

In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia

In the absence of reliable ghosts I made
aria,
Coughing into emptiness, and it came
A west wind from the plains with its
arbitrary arsenal:
Torn sails from the Ganga river,

Bits of spurned silk,
Strips of jute to be fashioned into lines,
What words stake—sentence and make
believe
A lyric summoning.
—Alexander

What words stake. Marginality and loss, paucity and disenfranchisement: these are the hermeneutical forms that have become the common currency of histories of sexuality. The missing amphora of sexuality, particularly in South Asia, is recovered from the archival detritus of hegemonic histories of colonialism and nationalism and showcased within more liberatory narratives of reform and rights.¹ Even scholars of precolonial South Asia, who rightfully bemoan the temporal focus on nineteenth-century European colonialism, call upon a similar language of loss as they lament the postcolonial erasure of a historical archive resplendent with evidence of sexuality's past.² This orientation to loss, *mutatis mutandis*, surfaces within queer/sexuality studies in the Euro-American academy as well, where the current invocation of queer negativity and queer failure tethers histories of sexuality to forms of loss, lack, and failure in the face of, or rather because of, our embattled political horizons.³ The appeal to psychoanalysis as the privileged language of critique within queer studies further solidifies an attachment to sexuality as loss—fantasmatic, protean, or otherwise.⁴ Tropes of loss especially abound in queer historiographical work

where sexuality's (falsely) pathologized pasts and archives are recuperated and reinstated as sources of sanctuary/jouissance rather than despair.⁵

Sexuality thus endures as an object of historical recovery, it seems, through “a poetics of melancholia,” an irresolvable longing for loss that refuses all forms of consolations (Fuss 4). To be clear here, I am not facilely lambasting or rejecting such histories of sexuality; rather, my meditations call upon a figuration of historiography that pushes against the binding energies of such melancholic historicism.⁶ After all, in the face of the casual brutality of dispersed suffering in the global south, there is, as Elizabeth Povinelli writes, “nothing spectacular to report” about loss anymore. Indeed, any epistemological privileging of loss (past or present) assumes an “eventfulness” that flounders in the face of the “ordinary, chronic and cruddy” syncopations of everyday subaltern life (*Economies* 3–4).⁷ To fix sexuality primarily within such an arbitrary arsenal of loss (while politically exigent) is to refuse alternative histories of emergence. Taking my cue from the epigraph I began with, I want to ruminate instead on more imaginative histories of sexuality, full of intrepid archives and acts of invention, full of pith and moment, full of “a lyric summoning.” At its most ambitious, my essay thus poses two broad and vulgar questions: What happens if we abandon the historical language of search and rescue and focus instead on sexuality as a site of radical abundance—even futurity? What would it mean to let go of our attachments to loss, to unmoor ourselves, as it were, from the stakes of reliable ghosts?

In my previous work, I have grappled with these thorny questions by writing about a pressing impasse in our recuperation of the historical archive, about the hermeneutical demands placed on histories of sexuality, particularly such as those in South Asia that entangle with questions of colonialism and race, and about the multiple double binds and possibilities that emerge from it. I have argued that the promise of archival presence as future knowledge is always circulated in relation to historical desire, a desire for lost bodies, subjects, and texts, and for the evidentiary models they enable.⁸ My efforts here, however, are drawn more to grappling with how such recuperative historiographical methods assume, as Geeta Patel argues, their salutary forms of loss precisely in the service of collectivities, such as queer ones, tallying up what they do not as yet have in relation to other constituencies (Patel 50–51). Far from repudiating such salvific historical forms (instantiated as they routinely are in the language of lost rights and representation), I would like to ask: 1) how minoritized collectivities wrestle with the evidentiary forms that such models of loss

demand; and, in doing so, 2) how they assemble historical archives that self-consciously activate the compensatory mechanisms that such losses should or will produce. More broadly, I am interested in thinking through how the absence and/or presence of archives secures historical futurity and what proceeds from an unsettling of that attachment, from a movement away from the recursive historical dialectic of fulfillment and impoverishment. The challenge here is to engage a queer historiography that paradoxically adds value to a sedimented historical form (lost archives must be resurrected, found, produced for future gains) precisely by staging interest in its modes of reproduction.

Such concerns have become especially pressing through my research on the emergence of a *Devadasi* diaspora, the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj*. *Devadasi* is a compound noun, coupling *deva*, or god, with *dasi*, or female slave; it is a pan-Indian term (falsely) interchangeable with courtesan, dancing girl, prostitute, and sex worker. Members of this diaspora, also referred to as *kalavants* (literally carriers of *kala*, or art), shuttled between Portuguese and British colonial India for over two hundred years, challenging European epistemologies of race and rule through their inhabitation of two discrepant empires.⁹ Tracing its roots back to early eighteenth-century Goa, the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj* (henceforth the Samaj) is an OBC (Other Backward Caste) community and was established as a formal organization in 1927 and 1929 in the western states of Goa and Maharashtra, respectively. It officially became a charitable institution in 1936.

The Samaj continues its activities to this day and has from its inception maintained a community of 10,000 to 50,000 registered members. Unlike more received histories of *Devadasis* in South Asia that lament the disappearance or erasure of *Devadasis*, the history of the Samaj offers no telos of loss and recovery. Instead, the Samaj, from its inception, has maintained a continuous, copious, and accessible archive of its own emergence, embracing rather than disavowing its past and present attachments to sexuality. The Samaj's archive (housed in Panaji and Bombay) constitutes an efflorescence of information in Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, newsletters, private correspondence, flyers, and programs, all filled with details of the daily exigencies and crises that concerned the community. Often referred to as *Bharatatil ek Aggressor Samaj* (an aggressive community in India), this *Devadasi* diaspora is routinely lauded (by the left *and* the right in India) for its self-reform and progress. From the immortal Mangeshkar sisters (Lata and Asha) to the first chief minister

of independent Goa, Dayanand Bandodkar, there are few sectors of Indian society where the presence of Samaj members cannot be felt.¹⁰

