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# History: Its Make And Making

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**NO ONE ELSE: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF OUTLAWED LOVE AND SEX**

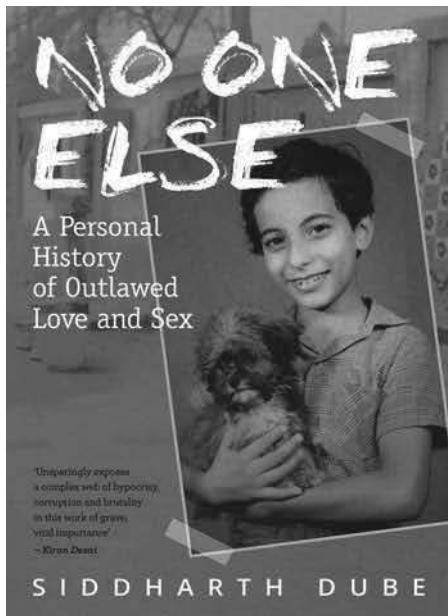
By Siddharth Dube

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*No One Else* earns its title on every page, all the more for not labouring it. No one else, *but I*? The unvoiced qualifier has a case to be made for it. This is the first non-fictional account at book-length of a gay man's life in India, possibly from anywhere in South Asia, and Siddharth Dube singular also in having returned from the USA in the mid-eighties and lived openly in Delhi with his lover. (One of its pay-offs was to be a harrowing night for both at the police station; their neighbours' curtains had evidently been twitching, up and down Jorbagh.) Extraordinary personal courage could have been his principal theme, but isn't. Instead, we get a discerning treatment of an otherwise unavailable social history, which also expresses another salient quality of the writing: the low-key presence—implicit rather than overweening—that Dube maintains across long stretches of his own life's story.

Memoirs commonly set up a patchwork of recollections in which the writer's presence can fluctuate, but their ends are desultory, life shared as a hoard of anecdotes. In contrast, Dube gives us a full-blooded autobiography, tracing out the development of a coherent personhood and its bearings in the world; life shared as the honing of a perspective. Its structure is consummate, as the narrative first reasons outwards from personal experience to a worldview—its arc broadening alongside Dube's own horizons on his way to adulthood—and then, as if to test its findings, doubles back from events on the global stage to their effects on local lives and struggles.

History, taken as the sum of its effects on all-too-local lives, was the theme of his first book. *Words like Freedom* appeared in 1998, and cut through the prevailing guff about the jubilee year of Independence with a startling report card on the state. Here's what your statistics think of you, it said. While you were busy making history, here is how it was experienced by Ram Dass Pasi and his wife, Prayaga Devi, landless unlettered Dalits from UP, who can look back upon two generations of their family's life, and ahead to the lives of their grandchildren. That comprises a sufficient store of memory



and local knowledge to judge exactly what kind of government policy works, what doesn't, and why. If the state means well by them, how is it they never get asked their opinion, but only appear ground up into tables and charts? Whom does it serve that they be obscured? Might that be the state?

On the face of it, Ram Dass Pasi has little in common with Siddharth Dube, whose life as the son of a wealthy Anglophone Brahmin family in Calcutta takes him past the solid milestones of La Martiniere for Boys, the Doon School, St Stephen's College, Tufts University—marked out for privilege in a thoroughgoing way. Except that these markings are often the stigmata of privilege. Literally so, as young Siddharth is sent out each morning wearing—of all things—the yellow tie pin of Macaulay House, for the 'forbidding cathedral-like edifices' of La Martiniere, which seemed 'designed expressly to humble us children'. Even in the USA, till the mid-eighties, members of the Tufts Gay and Lesbian Community (TGLC)—a student body—were appearing anonymously in year-book photographs, with bags pulled over their heads.

Just as the state has acquired a practised eye at overlooking Ram Dass and his kind, so these institutions of learning do not lose sleep over questions of justice and empathy. At Doon, Dube's housemaster makes a serene nightly progress through the dorms, his golden Labrador in tow, past the miserable faces of little boys into whose lives he does not care to look closely, directing genial remarks at their tormentors instead. Confronted with Dube's story of sexual abuse at the hands of a senior, his geniality turns to brusqueness: 'These things happen. You need to become tougher.' At Tufts, the TGLC's

application for official recognition, 'so it could receive funding like the other student groups—kept getting rejected year after year'.

These institutions are no strangers to homosexuality. All of them originated as homosocial spaces but resolutely ignore the homo-eroticism that has accompanied their ethos; silence on this subject has the dread force of a tribal taboo. In his adolescent years at Doon, Dube felt the impact of both, the traditional latitudes of a homo-normative order and the institutional stifling that warps them—indeed, can live with only their warped expression—mentally budgeting for sexual abuse, but never love, desire and pleasure. Till well into his twenties, he was to remain ill-at-ease with his body.

