

Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (editors)

## Because I Have a Voice Queer Politics in India

New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005, 288 pp.  
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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 wrote the book by calling for not only the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India, but its 'full and complete acceptance' by the heterosexual population so that the homosexual may lead a dignified and secure life.<sup>[1]</sup> Then for a long time not only no magazine article here, an interview with a homosexual there, but no serious academic 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 does not even 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 *Sakhiyani: 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 Lesbian: Writing from India*, edited by Ashwini Sukthankar.
2. The dam seems to have burst now. These days the Indian queer's bookshelf is rapidly filling up with titles such as the volumes edited or authored by Ruth Vanita,

set in India in which the central character or one or more of the main characters are queer, magazines that regularly run cover stories on homosexuality and DVD films where the homosexual has an increasingly positive rather than comic, or 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 essays, theorisings, readings and personal narratives under the title *Because I Have a Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005). Not since Vanita and K. Ramdas's 2000 book has there been such a close-reading and such a sustained scholarly effort 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 contextual approaches to sexual politics in the subcontinent. Pertinent rhetorical questions are posed against the heteronormative. The questioning starts in the introduction with Narrain and Bhan wondering 'why the "tag" of Western (however wrong it is) is construed as an invalidation of passionately felt sexual desires and strong 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 written in the U.S.<sup>[4]</sup> The term 'post-colonial' is present either overtly or covertly in several of the essays. Arvind Narrain and Vinay Chandran examine the pathologisation of homosexuality and expose the subcutaneous homophobia in an Indian psychology'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 medicine's 'colonial project of pacification and control of the Indian subject'. Akshay Khanna tries to 'name "sexuality" ...as an effect of our post-colonial context where the options we have, to understand and address our realities[,] are regrettably shaped by our colonial histories and our imperialist presents' (p. 91).
4. Nivedita Menon asks in her essay, 'If "normal" behaviour were so natural, [wouldn't] it] require such a vast network of controls to keep it in place?...Are there laws that prevent people to eat or sleep?' (p. 37). In possibly the best essay in the book, Muraleedharan reads Malayalam cinema against the heteronormative grain and constructs a sophisticated queer reading of male friendships in Malayalam films much like what 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. This prevents the other two sections from becoming a mere collection of essays that tell essentially the same tale but only setting them in different parts in India, is the acute-sighted identification of the several fissures that run through the Indian queer movement. Hyphenated queer identities emerge. Elavarthi Manohar is queer.

leftist, Pawan Dhall is queer and environmentalist, Alok Gupta is queer, city-English-speaking and 'straight-acting,' whereas Anis Rai Chowdhury is queer resident of a small town in Bengal. Just as Bina Fernandez and Gomathy N.B. 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 faith 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 want to live with each other but deny a romantic relationship, like Hasina Bano and her partner 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 excellent 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 front against 'compulsory heterosexuality'—a phrase that is so deeply associated with Judith Butler and so often used in the book that I was surprised to find not a single reference to 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 as important are other theorists such as Althusser, whose concept of interpellation suggests itself in Akshay Khanna's essay.
6. Living in Calcutta, I must note the calm certainty with which queer culture is coming into its own in and around the city. There are little magazines such as *Recognition* and *Swakanthe* [In her own voice] that are bi-lingual and carry articles, stories and poems in both English and Bengali. Also in production is a 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 Bhramar are representing the homoerotic in their work. The sharp increase in the visibility that one notices in India, of which *Because I Have a Voice* is a symptom, will only lead to greater acceptance of alternate sexualities and the inevitable re-examination of the homophobic, Victorian Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. It is the work of Narain, Bhan, Sukthankar, Row Kavi and countless others would begin to celebrate their achievement.

## Endnotes

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

<sup>[2]</sup> Vanita's numerous works include *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English 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: Columbia University Press, 2007.

2002; and recently translated Pandey Bechan Sharma ('Ugra'), *Chocolate and Other Stories of 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 54 per cent support for decriminalisation. A similar poll conducted earlier by the national daily *The Hindu* had 54 per cent of the readers texting against homosexuality remaining a punishable offence under Indian law (3 April 2005). Whereas 58 per cent of the readers of another national daily, the *Hindu*, supported the legalisation of homosexuality (5 April 2005). The mass-circulation *Calcutta Telegraph* had 81 per cent of its readers wanting homosexuality to be legalised (5 February 2005).

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

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

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



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