In obvious ways, the presence of this vibrant *Devadasi* diaspora in western India (spliced as it is between the borders of two competing colonial projects) disrupts established histories of sexuality through its survival and geography and holds much potential for a differentiated model of historiography. First, *Devadasis* are studied more in southern India and rarely in western India, suggesting a regional twist.¹¹ Second, studies of sexuality and colonialism have overwhelmingly focused on the affective and temporal weight of British India, with Portuguese India lurking as the accidental presence in the landscape of colonialism. Leaving aside the startling point that the Portuguese occupied Goa for nearly 451 years, we have here a south–south colonial comparison.¹² And last but not least, Goan historiography itself, long written off as an underdeveloped and undertheorized kin of Indian historiography, could find new flesh within the lineaments of the radical history of the Samaj. As one scholar writes, it is time for Goan history to move beyond a “kind of absence,” to brush aside the “shadows that obstruct our attempt to access, retrieve and understand” our past.¹³ Yet even as such comparative modes (regional, south–south) enrich our understanding of sexuality’s pasts, they could equally function in ways that are perilously additive, minoritizing the very histories they seek to make visible. That is, the story of the Samaj must not function as a singular parable of cathartic potentiality, nor of an abjured geopolitics, resolving historical ambivalence or loss through its success and emergence. Rather, I will argue, the archive of the Samaj must be read as an example of catachresis, an incitement to analytical reflection that produces more robust idioms of the historical. Here, the story of sexuality estranges settled readings of recuperative scrutiny, drawing us more into the queer forms of an archive’s becoming, angled through lineages of the nonreproductive and the unfinished. Let me turn, then, to one such example within the Samaj archive.

That Thrilling Dark Night

“Bundachi tee romanchkari kaari raatr [A thrilling dark night of insurrection].”

25 May 1921. It is 10:00 p.m. and we are under attack. Our house has been surrounded on all four sides, and I can hear loud cries and whistles as stones and rocks pummel our doors and rooftop.

I run to the courtyard to see all the women and children huddled together in fear. As the attack escalates, the children begin to lose control and defecate on themselves in fear. The women scream till their throats run dry, only to realize that there is no water left in the house. My wife, who is very ill, unable to bear the stress, falls to the ground in shock. I run to the rooftop, with my gun in hand, and shoot aimlessly into the darkness of the night, unsure if I am killing or will be killed. I scream out into the night, and suddenly the attackers retreat and an eerie calm returns.

Thus writes Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar, the son of a *kalavantin* (literally, a term used for women with *kala*—a subgrouping within the Goan *Devadasi* structure), in the first volume of his much-heralded autobiography, *Mee Kon [Who Am I?]*.¹⁴ The attack takes place in Paigin, a small village in the *taluka* (area) of Canacona, southern Goa, a key stronghold of the Goan *Devadasi* community. Once morning breaks, Paigankar recounts the events to the village headman, who accompanies him back home to inspect and corroborate the damage done to his household. In due course, Paigankar and his extended family of twenty-five women and children abandon their home and seek shelter in a neighboring village.

There is, of course, as is to be expected in any narrative retelling, a prehistory to the *halla* (attack). Four days earlier, on May 21, 1921, Paigankar and his comrades held a general *Satyanarayan pooja* (a religious ritual that celebrates Lord Satyanarayana, an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and is often held to commemorate an auspicious occasion or to ward off impending evil), calling for a refusal of caste hierarchies and religious differences. An enthusiastic crowd of over a thousand people from five neighboring villages gathered, composed primarily of the Deuli and Bande castes (the lowest subgroupings of the *Devadasi* community), a smattering of curious Portuguese officials, and a few breakaway Saraswat Brahmins. Enraged by the repeated caste humiliation and sexual exploitation suffered by the *Devadasi* families at the hands of the Saraswat Brahmins, Paigankar demanded an end to Brahmin hegemony and spoke passionately at the *pooja* about the need for education and reform. Yet, despite all the excitement and support of the gathered crowd, the *pooja* remained unfinished. No *purohit* (priest) was willing to step forward to complete the rites, fearful of incurring the wrath of the powerful Saraswats. And the wrath of the Brahmins did follow. Paigankar and the larger *Devadasi* community in Paigin were immediately banned from all social functions, their lands were confiscated and their businesses

shut down, and a general sanction was imposed against all of their interactions. Paigankar was seen as the key protagonist in an escalating drama of anti-Brahmin sentiment and was asked to appear before the ruling Brahmin council. Even worse, hundreds of Brahmin youth were rumored to have taken up arms in retaliation, threatening to attack and destroy Paigankar and his followers. There were signs that such anti-Brahmin activities were also spreading apace in southern Goa, as similar *poojas* were said to be taking place in nearby Lolegaon, a second stronghold of Saraswat Brahmin hegemony. The scene was set for the inevitable events of that thrilling dark night (*Mee Kon* 1: 73–80).

After the attack, another extraordinary set of events followed. Paigankar, along with twenty-five *kalavantins* from his village, traveled to Panjim, acquired legal representation, and submitted a writ appeal to the Governador-General (Governor General) of Portuguese Goa, Jaime Alberto de Castro Morais (1920–25). In the appeal, Paigankar et al. wrote,

We, a Gayak Kalavant Samaj (community of singers and artists), based in Paigin, are endeavoring to free ourselves. We aspire to be worthy citizens of Portugal by emancipating our women from prostitution and by advocating education and marriage. The Saraswat Brahmins find our goals objectionable and have attempted to punish us by confiscating our lands, levying fines, refusing us access to all basic services, and by attacking the houses we live in. They have done so in the name of the Portuguese state. If this is indeed your law, then we wish to leave our village and 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. (Mee Kon 1: 84–87)

In many ways, such a strategic appeal to the patronage of the Portuguese state is hardly surprising given the progressive political climate of the pre-Salazar era in Goa and the protracted geopolitical claims of the so-called Velhas and Novas Conquistas (Old and New Conquests) in Portuguese Goa. Often referred to as the Republican period in Goan history, the period between 1900 and 1926 has been heralded as a time of renaissance for Goan arts, culture, and politics (R. Pinto). Such a renaissance, however, must be understood within the economic, social, and political demarcations of the more developed coastal *talukas* of the Old Conquests: Ilhas, Bardez, Salcete and Mormugao, conquered first by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and impacted more directly by the advent of Portuguese colonialism. The

