

Book

Sutras on AIDS in India

Good literature, writes Amartya Sen in a masterful foreword to these essays by Indian writers, has been “a great ally of science in making us discern the world better—a hugely important contribution that still does not get adequate recognition”. By lifting the “dense fog” of ignorance and prejudice shrouding AIDS, literature can “lead us to a fuller understanding of the epistemology of the AIDS epidemic”, says Sen, “thereby opening the door—since epistemology is so central to a well-founded ethics—to informed reflections on the social and political commitments that the calamity inescapably demands”.

Indeed, almost since the emergence of this mystery killer over a quarter century ago, it is fine literature that arguably has done most to illuminate our understanding of the human ramifications of AIDS. Of writers in English alone, think of how Larry Kramer, Paul Monette, Randy Shilts, Susan Sontag, and Edmund White in the USA, Derek Jarman in the UK, and Adam Levin and Jonny Steinberg in South Africa, have helped us grapple with the multilayered issues of blame and innocence, moral codes and sexual liberty, public health and individual rights, that this epidemic has raised in every society that it has touched.

In this anthology, 16 noted Indian writers turn their skills to shedding light on India’s AIDS epidemic. The line-up includes such global stars as 2006 Booker winner Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, and Vikram Seth. (Britisher William Dalrymple is included because of his long engagement with India.) With India’s writers feted worldwide for years now, high expectations are unavoidable. And, indeed, a half dozen of these essays are gems, in the best tradition of the Sutra, an ancient Indian literary form that calls for concise,

flawlessly clear literary compositions. Unexpectedly though, the best essays are not by the marquee names.

Novelist Nikita Lalwani transforms a single interview with an HIV-positive doctor, Dr Tokugha, into a riveting meditation on stigma and discrimination, as well as the fraught quest for love and marriage in the age of AIDS. She writes, “After the revelation of his blood test, in this narrative of his life...he becomes a man whose whole status is HIV positive, and nothing else. Even now, as he talks, he seems aware of this fact. He is a little louder, more insistent

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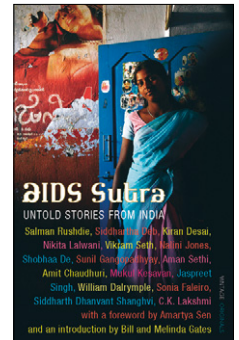
than before, as though the danger of being dismissed is never gone once the labels come out of the bag.” Later, Lalwani writes, “I sit in Toku’s office, and hear about the throttling legal details of his battle so soon after the simplicity of his love story, and think about how heartening, almost fantastical, it is that the right to marry has ended up as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...there is something hungry and romantic about the assumption that this aspect of human companionship is recognised as a basic need, along with the right to liberty and freedom of person.”

Equally finely etched is the essay by Tamil writer C S Lakshmi. The setting is unpromising—she is meeting a group of sex workers at the office of a non-governmental organisation. But Lakshmi turns this discussion into a moving meditation on what empowerment means to women stuck at the very bottom of India’s oppressive social structure. She

writes, “The stories pour out one after another, sounding so similar and yet so apart, for each woman is telling a story of her own...They advise one another on many aspects of their life and work—how to deal with a stubborn customer, a violent partner, or a suspicious family; how to take care of their health; how to deal with their children. Because of this, their bodies have ceased to be mere tools of survival, and their work is no longer an act of degradation...There is no self pity, no self reproach, no guilt.”

In “Beat Them, Kick Them Out”, journalist Sonia Faleiro trains an unrelenting eye on the brutality inflicted, habitually and with depressing impunity, on sex workers by Mumbai’s police. The essay’s chilling title comes from this casual interview: “I asked Madhav Rao, a senior inspector at a platform on one of Bombay’s busiest railway stations, the same question—his opinion of sex workers. ‘Maarne ka, bhagane ka’, he replied. They’re to be beaten, to be chased away. Then he scrunched up his face, in what I suppose was an imitation of a woman crying, and said, ‘I tell my men to beat them on their bottoms and send them packing.’” Faleiro’s essay is a grim reminder that in India and elsewhere, a vital area of HIV prevention where there has been scarcely any progress is the police’s interaction with sex workers.

