

# A Theory of 'Radical Abundance' History, Sexuality and a Devadasi Archive

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Anjali Arondekar's latest offering to the stable of sexuality and caste studies from the global South expands it abundantly with a deceptively slim, potent and delicious volume titled *Abundance: Sexuality's History*. It is no surprise that Arondekar, author of the award-winning *For the Record: Sexuality and the Archive* (2019), should produce another tour de force in the field. *Abundance* is a force of nature as much as of intellection—multiplied to create a method of un-containment, of a multitudinous-ness that harnesses its expansive knowledge-sharing into razor-edged theory. The interrogative energy with which this book has been shaped is a testament to what sexuality as “radical abundance” can bring to an archive, both as content and as method.

## Idea of the Archive, Sex and the Devadasi

Returning to the rich archives of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj within which she had grown up, Arondekar offers a potent retracing of the history of Goan Dalit/Bahujan women whose devadasi antecedents are traced to the early 19th century, when Goa was under Portuguese occupation. Having served primarily Brahmin men at temples since then, the devadasis registered themselves as a collective “Samaj” in 1927. Arondekar, however, brings to her subject of inquiry not just the perceptions of an insider but an academic incisiveness that produces a reading rare and valuable: first, for the archive itself, built alongside critical ruminations on archive-building; second, for the lucidity, passion and self-reflexivity with which it performs its scholarship; and third, for the taut theoretical framework that it offers for further work in South Asian caste and sexualities.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Abundance: Sexuality's History** by Anjali Arondekar, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2023; pp 166, ₹945.

Arondekar lunges for her task with not just her own knowledge and experience of the world of the Gomantaks—of women's, Dalit/Bahujan, and South Asian histories—but also with a keen awareness of the “absence of reliable ghosts,” as she sets out in Chapter 1. She begins by examining the idea of the archive, “the value-form of our history of the present” (p 32), which particularly for South Asian histories of sexuality “has become a figuration of such allure that it has produced an explosion of genres, places, spaces, losses, failures, and approaches. Arondekar pronounces her “commitment to, and frustration with, the current archival turn” (p 33): her commitment remains one that “sutures” the histories of area to those of sexuality. And she is creatively theoretical:

What to make, then, of an archive that resists recuperative historiography's most cherished mantra: recover, restore, redress? Rather, the archive I will proffer here is an abundant ecosystem, at once imaginative and real, less a recordkeeper of lost lives, more a potential epistemology for how we know, translate and amplify our relationship to the past. (p 36)

Arondekar is at once a poetic, imaginative and acute researcher of histories of sexuality, which is uncommon. Archives of sexuality, as she says, have been “metonymically coupled with loss, scarcity and erasure” (p 34)—especially in research in/from the global South—and this, perhaps, has compulsively erased most traces of aesthetic imagination from its study. *Abundance* brings back a radiant pleasure to the study of sexuality

archives in South Asia, linking the social and the political to *kala*, the arts: What could be more joyful, providential, promising?

## Loss and a Strategic Subaltern Pragmatism

This is not to say that *Abundance* does not confront loss. It is, in fact, premised on loss: “I am drawn here more to the persistence of archival loss as an origin story for histories of sexuality” (p 34), writes Arondekar in setting up her frames of research. If in the beginning there was loss, we are to work our way out of that dark hole with “a more strategic and subaltern archival pragmatism” (p 34). It is such a pragmatism, strategic and subaltern, that leads one to abundance, hallelujah. No wonder the tale begins on the “thrilling dark night” of 25 May 1921, in Paigin, a village in southern Goa, when a house is under *halla* (attack) (p 36). In Arondekar's translated summary of an account written by Paigankar, the son of a *kalavantin* (a term for women with *kala* or art, a subgroup within the Goan devadasi community), we go on to learn that the reason for this attack was an unfinished revolution by some sections of the devadasis to push back against repeated caste and sexual humiliations they were made to suffer by Saraswat Brahmins.

