's essay that many eunuchs want to be recognised as a third gender category, there is Revathi who writes 'a hijra's life story' (meaning it to be an autobiography) and yet happily proclaims 'I have got a passport as a woman' (p. 230).
5. I cannot overestimate the importance of a book such as this. It does an exemplary job of including a rich polyphony of queer voices while allowing for internal contradictions. But if there is one motive that holds this collection together it is the united resistance to 'compulsory heterosexuality'—a phrase that is so deeply associated with Adrienne Rich and so often used in the book that I was surprised to find not a single mention of her.<sup>[6]</sup> Her absence is particularly striking because queer theorists such as Foucault, Butler, Sedgwick, and Halperin are referenced by several contributors. And just out of sight are other theorists such as Althusser, whose concept of interpellation seemed to suggest itself in Akshay Khanna's essay.
6. Living in Calcutta, I must note the calm certainty with which queer culture is slowly coming into its own in and around the city. There are little magazines such as *Swikriti* [Recognition] and *Swakanthe* [In her own voice] that are bi-lingual and carry queer articles, stories and poems in both English and Bengali. Also in production is another volume of essays in English on the subject of sexual minorities to be soon published in Calcutta. A Bengali novel called *Chander Opor Chand* [Moon on Moon] dealing with lesbianism was published recently and more and more Indian artists such as Manoj Bhramar are representing the homoerotic in their work. The sharp increase in queer visibility that one notices in India, of which *Because I Have a Voice* is a symptom, can only lead to greater acceptance of alternate sexualities and the inevitable reading down of the homophobic, Victorian Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. It is then that Narrain, Bhan, Sukthankar, Row Kavi and countless others would begin to consolidate their achievement.

## Endnotes

[1] Shakuntala Devi, *The World of Homosexuals*, Delhi: Vikas, 1977, p. 155.

[2] Vanita's numerous works include *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996; and *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. She has also edited works including *Queering India*, New York: Routledge, 2002; and recently translated Pandey Bechan Sharma ('Ugra'), *Chocolate and Other Stories of Male-Male Desire*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[3] On 16 April 2005, Zoom television's chat show *Just Pooja* asked viewers to text 'Yes' or 'No' to the question

'Should homosexuality be decriminalised in India?' On 23 April 2005, the results showed 95 per cent support for decriminalisation. A similar poll conducted earlier by the national daily The Times of India had 54 per cent of the readers texting against homosexuality remaining a punishable offence under India law (3 April 2005). Whereas 58 per cent of the readers of another national daily, the *Hindustan Times*, supported the legalisation of homosexuality (5 April 2005). The mass-circulation Calcutta daily the *Telegraph* had 81 per cent of its readers wanting homosexuality to be legalised (5 February 2006).

[4] John. C. Hawley (ed.), *Post-colonial Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, New York: SUNY Press, 2001; and Peter Drucker (ed), *Different Rainbows*, London: Millivres Ltd., 2000.

[5] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005.

[6] Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory heterosexuality lesbian existence,' in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(4) (1980):631-60.



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This paper was originally published in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, with the assistance of Murdoch University.

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From February 2008, this paper has been republished in *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* from the following URL:

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