Like many another, he was a counter-cultural figure by default before becoming one by conviction. The grounds on which he first knew marginalization were those of masculinity. Branded as effeminate, the new boy at school—hitherto precocious—was forced into a sense of inadequacy and isolation, forced also into a false position of recoil, away from his open disposition and into a carapace of surly belligerence, expecting to be picked on at all times. This is how masculinity wins its converts, manoeuvring the world into offensive and defensive postures, provoking and thriving on a sense of insecurity, of imminent shame and crisis.

It fosters a schizoid response to the feminine—which it desires and despises, both at once. Dube had already grasped this truth in his schooldays when boys seen as effeminate were the objects of sexual advances by predatory seniors and, simultaneously, of their contempt and active persecution. Parallel to the sexual pursuit ran the construal of femininity as a temptation—corruptive of decent, clean-living boyishness – and the fear of taint by contact. In the co-ed precincts of St Stephens he was to see the 'chick charts' that played out the same resentful framing of desire as disrespect. Still later, with the outbreak of AIDS, he could easily recognize the state's impulse to vilify sex workers, the community under threat of infection becoming the threat of infection.

When AIDS first appeared in India, it was sex workers who suffered the fate reserved for gay men in the West. They were blamed for the crisis and promptly forfeited their human rights. Dube details the reflexive brutality of both state and medical establishment towards the infected. Sex workers bore the brunt of it because they are women, their profession already criminalized under law, and because their existence gives the lie to fond cultural notions of monogamous family life as India's civilizational norm.

What brings him to speak out when generations of gay men made allies of invisibility and silence? He ascribes the impulse to a 'family dharma' of honesty. Hiding away was never for him. As a schoolboy, his first submission for publication in *The Doon School Weekly* was a tragic romance between two boys—duly declined by the editors. Maverick courage came to him as a matter of course. We see him as a young journalist with the *Business Standard*, flashing his press card to protect cruising men in Delhi's parks from the predatory attentions of the police. What would have unnerved the policemen was not the press card so much as his willingness to be known precisely where their extortions traded on blowing the anonymity of their victims.

Dube is enough of a reader to recognize how books have formed him; sometimes in false starts, such as his 'quasi-Gandhian' phase. Already a vegetarian by resolve, he was inspired by Gandhi's autobiography to opt for janitorial work at Boston during the university break: something to do with the dignity of labour. In the event, his duties were not edifying but grindingly squalid, as were the conditions of work—shared by almost no white people. As a graduate student in Minneapolis his first plunge into gay nightlife saw him step out in rare finery, a vision in *khaddar*—not a success with the lumberjack clones who held sway there, although our candidate was no more in costume than they, and a bit of a clone in his own right.

Literature in its turn has drawn on Dube. Readers of *A Suitable Boy* will have no trouble identifying him as the source of Tapan Chatterji's hunted existence at the Jheel School—Vikram Seth's rendering of Doon with barely a facial mole in the way of disguise. He is also enough of a reader to have an odd way of his own with books. A childhood retreat that solaced him was into an imaginary world of 'noble animals', yet the Romantics on the literature course at St Stephens leave him cold—dismissed as 'fusty', along with Dickens. He can be just as off-hand with bookish details, now attributing Phaedrus's opinions in *The Symposium* to the absent Plato, now conveying the impression that Babur enjoyed an affair with Baburi. (If Babur had any such luck his autobiography does not share the news.)

Empathy and justice are the predominant themes of the books that find favour with him. And physical distress was the calling card of much of his formative reading. So, 'my stomach turned' and 'I was stunned', 'I was jolted awake' and 'his anger shook me', are Dube's approving recollections of Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable*, Frances Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet*, Howard

Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*. '[T]hese books about poverty, racism and subjugation of different kinds made me realize that the predicament of gay men and women was no different from that of countless other outcasts [...] I discovered that we were part of an even larger community of people—oddly, even a majority of the world—who had been marginalized by mainstream society, always on bogus grounds.' This colligatory insight is what links him to Ram Dass and leads him to a solidarity with sex workers.

Immediacy of experience, rather than argumentation, gives to both *Words Like Freedom* and *No One Else* their force. Here are lives at the receiving end of history. But they represent themselves with self-possession, the dignity of intellectual and moral agents—which history denied them. The result not only vindicates the biographical form but surpasses its conventions. For biographies—whether they establish or dismantle reputations—are addressed to institutionalizing processes, the culture of iconology. Dube's task is the retrieval of lives comminuted by institutional handling. It gains in urgency today as economic rationalism reduces ever more people to redundancy and insignificance, written out of the collective future except as a drag on it, a 'concern' for institutions rather than participant in their working.