New Conquests, acquired from the Marathas in the eighteenth century, included the *talukas* not directly along the coast, namely, Pernem, Bicholim, Satari, Ponda, Sanguem, Quepem, and Paigankar's *taluka*, Canacona. These *talukas* lacked the density of population and economic heft of the areas under the Old Conquest. One positive by-product of such geopolitical demarcations, some scholars argue, was that the New Conquests were less affected by the brutal project of Portuguese conversion (1560–1812) and were, by and large, left alone to flourish or perish at their own peril, at least till the discovery of raw materials and the rise of the mining industry. This difference in rule also translated to language acquisition as the New Conquests had more Marathi speakers, while the Old Conquests had the monopoly on Portuguese and English speakers (Martins; Mendonça-Noronha). Goan *Devadasis* were to be found more predominantly in the New Conquests, where Hinduism (allegedly) thrived with less persecution and temples remained relatively unscathed (Axelrod and Fuerch; Newman). The Census of 1920, for example, the year before the *halla* on Paigin took place, notes that Goa officially had four hundred and five *bailadeiras* (dancing girls), mostly located within the *talukas* of the New Conquests (*Censo*).¹⁵

Thus, it came as less of a surprise when Governor Morais responded positively and in an unprecedented fashion to the submitted appeal. So moved was Morais by the plight of the distraught women accompanying Paigankar that he immediately censured the Saraswat Brahmin community of Paigin and ordered official protection for the *kalavants*. News of the appeal and its aftermath spread like wildfire all across Goa, and editorials appeared both in the Portuguese and vernacular press as the *kalavants* appeared to have incited the beginning of a grassroots resistance against Brahmin hegemony. Notably, the Governor's judgment founded the basis of the first alleged legal case filed against Brahmins by a lower caste community in Portuguese Goa. I say "alleged" here because there are no available archival records of the case, either in the Goa state archive or in the Portuguese colonial archive in Lisbon. The case, *Kalavantin Bhima v. the Saraswat Council of Paigin*, however, is repeatedly referenced in Paigankar's biography as a mark of the community's successful campaign for reform. The Brahmins, we are told, were asked to return the seized lands and to monetarily compensate the *kalavants* for lost revenue and damaged property.¹⁶

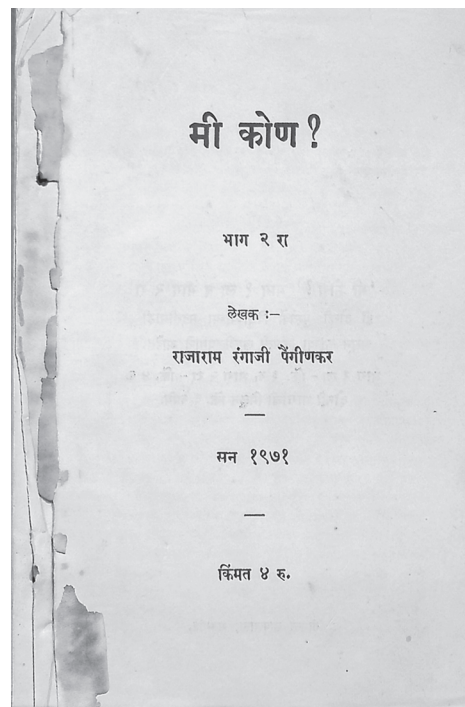
But just as his readers are ready to settle into this rousing account of brave resistance, Paigankar reveals an even more thrilling twist to the tale. In the opening gambit of the *second* volume of his autobiography, titled

Mee gharavar halla ka ghadvoon aanla [*Why Did I Stage the Attack on My House?*] (recall that the above-mentioned account appears in the *first* volume), Paigankar explains that the attack was in fact “ek saubhadh natak [a strategic drama]” directed precisely to protect and advance the interests of *kalavantins*. His words underscore the constant humiliation experienced by the male and female members of his community, a humiliation that precipitated the ritual of the reformist *Satyanarayan pooja*. Paigankar, for example, recounts his degrading experiences at the residence of a local Saraswat Brahmin where he was invited for a meal, only to then be asked to partake of the food on a soiled plate used to feed animals in the house.¹⁷ Such experiences were compounded by the fact that the *yajemans* (patrons) who frequented *kalavantin* houses were themselves Saraswat Brahmins. Paigankar’s own biofather, a well-known Saraswat businessman in the village, aggravated the situation further by urging Paigankar to appear before a Brahmin village council and pledge contrition for his actions. Paigankar even attempted to contest a legal claim against the seizure of *kalavantin* lands by the Brahmins, but his efforts were thwarted by a lack of funds and a general fear of Brahmin reprisal. With the sanctions against the *kalavantins* worsening each day, a sense of urgency and desperation defined their every word and action.

It is at this point in the drama, we are told, that Paigankar, at the behest of his best friend and lover, the *kalavantin* Bhima, and in complete secrecy, persuaded six comrades to attack his home on that fateful night. The comrades were given detailed instructions about when they should attack, from which vantage point, and for how long. Each individual was asked to recite prepared lines explaining their whereabouts at a neighbor’s residence, were any of them to be questioned after the attack. Not a soul was told of the carefully orchestrated attack except those directly involved (as we have seen through the extreme physical discomfort experienced by all), and even Paigankar’s family members remained in the dark. Such secrecy, writes Paigankar, guaranteed the narrative heft of the attack as the heinous work of frenzied Saraswat youth. Bhima, the young *kalavantin* who served as the director behind the scenes, set the stage perfectly for that fateful night of insurrection. Mobilizing established economies of rumor, fear, and humiliation, Bhima, along with her sister *kalavantins*, ensured that the larger village community truly embraced *and* anticipated the fiction of the attack. Guns were mysteriously set off around *kalavantin* homes prior to the night of the attack, and a general fear of Saraswat retaliation suffused all conversation (*Mee Kon* 2: 43–56). Thus an attack on Paigankar’s

Figures 1 and 2
 Front cover and title page of Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar's *Mee Kon*, Vol. 2 (1971). A signed copy of the text is archived at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Mumbai, India.