After the flare-up, Paigankar and 25 kalavantins travel to Panjim to submit a writ appeal under legal advice, in which they state that they are “endeavouring to free” themselves. They write: “We aspire to be worthy citizens of Portugal by emancipating our women from prostitution and by advocating education and marriage” (p 38). They allege that the Saraswat Brahmins had stopped them in the name of the Portuguese state, and declare grandly:

If this is indeed your law, then we... ask permission to migrate to British India. If we are asked to stay, we would like to petition the Saraswat Brahmins for damages and compensation. (p 38)

This is what Arondekar marks as “strategic” on the part of the kalavantins, given the progressive sociopolitical climate in

Goa in what was “heralded as a time of renaissance for Goan arts, culture and politics” (p 38). The petitioners not only receive a positive response from the then governor Morais, but the Saraswat Brahmins are censured, and there is so much reportage in both the Portuguese and the vernacular press that this event leaves significant long-term effects in favour of subaltern resistance movements.

It is only when Paigankar’s readers have been fully roused to appreciate such heroics, writes Arondekar, that he reveals to them that the attack he had described was *ek saubhadr natak* or “a strategic drama” (p 40), though it was one that everyone now knows was successful in achieving its desired results. Arondekar deftly—strategically—then asks, does this revelation of falsity strip it of its effects, or does it “inaugurate a different orientation to archival production?” (p 41) She contends in reply that “the halla opens up an archival space of *radical representability*, self-consciously replete with the figurations necessary to event-making and loss” and that “these archival repertoires... disinvest from the plots of social realism’s truth telling, instead inviting us to reenact the archival event through the craft and craftiness of survival—this is the *kala* (the art, the aesthetics) of the archive” (pp 41–42). From this sharp manoeuvre that shifts from reading the contents of the archive as social realist truth to reading the archive as both collecting and manufacturing truths, Arondekar ponders what Paigankar’s ruse of staging the halla may mean for the sexuality archive:

In so doing, Paigankar subjects the veracity archive of sexuality to a crucial modification... the ethical burden shifts away from the literal translation of the historical record to thinking more of its literariness, its *kala* in making history possible. (p 42)

### Sexuality as Archive, Archive as Sexual

What is remarkable in Arondekar’s chiselled scholarship in social history is her continual recourse to the *kala*, the aesthetics, of research, reading and representation—particularly, in this case, of the archive. As she trawls through the uncatalogued, unruly collections at the

Gomantak Maratha Samaj in Panaji and Mumbai that span “novels, short stories, minutes, property deeds, flyers, legal case records, programs, membership lists, and annual reviews, to name a few” (p 45) to research the Goan devadasis, she flags a metaphorical relationship between sexuality and the archive. That wildness—which cannot be contained within tropes of love and pain, loss and gain—is a wildness that reverberates as if in a methodological fantasy. Every time she turns around to look at a set of photographs of kalavantins, or a sexological treatise-turned-novel from the prolific Marathi writer Narayan Sitaram Phadke who produced seventy such between 1920 and 1950, or Paigankar’s autobiography built on a staged halla, she pierces through them to reconstruct critically how they came to be in the archive, and how the archive—a shifting, flowing, changing entity—expands and contracts to fold them in.

Arondekar is refreshing in her candid dismissal of tired tropes of sexual politicking which insert themselves monotonously into so many studies of sexuality across disciplines today, looking for “the materiality of lost subjects” that may return in some way to identitarian forms. She asserts, instead:

Here the return to a history of sexuality is not through a call to loss (of object and/or materials), but, rather, through radical abundance, through an archive that is incommensurable and quotidian, imaginative and ordinary. (p 45)

In making this clear distinction between what this history is not (sexuality as lost identity) and what it is (sexuality as “radical abundance”), she takes a methodological leap into the sexuality archive—sexuality as archive, the archive as sexual—which is teeming with rich kaleidoscopic fragments of lives, imagined and real. The range of these possibilities, made up of markedly different elements, then allows for this study to continually engorge and digest the previously unexamined and unthought. While, for example, no material traces of lost queer identity forms may be recovered in any specific search through them,

the Samaj’s archives stubbornly enact queer readings that unsettle the foundational link

between historical reproduction and archival preservation. Radical abundance here is presence without return, without the fear of loss. (p 45)

### Queer and Itinerant Forms as Method, Not Identity

Here, then, queerness is recovered as a method to sift through a radical history of sexuality, rather than being reduced to an identity whose loss is marked and mourned in a history of sexual containment. Arondekar, through the rest of her book, leads us through an explosion of uncharted archival territory that makes up the Samaj’s holdings, continually posing questions and demolishing what might have been obvious answers to plant. Instead, she offers provocations that—for the superlative performance of her prose—appear to provide exemplary rejoinders to answers we never quite formulated.