Do institutions ever change their spots? Working for the World Bank in the nineties he notes several signs of promise, but equally visible at its opulent DC headquarters is a familiar smugness—nothing stinted in the way of glass, art, atriums and other statements of self-regard. The Bank lays on lavish subsidized meals at its in-house cafeterias, and flies its staff first-class on 'mission' trips, with stopovers at plush watering holes, while tirelessly preaching fiscal discipline to the world. As he points out, the term 'mission'—redolent alike of evangelistic piety and secret-service derring-do—is a giveaway of the vanity of the international development industry. He recounts trips surreal in their splendour. Meant to observe poverty in East Africa and sex work in India, these missions involve the protocol and perquisites of state summits, all at taxpayers' expense, and no more than perfunctory contact with the objects of study.

Careerism is the hardwired bit in the circuitry of institutions. Here, vanity and venality come to a mutually advantageous arrangement. The final chapters of the book are a chilling account of how a respected international body like UNAIDS buckled under pressure from the Bush administration and lent itself to the propagation of Right

Wing prejudices in the fight against AIDS, jettisoning hard-won practical and humane approaches to AIDS-prevention.

In 1990, at the Harvard School of Public Health, Dube studied under Jonathan Mann, who had been instrumental in pushing for rights-based strategies in the prevention of HIV, highlighting the link between rates of infection and populations whose human rights were least fulfilled. Rather than the arsenal of coercive measures favoured by govts worldwide—compulsory testing, 'contact' tracing, quarantine, even (as in India) illegal incarceration—Mann argued for awareness and community mobilization as efficacious strategies. By the time Dube joined UNAIDS in 2005, this reorientation had been official practice for years, showing results.

Now, however, UNAIDS quickly surrendered its expertise to the Bush regime. Programmes of proven effectiveness like needle exchange and the promotion of condom use were defunded. Sex workers and their organizations became public enemies, fused with the international human trafficking industry—the target of a new 'global war'. The disbursement of funds was overseen by a coterie of Right Wing politicians, policy makers with connections to big pharma, and god-squadders, with the spending on medicine initially restricted to the formulations of American industry—billed at \$15000 per person per year—over the much cheaper generic drugs developed elsewhere—\$300 per year. Instead of science, abstinence and faith, along with rampant homophobia and violence against sex workers, were the new strategies of choice.

As senior adviser and speechwriter to Peter Piot, the executive director of UNAIDS, Dube saw the organization capitulate to these preposterous conditions, and the effects of this from Africa to India. Piot, co-discoverer of the Ebola virus in his twenties, and widely admired for his hard-working ways and dynamism, had the scientific and official standing to discredit the Bush regime. Instead, now into his third term in office, he accommodated the takeover of the global anti-AIDS effort and its reduction to witch-hunts. UNAIDS also shifted at this time into its very own acreage of tinted glass and high atriums in Geneva, and ran a busy line in lavishly-illustrated coffee-table volumes of triteness and self-promotion.

'No one else' is the unspoken refrain of our queer past. The phrase played on the minds of odd and lonely figures, from Baron Corvo to Quentin Crisp, who saw oddity as their true calling and grew ever lonelier in its pursuit. Henry James had had to choose between enjoying a sensual life or a social

one; so, no one else was to know both together, not in his created world. Proust reversed the inequity so that, by the end of his magnum opus, virtually no one else in the beau monde—besides Marcel, our narrator—is certifiably straight. And Forster, after *A Passage to India*, could not bring himself to set another work within the heterosexist order. His later fiction—homosexual stories—stayed private for the remaining four-and-a-half decades of his life. That is how absolute the divide and sense of isolation felt.

The gay outlook is sunnier, more practical and assimilative. You come out to the world and swell the ranks of those who did so before you. Then you march for pride, for legal recognition, for civil unions and the right to start a family. There are support groups to join, and funds to be raised, role models and lions of the community in every walk of life. Siddharth Dube knows that history does not move by mechanistic incrementalism. The years that *No One Else* got written saw India's gay community de- and then re-criminalized. As if to stress the point, Professor Siras was drawn and quartered by the Aligarh Muslim University during our brief spell of dignity under law.

Today, as we watch institutions painlessly accommodate male leaders whose consciousness never registered the women's movement (among much else), we are in for a live demonstration of Dube's themes: those deep entrenchments of outlook he pointed out show up again, proof against appeal to justice or empathy. The compact of institutions, with their authorized local dealership in reason and history, is on a roll.

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