Credit: Courtesy of the Samaj.



home provided the necessary climax to calculated and frenzied fear, so perfectly scripted were the conditions of its production. And the staging, as we already know, did produce its desired effects. In addition to the alleged case against the Saraswats, a school was established for the *kalavantin* community in Paigin (through the support of the Portuguese state) that exists to this day.¹⁸

The Kala of the Archive

Does the revelation that the *halla* was so deftly staged denude it of salvific historical value, or does its narrative veracity inaugurate a different orientation to archival production? Let me explain what I mean. For anyone who works within historical archives, it comes as no surprise that any hegemonic text making confident claims to historical truth will be destabilized and exceeded by the operations of counter archives, counter stories that disrupt any and all ideological project being advanced. Such a critical understanding, however, does not as easily extend to minoritized archives, where the “subversion/resistance hypothesis” (despite or perhaps because of the contaminations of Michel Foucault and subaltern studies) continues

to function as difference's most consequential and enticing effect. The aura and/or seduction of "resistance" stubbornly lingers, suturing subaltern archives to an oppositional imperative. Even the most rigorous intentions to the contrary have not prevented the preservation of a "veracity archive" that promises, even as the activity of its own demystification is rehearsed within its own contents, "salvific truths." For someone like me, who is currently writing a history of the Goan *kalavants/Devadasis*, this staged event provides an alternate historiographical model that refuses the stability of a spectacle, to hold or destroy, and focuses more on the salvific forms archives are asked to assume. That is, the *halla* opens up an archival space of *radical representability*, self-consciously replete with the figurations necessary to event-making and loss. In the case of this particular event, Paigankar himself exhibits a keen understanding of such expectations as he situates his representational tactics within a longer, routinized, and mythical/political demand for salvific forms. Comparing himself to Subhadra (in the famous staged kidnapping of Arjun by Subhadra), Shivaji, and a long line of historical dupers within received Indian (read: Hinducentric) history, Paigankar asks his readers to recapitalize our political commitment to compensation through an understanding of the staging of archives. The architecture of the mob *halla*, too, reprises a set of representations central to any subaltern history of opposition or resistance (Guha). Within the lineaments of the story, Paigankar accesses earlier stylized repertoires of representation that render the languages of empire through the revered architecture of Hindu mythologies. Thus, there can be no refusal of Paigankar's archive, nestled as it is within established histories of *méconnaissance* and fraud. These archival repertoires (to play with Diana Taylor's formulation) 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.

In so doing, Paigankar subjects the "veracity archive" of sexuality to a crucial modification; he produces repeated evidence of the staging of the *halla* (in the second volume, as noted above) such that we are, as readers, asked to retool the foundational epistemologies undergirding historical recuperation. We are asked to negotiate the modalities of archival representation and recognition, to document, as it were, the staging of a record. The ethical burden shifts away from the literal translation of the historical record, to thinking more of its literariness, its *kala* in making a history possible. Here, the archive defines itself through a deliberate hermeneutics of perfidiousness, through what Rey Chow has called a "situation, dramatization, staging,

picture frame, window, and above all as the assemblage, or installation of a critical aperture, a supplemental time space” (12).

Such a supplementary archive equally draws attention to the weight of origins as places of commencement within liberationist histories of sexuality (individual and/or collective). The challenge here is to not suture the place of origins to a landscape of repetitive loss, to a set of recursive displacements or suspended beginnings. Rather, as Elspeth Probyn writes (quoting Foucault), what would it mean to play with the “solemnities of origin” (440), particularly when it comes to the histories of sexuality?¹⁹ After all, Paigankar’s ultimate disclosure of the fake *halla*, and the ease with which he provides details of the staging, deploys the very weight of the origin it undoes and attests to the tenacity of such representational conventions. Paigankar’s revelation (*Why Did I Stage the Attack on My House?*) is meant to ward off the debunking of an archive that he at once promotes and resists. His disclosure cannily stops short of impugning the form from which it draws its historical authority; rather, Paigankar’s belated “veracity” expands the idea of an archive by anticipating its compensations. Any concerns about the success of Paigankar’s archival *kala* are easily diffused through the lavish praise his biography garners from reviewers within the Samaj. In place of consternation or even outrage at Paigankar’s revelation, the reviews express gratitude for Paigankar’s canny historical sense, urging their readers to learn from Paigankar’s craft and commitment to the betterment of the Samaj. One reviewer, Sushil Kavlekar, writes passionately that Paigankar’s staging of the *halla* provides an exemplary model for future action. For Kavlekar, Paigankar’s success at promoting the Samaj’s goals, “without recourse to violence, hate-spewing,” is to be lauded rather than lambasted, reproduced rather than repudiated. Indeed, if anything, the (non)origin story of the Samaj’s history expands its *kala*, its mastery, from the regimes of music and dance, to the workings of historical drama (*Mee Kon 2: 13*).