In his essay, the great Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay also explores sex work. After a gap of nearly 50 years, Gangopadhyay returns to the red-light locality of Sonagacchi, in Kolkata. He celebrates the changes he sees. “Though Sonagacchi looked the same, I could detect a distinct change in the psyche of the women. They don’t perceive themselves as sinners and fallen women anymore. They don’t claim to be victims of a cruel destiny either. They speak of their profession,



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quite naturally and spontaneously, as though it was one of many." These changes have been driven by the efforts of Sonagacchi's pathbreaking sex workers collective, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee. Gangopadhyay visits a sex workers' conference organised by this collective, and marvels that "it was being held in a huge stadium...and 7000 sex workers from all over the country were present".

On less contested terrain, Jaspreet Singh writes with brilliant economy about his visits to a Delhi care home for abandoned HIV-positive children. In just 18 pages he creates such powerful individual sketches of some of these children that we understand why he writes, "if I don't leave this place soon, I will end up staying here".

These five writers, to my mind, succeed in illuminating our understanding of AIDS, so that "we move from depiction to perception, and from reflection to compassion and resolution", as Sen puts it. There are also moments of brilliant depiction and insight in several other essays in the anthology. Consider Kiran Desai's

summation of the fate of hereditary courtesans in Andhra Pradesh: "Generations of struggle, and this is all that they have: one trunk; a few battered pots; an ancient, dusty, cloth umbrella; a black and white TV; a few cosmetics, safety pins, a toothbrush lying on the earth; all in a hovel of ruined thatch and mud, more sieve than shelter, two dark holes into which they carry a mat should a client appear." Or Dalrymple's disturbing insight into why several thousand girls, usually aged 6–9 years, are every year still "dedicated" to "sacred prostitution" in neighbouring Karnataka: "For the very poor, and the very pious, the devadasi system is still seen as providing a way out of poverty while gaining access to the blessings of the gods, the two things the poor most desperately crave."

For five great essays, the other occasional flashes of brilliant insight, and Sen's extraordinary foreword (a must-read, for its sane, humanistic look at matters that have been clouded by the previous Bush administration's obscurantist agenda), *AIDS Sutra* is a welcome addition to literary writing on

this pandemic. Yet, curiously, I ended it feeling cheated, even upset. There is no sense in these essays of what it means to be personally at risk of HIV infection (the only passing reference is by Vikram Seth). There is none of the celebration of carnality, eroticism, and sensuality that so marks the writing of those who have faced this virus' deadly intertwining with sex and had the power to embrace sexuality nonetheless. (Strikingly, it is only Sen, in his foreword, who celebrates "love and physical relations" in this age of AIDS.) And, there is bewilderingly little rage—the rage of Kramer or Shilts—at the loss of their communities. This writing self-evidently comes from a country that has not been widely hit by AIDS, a country where discrete populations have been ravaged but most others left facing little risk or impact. This writing is about an epidemic that is affecting distant others, not these writers themselves, or their friends, family, and peers.

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The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

DMCS 2009

Asta Gröting Sculpture: 1987–2008

An exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, UK, until April 26, 2009. See <http://www.henry-moore-fdn.co.uk/hmi>

In brief

Exhibition Intimate interstices

The human body has inspired artists from prehistoric time, but contemporary German artist Asta Gröting has a rather different take on it and the human condition. In her sculptural work she explores anatomical structures usually hidden from sight within the body.

Orientierungsapparat (*Orientation Device*), one of the works on display at this exhibition, comprises two enlarged inner ear structures—the vestibular apparatus—mounted on adjacent walls set at a right angle. This work is made from polyester, but Gröting uses diverse materials to make her sculptures. In an earlier series, made after observing several

necropsies, she used glass to make sculptures of the digestive system. Paradoxically, she chose an invisible material to make visible the intestinal "chaos" hidden within even the most perfectly toned abdomens.

Gröting's most recent work, *Space Between Two People Having Sex* (2008), probes the physically intimate spaces between the bodies of a copulating man and woman and hints at psychological or emotional distance between lovers. "It deals with the void between two people along with all the unexpressed, inexpressible, and hidden issues that relationships involve", she says. Her starting point in making this sculpture was covering the

models in plaster "from nose to penis to vagina", while they had sex. Although further details are sketchy, it seems that Gröting removed the set plaster from their postcoital bodies in sections, which she reassembled and used to cast a positive impression, from which she cast her completed sculpture in silicone rubber. Interpreting its form is tricky. "Gröting is saying there is a formula to human existence", says exhibition curator Stephen Feeke. "That no matter who we are or what we do, we regularly return to the same questions and concerns."

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