



# A place of greater safety

## No One Else: A Personal History of Outlawed Love and Sex

By Siddharth Dube

HarperCollins Publishers India, 2015, 372 pp, Rs 599 (HB)

ISBN 978-93-5029-713-1

VIKRAMAJIT RAM

Homophobia in India, like Darjeeling tea and the railways, is a British colonial legacy. Unlike tea – which makes for sparkling chat – and the railways – which blurs all boundaries – homophobia discriminates and, in its manifestation since 1860 as Indian Penal Code Section 377, goes so far as to criminalise. It also, unwittingly, prejudices an appreciable vote bank: some 60 million homosexual and transgendered Indians as per recent approximates (see Outlook, March 2016). With more gay and transpeople standing up to be counted, that demographic is growing. And with growing support from families and other ‘regular’ citizens for full and equal LGBT rights, the present holds an excellent opportunity for the powers that be to rescind a 156-year-old alien law, lurking in the fringes of a progressive democracy. In light of these realities – and another apex court ruling awaited on 377 – Siddharth Dube’s latest book is timely. I first read the e-version some weeks prior to a closer reading of a review-copy of the print edition. Whatever one’s preference, the importance of this work as an authentic, essential record of our lives and times can hardly be overstated. Here’s why.

Dube has written extensively on poverty, public health, social justice and development. His bibliography includes three books: *The End of Polio: A Global Effort to End a Disease*, with photographer Sebastião Salgado; *Sex, Lies and AIDS*; and *In the Land of Poverty: Memoirs of an Impoverished Indian Family*, a sequel to which is due this year. He’s worked with the World Bank, UNICEF, WHO and UNAIDS and is a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute in New York City. With *No One Else*, the author is his subject: the elfin child portrayed on the dust-jacket, the student, the quasi-Gandhian scholar, the policy advisor, the activist, the sorted gay man. But in its larger scheme, the book is more than an individual “personal history of outlawed love and sex”. Rather, from revisiting key events from a little over four decades, Dube provides context to his metier as well as a compass to the histories he charts of other “outlawed” lives: their loves and losses, their oppressors and heroes, their trials and

victories. The result is this masterful union of memoir and reportage, leaning more towards the second.

Born and brought up in urbane Calcutta of the 1960s, the youngest of three sons of a slightly unconventional family knew he was “a girly-boy, a sissy, different from other boys, and despised and ostracized by them”. His early school life at La Martinière ‘for Boys’, was a tame intimation of what awaited him at Doon School, Dehradun, of the 1970s. In these opening chapters, the sympathetic reader will find more parallels than one might care to dredge up from his (and her) own history. The bullying, the shaming, the hypocrisy, the rapes; the fear, the helplessness, the fury, the self-loathing. Never wrong a writer, they say, for he will write about you. In holding up a mirror to those dank dismal dorms and shadowy schoolyards, Dube does so with startling compassion for his nutty tormentors — themselves fodder for a “tradition” schooled to look the other way. Palliatives to remembered pain come as hommages to an almost-consummated first-love, to nature and literature, to that one empathetic teacher who encourages a writer in the making. Done then with Doon – what a cautionary tale to boarding schools and their wards – our sensitive, virginal, wryly self-deprecatory and very brave teenager strides forth to investigate his deeper identity and calling.

Following a year at the friendlier ecosystem of St Stephen’s College, New Delhi, Dube winged west in 1982 on a suggestion from his father (to whom the book is dedicated) to Tufts University. Reagan’s America, however, was not the gay idyll Dube had envisaged; Tufts’ suburban Boston campus itself proved inhospitable to gay students. For a 20-year-old undergraduate with secret emotional baggage, the university library provided furtive refuge in its wealth of literature on the complex roots and dynamics of homosexuality, and news as it trickled in of a “mysterious killing disease among homosexual men, which had been discovered in the summer of 1981”. Already gravitating to “courses and reading that addressed injustice and marginalization of any kind, whether social or economic”, Dube found himself profoundly affected by Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Frances Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet*

and Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth* — the last inspiring his own experiments, reviewed in the droll light of hindsight. Epiphanies are central to biographies. Dube’s presented itself in 1986.