As we have already seen, initial efforts to organize the community were primarily led by Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar as early as 1902. Paigankar particularly rallied youth members of the community and staged multiple successful conferences all over Goa and Maharashtra. Based primarily in Panaji, Shiroda, Malvan, and Bombay, the Samaj championed itself as caste-reformist, describing its shift in name from Gomantak Kalavant Samaj (Goan Artist Collectivity) to Gomantak Maratha Samaj (Goan Maratha Collectivity) as a primary indication of its commitment to a progressive pan-caste politics. The term *kalavant* privileged a specific professional identity (linked to the arts), whereas *Maratha* engaged a field

of membership that encompassed all subcastes of *Devadasi* labor, emphasizing affiliations of language and culture (Marathi). The shift in name occurred in 1927 after much heated debate over other possible names, such as Neethivardhak Samaj, Gayak Samaj, Pragati Samaj, all of which focused solely on the project of reform rather than caste and region.²⁰ For example, the name Neethivardhak Samaj called forth the idea of truth (*neethi*) as the guiding principle behind the Samaj's emergence, eschewing any reference to the Samaj's attachments to sexuality and/or to Portuguese India (evident in *Gomantak* [from Goa]).²¹ In many ways, the Samaj's early struggles around self-nominalization anticipate many of the paradoxes that have become the mainstay in discussions of rights and representation. At issue is the reification of a name such as *Gayak* (singer) that at once secures visibility even as it strengthens the very category that founds its marginalization.²²

In the first official conference, held on May 5, 1929, in Shiroda, a small village in central Goa, 750 delegates from all over Goa, Maharashtra, and Karnataka gathered to discuss the future of the Samaj—an extraordinary event given the difficulties of traveling between the borders of Portuguese and British India. Speech after speech made at the conference highlighted a commitment to education, caste reform, and the abolition of the sexual exploitation of Samaj women. Sexuality featured heavily in all discussions of reform as the structuring mode through which to forge futures, a space of radical possibility for opening up larger avenues for the Samaj's development. Members were urged to strategically mobilize their *Devadasi* histories as pedagogical tools to create much-needed societal discussions on sexuality and morality and, in so doing, to *sudhaar* (improve) not just themselves but society at large.²³ Despite such expressed zeal for large-scale social change, no salutary reference or connection was made to the ongoing liberation struggles, either in British or in Portuguese India.²⁴ Indeed, the early absence of any collective involvement by the Samaj in the resistance movements outside of their local interests speaks to yet another twist in the tale of the Samaj. For a large part of their emergence in Portuguese India, the Samaj relied on the benevolence of the Portuguese state for a wide array of causes: from the building of schools and libraries to the funding of small businesses. But given that this essay is also a rumination on the unmooring of attachments to revered lineages (may they be of loss, opposition, or resistance) within histories of sexuality, the Samaj's refusal to join liberation struggles—a refusal that frustrates contemporary expectations of subaltern oppositionality—is hardly surprising. The Samaj, for example, had and still continues to have no interest in aligning with any other project of social

reform. Its members are now largely and resolutely middle class, with the Samaj offices in Bombay and Panaji now used to host monthly meetings as well as to accrue revenue through wedding celebrations. In fact, one of the recursive and fascinating features of this Samaj's story is its refusal, or rather sidelining, of any social project outside of its own historicity.

Radical Abundance

At this point, one may well ask: how does an archival story of a staged *halla* provide both the mass and patina for a nonmelancholic historiography of sexuality? Those readers wishing to find queerness in this essay through the materiality of lost subjects aspiring to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identity forms, or even through archives that might somehow fold back into an identitarian form, will find few treasures here. Rather, the Samaj archive's queerness is to be found in the challenge it offers to the lineages through which reproductive futurities constitute their authority, attending more to what those instances of becoming entail. 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. Far from coupling archival accumulation with "straightforward" historical visibility, the Samaj's story challenges and indeed undermines the very idea and entelechy of an archive.

Bypassing the hermeneutical demands for recuperation, reproduction, revision, and reparation, the Samaj archive stubbornly enacts queer readings that unsettle the foundational link between historical reproduction and archival preservation. Radical abundance here is presence without return or the fear of loss. While I am keenly aware of what archives "cannot not" deliver, what their evidentiary forms foreclose in their celebrated endorsement of rights and representation, the plenitude of the Samaj archive opens up the question of how we record histories of sexualities in many different keys.²⁵ Thus, the orchestrated refusal of the Samaj to conform to representational archival forms embraces the very paradox it engenders: the archive remains a central value form, even as its radical transformation is continually demanded. The revelatory veracity of the archive gives way to a revelatory labor that eschews transparency and celebrates its own continuous (non)production.

It is important to note first that there are multiple registers of archival representation at work within the history of the Samaj. On the one hand, there are public archives of vocal performances (many *kalavants*

from the Samaj were and continue to constitute an impressive who's who of classical singers in South Asia) that are available and widely disseminated.²⁶ Yet, such archives are largely generated by non-Samaj members and rarely include information or references on the membership of these singers to the Samaj, and they routinely elide any attachment to histories of sexuality. Mostly hagiographical in nature, these archives of voice and sound have been routinely utilized to address the centrality of the *kalavants* within traditions of Hindustani classical music. Indeed, the energetic circulation of these archives by scholars of South Asian classical music and music aficionados in general has guaranteed that the presence of the Samaj endures in public view.²⁷

Alternately, the Samaj's own archive, as I mentioned in the early pages of this essay, is massively messy and contains multiple genres of archival records, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, private correspondence, flyers, and programs, all replete with the minutiae of everyday life in the Samaj. Such efflorescence appears startling, almost jarring, pushing against expectations of archival absence and erasure. The Samaj archives are housed in open collections in Bombay and Panaji and have been available for public viewing since their formation in 1929. In fact, the Samaj's incitement to archive is only surpassed by their startling lack of interest in the preservation and circulation of the very materials it continuously produces. A researcher's or even a curious visitor's request for rare materials is met with relative ease (a feat for anyone working in archives in India!), as one is directed to the archive without fanfare and often with a cup of hot chai to accompany one's reading. When asked about the potential loss of valuable historical materials, the response from the archival custodians (in both Bombay and Panaji) was full of mirth and consternation. For them, the risk of loss is *ek hasaichi gosht* (a laughable matter), where the preservation of rare archival materials is of little consequence. After all, as one of them reminded me, theirs was an oversaturated archive, so full at its seams that it struggled to manage the daily challenges of housing the new documents that continue to be produced. In contrast to the imperative to immure and preserve materials, the Samaj archive appears instead to be focused on the sustenance of an archive, whose abundant productions negotiate a different sightline to futurity. Here the return to a history of sexuality was not through a call to loss (of object and/or materials), but rather through ordinary surplus. To this day, new materials continue to enter the Samaj archive, with little effort expended to either digitalize or republish older, more fragile materials.²⁸

