

# Exposing a killer

Want to know about AIDS but didn't know whom to ask? Siddharth Dube has the answer: *Sex, Lies and Aids*

Not another book on AIDS! Hasn't too much appeared on the subject already? Siddharth Dube looks incredulous. "Too much? I think, considering the seriousness of the problem, too little has been written, far too little," he counters.

And proceeds to invoke doomsday statistics. Three lakh people died of AIDS in India in 1999 alone—several times the number killed by the recent Gujarat earthquake. AIDS is already the fourth largest killer disease in the country, and the second among adults—only tuberculosis claims more adult lives. "Some 20-25 lakh people have died of AIDS in India since it began," Dube notes. "Over 50 lakh are infected with HIV. Where are the newspaper headlines? Where is the concern?"

Siddharth Dube first made his mark two years ago, when he published *Words Like Freedom: The Memoirs of An Impoverished Indian Family* (1947-97), to rapturous critical acclaim, including praise from the likes of Amartya Sen, Pankaj Mishra and Krishna Raj, editor of *Economic and Political Weekly*. In this book he traced the true life story of one Dalit family in Uttar Pradesh across 50 years since Independence, against the backdrop of all the important features and changes that have affected the country during the same period. In a major shift of both content and style, Dube has now published *Sex, Lies and Aids* which tracks the alarming rise of AIDS in India over the past 15 years, and suggests means of tackling it.

The first book was scholarly, though it wore its learning lightly; the actual narratives of the family members not only resounded with

the ring of truth, but were also finely crafted, as well written as any first rate work of fiction. The new one uses language much simpler, has the tone of a school textbook, and assumes the reader knows absolutely nothing about the subject. "I wilfully chose to write this way because my intention in this book is advocacy," says Dube. "I was not trying to produce a work of art, but to communicate with as many people as possible. The book has already been translated into Telugu and Malayalam, and I am trying to arrange other Indian language translations too."

From Dalits to AIDS: where's the connection? "I have always been interested in both poverty and health issues," maintains Dube. "I don't see how anyone can live in India and not be concerned about poverty." He has worked with an NGO in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, and has extensive journalistic writings relating to poverty. On health, his credentials are more impressive still: he is a post-graduate in International Health from Harvard University, and now a consultant with WHO and UNAIDS. "Working on poverty is very depressing, because solutions are so difficult to find," he points out. "In health matters bringing about change is somewhat easier. A single vaccine, a single drug can sometimes make a major difference."

Dube's personal background however is remote from both poverty and ill health: his father was a top official in a Calcutta-based tea company, his maternal grandfather was chief secretary of Madhya Pradesh; he attended Doon School, and apart from a single year at St Stephen's Delhi, had his en-

tire college education in the United States. Returning to India in 1986 he worked as a journalist for four years—with *Business India*, *Sunday* and the South Asia bureau of *The Washington Post*—before concluding this was not the profession for him. "I realised I didn't want to do daily or weekly journalism forever," he declares. "I wanted to do in-depth work on particular subjects over a length of time."

So it was back to the US for his degree in International Health, followed by projects for the UNDP and a stint with the World Bank. "I didn't find this work particularly worthwhile either," he recalls. The idea which ultimately resulted in *Words Like Freedom* first came to him, he remembers, during a soporific con-

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Photo/Arvind Jain

ference on AIDS he was attending in Mombasa in 1991: "What I really wanted to do was give expression to the voice of India's dispossessed."

But getting a grant to fund his dream project proved far from easy: it took three years of knocking at numerous doors before the little known United States Institute of Peace (USIP) agreed to help out. Even so, while back in India, he had to

work as a stringer for the US-based *Chronicle of Higher Education* to make ends meet. "Those two years I spent researching my book were completely crazy," he reveals. "I was working 20 hours a day to manage both my project and my job at the same time. When I finished I was so exhausted I thought I would never write another book."

The fieldwork too proved much

more difficult than expected. "Interviewing the Dalit family was like trying to squeeze juice out of a stone," he reminisces. "The family members were not used to being interviewed, nor was it easy for them to give me the time and the details I needed." Nor could he afford to remain the detached observer. "You have to be a decent person," he points out. "You have to involve yourself in the problems of the community. So much of my time in the village was spent on work unrelated to my project—taking the sick to hospital, intervening on their behalf with the police, the *patwari*, the upper castes." During the 1995 panchayat polls in UP, Dube was even physically attacked.

The second book proved relatively easier to write, though it also required extensive travel. But in this case his task is not over with the book's release: he is travelling all over the country, lecturing at every forum he can find on the impending AIDS catastrophe. "India has all the ingredients needed for an AIDS explosion," he warns. "We have a vast number of single men in cities, a vast number of prostitutes, and a great deal of bisexuality." He recalls his experiences of some African countries. "Once the number of HIV infected had crossed five per cent of the population, it rose to 20 per cent within the next five years. Several cities in India already have three to six per cent of its adults infected. What is there to prevent India from going the same way?"

**Debashish Mukerji**

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