In Chapter 2, “A History I am Not Writing,” Arondekar asks why writing a history of sexuality takes a particular form, what the obstacles in its course are, and what “hermeneutic demands [are] placed on its revelations” (p 67). Troubled by an insistence on excavating “the weight of an alleged erased history” (p 67) in the archive—especially one as “unexamined” as the Samaj’s—Arondekar asserts, “I wanted to make room for a more paradoxical possibility: to read the archival exemplar precisely for what it cannot hold” (p 67). She wishes to “craft a history that would speak to the conundrum of the archival trace, not to decode it (because we cannot) but more to embrace its roving and fractal complexity” (p 67). She quickly clarifies that she is not claiming “the ungraspability or incommensurability of the critical object” which is all too common for “geopolitical elsewhere”. She insists—and this is crucial, I believe, to the politics of Arondekar’s engagement with the archive—that there is “plenty to learn, to know, and let go” (p 67).

How will she enact this in the archive? She seems to envision herself a flâneur, strolling through the arcades of the Samaj’s untidy collections:

I want to imagine a relationship to archives that is about loitering, stalling, digressing, and defamiliarizing the very process of writing history. What I want to think about, tout court, is “timepass.” (p 68)

Moving through “spaces of delight, boredom, distraction, dynamism, and even nothing” (p 68), Arondekar in this chapter traces the story of “the evil ladies of Girgaum” as they were vilified in a letter of civic complaint in South Bombay in 1911, who became “the progenitors of the successful and celebrated Gomantak Maratha Samaj” (p 73). After narrating their escapades for survival, Arondekar poses a core hermeneutic question: “How can we fashion new habits of reading that disarticulate sexuality from its inevitable ‘evil’ form, to move toward its ordinary plenitude within the conventions of capital, caste and, historiography?” (p 81).

In Chapter 3, “Itinerant Sex: Geopolitics as Critique,” Arondekar examines B D Santoskar’s editorial in the *Samaj Sudharak* in September 1947 following Indian independence, in which he

asks members “to carefully deliberate upon the geopolitical futures that lie ahead of them” (p 91). Santoskar reminds them that the Samaj’s strength is that “it can be *ikde aani tikde* (here and there), and it must, he continues, resist the aakarshan (seductions) of *pranth kiva rajya* (nation or state)” (p 92). Arondekar reads Santoskar’s editorial as unusually bold in exhorting members of the collectivity “that is nonmonogamous and outside of endogamous caste and social forms” (p 92) to imagine itinerant futures; she deduces from this that “instead of laying claim to geography as established historical value, the Samaj ... strategically mobilizes the politics, desires, and identities made possible by the reach of geopolitics” (p 97). Arondekar, detouring via a queer conference in Lahore in 2019, asks, “How can the vernaculars, temporalities, and spatialities that make ‘sex’ intelligible as object and archive summon itinerant geopolitical forms that are often left behind?” (p 104).

### Coda: Abundance and/as Andolan

In her Coda titled “I am Not Your Data: Caste, Sexuality, Protest,” Arondekar, returning to the Gomantak Maratha Samaj’s history of sexuality and caste, locates her searing task in poetic images:

How can such histories clog up the data stream, so to speak, on boats of our own archival making? Can we draw pictures, craft verse, imagine worlds that do not translate into captured forms? (p 116)

What happens if we turn to a theorization of radical caste politics, of Dalit/Bahujan imaginaries, as abundance, as *andolan* (protest) visions that cull the creative fury of the *bahu* (expanse) of lower-caste subjects? (p 116)

There is a *bahu* of vision here that displays both abandon and acuteness. Arondekar has, simply, raised the bar in sexuality scholarship here, with this dynamite of a book and a new method sprung from South Asian geopolitics—an exuberant, critical, inventive, daring “timepass” of “radical abundance.”

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