A second key feature of the Samaj archive is the relative paucity of “veracity” genres such as memoirs, testimonials, and biographies. Indeed, the only available biography, to this day, remains Paigankar’s *Mee Kon* (1969), whose story line (as we have already seen) is itself mired in the production of a foundational fiction.²⁹ The privileged archival genre is fiction, in abundance written by Samaj members, in the form of short stories, serialized novels, and novellas that take center stage in the Samaj’s self-fashioning project. Fiction provides the vitalizing properties of the archive, deliberately rerouting the demand for archival presence from conventional evidentiary forms to more imaginative modes of representation. Here, the truth of the Samaj is not what is at stake; rather, genres of self-fashioning are. These writings (mostly anonymous) appear in the monthly journal *Samaj Sudharak* (1929 to this day) and are heavily didactic in content, encompassing issues including education, marriage, *Devadasi* reform, the perils of prostitution, caste-shame, travel, contraception, sports, and even the evils of gossip. Bearing morally charged titles such as the serialized novella *She Had Her Mother’s Heart* (Jan. 1947–June 1949) and short stories such as “A Letter from God” (Nov. 1943) and “Justice” (June 1941), these fictional modes exhort their readers to take action and self-reform through a language of sexuality. Readers, for example, are asked to set aside their moral discomfort with their mothers’ professions (as *Devadasis*) and embrace instead the legacies of art and affect that found such lineages of sexuality.⁵⁰

It is, of course, impossible to do justice to the sheer volume and complexity of issues covered within the pages of the *Samaj Sudharak*. Given the limited scope of this essay, I have chosen to focus more on the early issues of the *Samaj Sudharak* (1929–61), where the challenges of self-fashioning and self-archiving are more pressingly articulated. One arresting example of such exhortations is the short story “Kala-Sangeet [Kala of Music]” (1937), which deftly mobilizes allegory, irony, and a good dose of humor to capture the Samaj’s variegated history. The story, written by Y. N. Tipnis, carefully assembles a recognizable collection of characters who effectively allegorizes the different stages in the Samaj’s history. We have Miss Kala (as we have already seen, literally meaning *art*), a gifted singer, accompanied by her friends Miss Veena (also the name of a plucked stringed instrument) and Miss Nanda (meaning *joy* or *joyful*). The story opens with a heated discussion between Kala and Veena airing their divergent views on the value of music. For Kala, music is a pursuit worthy of all sacrifice, a divine gift; for Veena, the pursuit of music promises no rewards, only exhausting hours of rehearsals that can be easily avoided through the simple purchase of a

Figure 3
Cover page of the
Samaj Sudharak,
January 1930.

Source: Gomantak
Maratha Samaj
Archives, Mumbai,
India



“Columbia record and a gramophone!” For Nanda, who arrives later in the story, the seduction of music looms as a cautionary tale; as she laments: “What use is the *kala* of *sangeet* if we remain degraded *Kalavantins* or *Devadasis*, or move to Bombay, and become actresses and singers in the film industry?” (100). The story ends with Kala sternly reminding her friends that it is *kala* that has funded their lives and afforded them the daily comforts they now take for granted. In fact, the *kala* of their Samaj is so sought after, she adds, that even Lokmanya Tilak, the great freedom fighter, has publicly praised their talents, tethering their history of sexuality to the history of a nation’s emergence. Chastened by Kala’s words, Veena and Nanda agree to continue their singing lessons and head to their respective homes (101). Strategically and playfully mixing past and present readings of the Samaj’s *kala*,

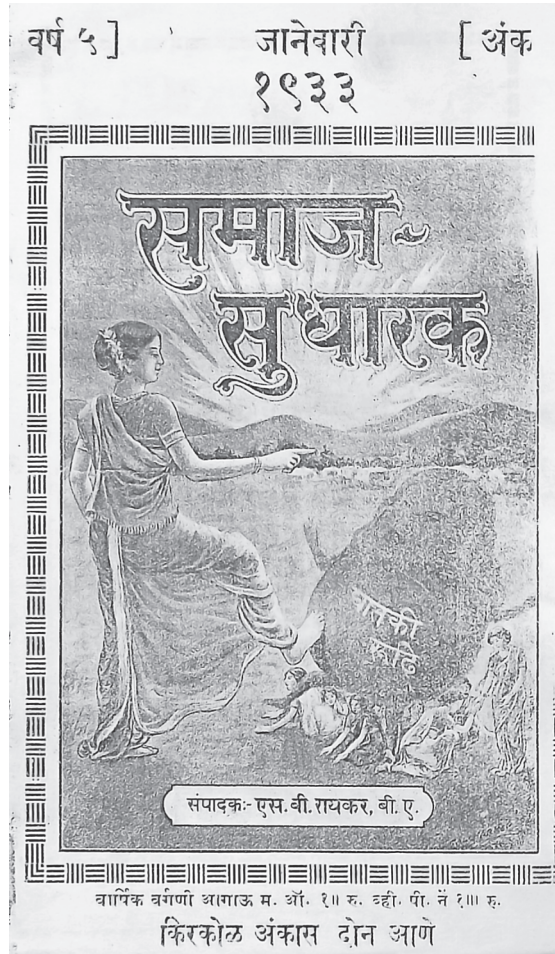
the story argues for a protean understanding of the Samaj that resists any stable or purely positive form. The images and advertisements accompanying the text of such stories further open out into a different register of *kala*; even as Samaj actresses are celebrated for their roles as “unwed mothers,” “prostitutes,” and “mistresses” in Hindi and Marathi theater and cinema, it is their paid labor that guarantees the respectability and growth of the Samaj. In fact, almost every single issue of the *Samaj Sudharak* published between 1952 and 1949 carries an homage to the labors of such actresses by carefully listing their philanthropic contributions toward reform efforts within the Samaj.