He was almost 24, had graduated from Tufts and moved to Minnesota’s School of Journalism, chosen a chaste path of yogic austerities, come-out to his father (in the course of a visit home to Calcutta), failed to lose his virginity, made a brave maiden foray into a Minneapolis gay bar “in kurta-pyjama and delicate Kolhapuri slippers [...] like a Hare Krishna monk who has stumbled into a lumberjack yard” and even outed himself to another set of intimates. But he was suffocating. He writes:

My intense need to disclose this fact about my orientation to people I was close to, and eventually to others who broached questions about my personal life, sprang from the paramount importance my family placed on honesty. It was also of a piece with my fighting spirit, which had now developed into an activist political engagement with social justice issues. And most of all, keeping such a major secret about myself was in itself a killing burden that I wanted to free myself of. Secrets spawn the fear of being found out [...] Only by not hiding could I be truly free of fear. Only by not hiding could I bring an end to accepting the harm done to me by other people’s bigotry, of viewing myself as shameful and deviant, of agreeing to be cast out and isolated. But of course, I wished my orientation had not been made a matter necessitating such anguish to begin with, that – like heterosexuals – I could take for granted that I was “normal” and have nothing to do with either concealing or disclosing.

The passage marks a pivotal point in the book, heralding the first of two intensely passionate lived relationships. It also brings into focus other men and women, some of whom may have remained footnotes – but for this book – in the history of India’s tryst with HIV/AIDS. New points of reference shift and reconnect: from the rarefied inner workings of WHO, IMF and World Bank to the mouldering red-light enclaves of Kamathipura, Mumbai; from an AIDS-conference in Yokohama to a sex-workers’ fair in

Kolkata’s Sonagachi; from mythology and cultural history to scientific research and hospital labs. The time-frame stretches from 1986 to the present.

Selvi, a sex-worker in Chennai, was compelled by crippling poverty, like millions of women, many barely out of their teens, to compromise everything for the satisfaction of men. Arrested for soliciting, Selvi tested HIV-positive and was incarcerated. Her release (in more ways than one) owed to the efforts of the journalist Shyamala Nataraj, who later established the South India AIDS Action Programme (SIAAP). In Goa, Dominic D’Souza, a “respectable and happily employed” young man, was arrested, held in solitary confinement and then subject to three harrowing years of public scrutiny, not so much because he was gay but because he was HIV-positive. His condition deteriorated, mainly from being denied correct treatment, courtesy Goa’s draconian anti-AIDS law of the time. Dominic’s personal champions were his mother and a young human rights lawyer, Anand Grover; their combined energies, and of Dominic’s group Positive People, made great strides in improving attitudes towards homosexuals and AIDS; Grover, the co-founder of Lawyers Collective, is one of India’s most tireless legal voices for HIV-related and LGBT rights. In Chennai, Sekar, an HIV-positive gay man stoically held himself up as an example to educate and counsel gay and bisexual men; his organisation, Ambu Illam, was helped by seed-funding and technical support from SIAAP. Also in Chennai, Noorie, an HIV-positive transwoman, became the face of AIDS-awareness among her community. She was instrumental in galvanising Tamil Nadu’s AIDS-prevention programmes, long before any other state. And there is Siddhartha Gautham in Delhi, valiantly badgering the highest echelons of power to acknowledge every citizen’s Constitutional right to equality, justice, fraternity and liberty even whilst battling Hodgkin’s cancer and succumbing to it — but not before co-authoring *Less than Gay: A Citizens’ Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India* (Aids Bedhbhav Virodhi Andolan, New Delhi, 1991; free pdf available online). This 95-page document helped catalyse the felicitous, landmark ruling of 2009 on Section 377; the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) has derived much knowledge from it. For each of these documented histories, pause now to consider “thousands upon thousands upon thousands” of other nameless, voiceless, and certainly champion-less victims – even as we speak – of poverty, dispossession, coercion, misinformation, misogyny, trafficking, police brutality, corruption, blackmail, public apathy, blinkered ideologies, political fence-sitting, and the chilling nexus between secrecy and insidious STDs, all with the blessings of Section 377. We see them every day, and yet we don’t see them. It begs the question: is this our humanity?

The closing chapters of *No One Else* present a powerful analysis of the current impasse with regard to an archaic, counter-productive law and its grim effects. Only from knowledge comes true progress. Towards that end, one hopes that Dube’s publishers have translations of the book already in press. We will need them. ■