Another extraordinary feature of the Samaj’s early writings is its concerted effort to refuse reproductive futurity through proprietary kinship structures. After all, as we have seen through the evidence of Paigankar’s biography and other available historical records, the *kalavantins* were seen as distinct from the category of “prostitute” by the Portuguese colonial state primarily because these women maintained coercive and noncoercive *monogamous* relationships with Saraswat Brahmin men (and occasionally women). As the children of such unions were rarely recognized as legitimate heirs to their fathers’ caste status and/or properties, a variety of creative forms of kinship were developed to survive and prosper. In some cases, the children took on their fathers’ Saraswat Brahmin surnames (without consent) such that there are now Samaj members in both Goa and Maharashtra who have deceptively upper-caste surnames such as Kakodkar, Shirodkar, and Welingkar. While these members are clearly not received as Brahmins in larger society, their acquisition of Brahmin surnames has created considerable confusion within normative kinship structures. Given the primacy of blood and laws of primogeniture within Hindu legal and religious formations, such sleights of caste (if you will) are more than efforts at upward mobility (Kakodkar, “Portuguese”).⁵¹ Rather, they gesture to an astute anticipation of sexuality’s compensatory economies, entangled as they are with regimes of profit and pleasure.

A similar discomfort with the compulsory script of kinship can be seen in the poignant writings of a sixteen-year-old Samaj member, Ramakant Arondekar. Published in the July 1949 issue of the *Samaj Sudharak*, almost two years after the liberation of British India, Arondekar’s short opinion piece is intriguingly titled “Matrudevata aani Matrurprem [Mother as God and Love for One’s Mother].” The text opens with an elder, Rambhau, commanding the author to love and worship his mother. Finding such a proposition troublesome, Arondekar argues that it is irresponsible

Figure 4
Cover page of the
Samaj Sudharak,
January 1933.

Source: Gomantak
Maratha Samaj
Archives, Mumbai,
India



and unethical to follow such a dictum, given its flawed and unrealistic logic. Surely, Arondekar writes, one must be able to choose who one worships and who one loves, especially given the murky genealogies of the Samaj's own family histories. Refuting the claim that to love one's mother is natural and divinely ordained, Arondekar proposes the Samaj advocate for families forged through choice rather than mere blood relations. Nestled within the laments of this short piece is a startlingly radical script of kinship: even as the authority of biofathers (read: Saraswat Brahmins) is challenged, one must extend the same ambiguity of affect to the authority of one's biomother (read: *kalavantins*). Within such a refusal of normative kinship structures, no biological determinism can prevail, even if it means decentering the presence of the very women the Samaj seeks to valorize. While it may be

possible to dismiss Arondekar's young voice as overly speculative and inexperienced (or even ashamed of his biomother's profession as a *Devadasi*), his questions still echo the extant kinship structures within the Samaj. Available records of *kalavantin* families from Paigin, for example, clearly point to children (both male and female) being raised and/or adopted by a diffuse set of relatives, with biomothers rarely occupying central parenting roles. In fact, the thread of straight kinship is so undone that few children of Arondekar's generation were fully aware of their bioparentage. Of equal import is that Samaj members continue to express little or no interest in tracking or privileging the origin stories of their birth.⁵²

I have thus far elaborated on the textual nature of the Samaj archive, its overflow of writing as a supplement (in the Derridean sense) to the overprivileging of the visual and acoustic when it comes to the consumption of *kalavantin* bodies such as those of the Goan *Devadasis*. My emphasis here on the multiple genres of written materials housed within the Samaj archive highlights the difficulty of narrating a history drawn from such a different, incommensurate, and textured archive. My reading centers, instead, on the dialectic between the banality of the written form (here, the copious content of the *Samaj Sudharak*) and the recourse to the hagiographical (something transformative is happening in the pages). I have struggled to read the history of the Samaj neither as a seductive exemplar nor as an exceptional case study that needs decoding (which is, of course, the preferred form). After all, there remains the enduring allure of a virtuosic reading (within which I, too, am mired) that will somehow unravel the secrets of sexuality. Rather, the Samaj archive speaks more to a history of sexuality that is unfinished and messy; it upends sedimented genealogies of recuperation and representation.

What More Remains

I began this short essay with a summoning of a historiography of sexuality that eschews the language of loss as the structuring mode of its narration. What we have in the archive of the Samaj is a story that stubbornly refuses to move on from the ordinary plenitude of sexuality. In this story, archival surplus repeats itself in a historical calculus so minor, so unspectacular, that it does not appear to excite historical recuperation. As we have already seen, the archives of the Samaj have not been read, circulated, or memorialized beyond a repeated reference to the glories of the Samaj's success as an aggressive, self-reforming collectivity. Such a historical elision

is particularly telling because there is no mystery surrounding access to the archive, no governmental bureaucracies to accommodate. Shorn of the aura of loss and oppositionality, we are confronted with a historiography that refuses to give up the paradoxes instantiated in its self-archiving: presence without preservation, production without reproduction. What more remains, then, is the promise and failure of archival recuperation, the looking for, and a queer historiography about found archival objects that are so plentiful that one must look askance.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Advocate Adhik Narayan Shirodkar (1951–2014). Shirodkar was a visionary and *kalavant* of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. He remains my most unreliable ghost.

I am grateful, as always, to Geeta Patel and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns for their judicious intellectual and editorial insights, as well as to audiences at Cornell University, Stanford University, the University of Toronto, and the Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. I am equally indebted to conversations with Lauren Berlant, Indrani Chatterjee, and Bishnupriya Ghosh.

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Notes

- 1 Some sample texts include Arunima; Dave; and Kapur.
- 2 See Chatterjee.
- 3 I do not mean to suggest here that Edelman and Halberstam are unproblematically recuperating languages of loss, lack, and failure, or that they are to be read as simply fungible within my conceptual formulation. Rather, each of their projects speaks (with varied degrees of success) to new imaginaries within queer theorizations of temporality and affect. I mean to draw attention to the persistence of dominant forms of queer reading that circulate around structuring tropes of loss, lack, and failure.
- 4 There is a literal cottage industry of texts on the potentiality of melancholia as a productive conceptual structure for thinking gender, sexuality, and difference. For example, see Eng and Kazanjian.
- 5 See Freeman; Goldberg and Menon; and Love.
- 6 Stephen Best makes an exemplary case for pushing against the melancholic attachments to the history of slavery.
- 7 See also Povinelli, “The Woman.”
- 8 For an excursus on the relationship between sexuality and archival hermeneutics, see A. Arondekar, *For the Record*.

- 9 Available colonial records register the presence of these *Devadasis* as early as the seventeenth century in Portuguese India, predictably describing them as depraved *baila-deiras*, or dancing girls. Such representations are routinely reproduced in a range of ecclesiastical and judicial records of the Portuguese state, at least until the mid-to late nineteenth century. Counter representations of *Devadasis* as revered purveyors of arts and culture are equally present within Sanskrit sources that are available from the same periods. See Madureira; and Perez.
- 10 For more historical detail on the emergence of the Samaj, see A. Arondekar, "Subject to Sex." Other texts that gloss briefly on the history of the Samaj include Bhobe; Khedekar; and Satoshkar.
- 11 There is a small and well recycled set of writings on the cultural history of *Devadasis* in southern India. Some key texts include Chakraborty; Kamble; Kersenboom-Story; Marglin; Ramberg; Shankar; and Srinivasan.
- 12 Goa's official liberation came on December 19, 1961, when the Indian Army moved in against the Portuguese garrisons as part of Operation Vijay. Yet, this late "liberation" by and into the Indian state did not come without a fair share of controversy and resentment. For many Goan historians and nationalists, Prime Minister Nehru's "soft policy" against the dictatorship of Portuguese rule provided late relief and relegated Goa to an extended state of historical stasis and neglect. See Deora; Rubinoff; and Shirodkar.
- 13 See Trichur. For a further sense of the peculiarity of Portuguese colonialism and its afterlife within Goan historiography, see Sousa Santos.
- 14 The translated summary I provide here covers over eight pages of text in Marathi. Part of the challenge is to render the affective tone of the description of the attack within the limitations of translation.
- 15 See also Boxer.
- 16 In addition to multiple references in Paigankar's *Mee Kon*, the case is also mentioned in Radhakrishnan (55, 63, 79). Radhakrishnan was a reputed Brahmin journalist who took it upon himself to write what he saw as one of the most revolutionary histories of Goan society.
- 17 Such invocations of caste shame and humiliation routinely appear in published biographies and life histories of lower-caste subjects in South Asia. There is much work still to be done in the continuities of content within the writings of ovc communities such as the Samaj and Dalit. See Guru.
- 18 References to the land awarded for the establishment of the school can be found in "Matriz Poinguinim"; and *Paigini Temple Documents* (in Marathi, Modi, and Portuguese).
- 19 See also Morris.
- 20 The term *Marathas* denotes a collective (and heavily debated) reference to Indo-Aryan groups of Hindu Marathi-speaking castes of warriors and peasants hailing largely from the present-day state of Maharashtra. Through their creation of a substantial empire in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Marathas occupied a major part of India. Of note here is that the Marathas were known as such primarily because their native tongue was mostly but not always Marathi. Thus, the terms *Marathi* people and *Maratha* people are not interchangeable and should not be confused. See Deshpande.

- 21 Waman Radhakrishnan writes extensively about the many names spawned by the Samaj's collective deliberations. The heated debates around the appropriate name for the Samaj derive from a range of concerns over which defining characteristic should be showcased within such a name: the refusal of tradition, art, reform, or region? See the chapter "Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Gova Sansthechi Sthapana" (75–89).
- 22 In many ways, the Samaj's debates around self-naming anticipate the paradoxes that Wendy Brown invokes around the limitations of rights discourses for minoritized communities (in her case, women and/or queers).
- 23 All the speeches given at the conference were reproduced verbatim in the May 1929 issue of *Samaj Sudharak*. The conference was also covered by newspapers in Goa such as *O Herald* and *Hindu-Mangalvaar* (26 May 1929).
- 24 See Kamat.
- 25 I am of course referring here to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's attentiveness to the perilous demands of a liberal project as "that which we cannot not want" (44).
- 26 A small sampling of notable singers from the Samaj between 1950 and 1959 (all women) would include Kesarbai Kerkar, Mogubai Kurdikar, Kumodini Pednekar, Saraswati Rane, Tarabai Shirodkar, and Saroj Welingkar.
- 27 An excellent example of such elisions is Janaki Bakhle's *Two Men and Music*.
- 28 The bulk of the archive is now housed at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj Society building in Mumbai, India. In 2004, the Samaj offices were moved from Gomantak Maratha Samaj Sadan, 345 V. P. Road, Bombay 400004 to Sitladevi Co-op Housing Society Ltd., 7–16/B Wing, D. N. Nagar, New Link Road, Andheri (W), Mumbai 400053. A partial archive can be found at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Dayanand Smriti, Swami Vivekanand Marg, Panaji 403001, Goa. My observations are culled from conversations I had with two archival custodians, Mr. Parvatkar in Bombay on June 9, 2012, and Mrs. Archana Kakodkar in Panaji on June 16, 2012.
- 29 Henry Scholberg's exhaustive and much cited work *Bibliography of Goa and the Portuguese in India* (1982) lists Paigankar's text as the only available published biography on the social lives of *Devadasis* in Goa (121, listing D148). Even such an appearance in an erstwhile authoritative bibliography of Goan texts, however, seems staged to garner attention (the entry occupies ten lines—more than any other entry), given the name of Scholberg's research collaborator in Goa: Mrs. Archana Kakodkar. Kakodkar has spent many years as a senior librarian at the Goa University and is herself a member of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj.
- 30 All issues of the *Samaj Sudharak* are currently housed in the Bombay branch of the Samaj archive. The periodical continues to appear on a monthly basis to this day but is now called *Gomant Shardha*.
- 31 I am grateful to Dr. Kakodkar, Senior Librarian (Retd.) at Goa University, for her invaluable help. See also C. Pinto.
- 32 See ch. 2–4 in Prakash, whose study continues to be the only available sociological study of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj.

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