



Book Review

Anjali Arondekar. (2023). *Abundance: Sexuality's History*. Durham: Duke University Press. Pp. 166. Price: €26.15. ISBN 978148019909.

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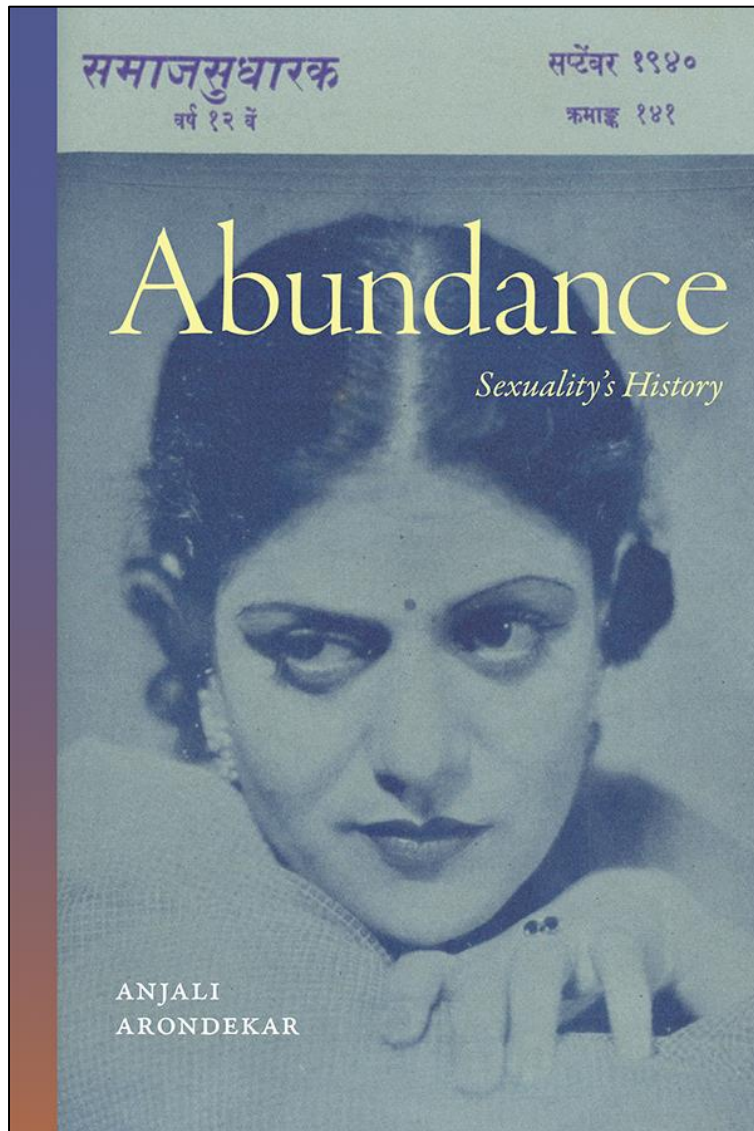


Image 8.1: Jacket Cover. The cover page of *Samaj Sudharak*, January 1933. Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archive, Mumbai India. (Source: Duke University Press / public domain).

Arondekar uses 'abundance' as a concept and metaphor in her ground-breaking new book titled *Abundance: Sexuality's History* that in her words is "a messier experiment, an open-ended inquiry that travels between a difficult present and an unfinished past, a reeling spiral of flight and return, approaching histories of sexualities aslant" (p. 3). In terms of both theory and method, Arondekar focuses on the plethora of sources on the sexual history of *devadasis* in Western India, referred to as artists (*kalavant* or *kalavantin*). Arondekar's book is a critique of a historiographical pattern that is recuperative and liberatory, that harbours elitist biases of seeking to discover loss, where sexuality is the Other, divested from the continuous historical presence of subaltern minorities and their archive on sexuality. The history of sexuality of subaltern groups inhabits asymmetrical relations with the western academic and historical habitus where it loses legibility for not needing to be 'saved'. In search of loss that needs saviours, liberatory and recuperative historiography thus endorses hegemonic evidentiary

regimes that elide the presence of subaltern abundance, fixating instead on sexuality within the "wider historical structures of vulnerability, damage, and loss" (ibid.). Identifying this historiographical trend as a form of hubris, Arondekar argues that minorities struggle additionally, not only with caste oppression, but with evidentiary genres that serve to obliterate and devalue their presence in archives owned by communities outside official and state-sanctioned 'endangered' collections. Reading sex as abundant is enriched (or complicated)

here through a geopolitics that is incommensurable with the historical value of the archive in relation to the West. Much of the archive on sexuality that is full of “the region’s myriad politics, theoretical nuance, and multilingual aesthetics” (p. 5) becomes illegible within western historical traditions. The archive Arondekar explores in this book, that she characterises as abundant, belongs to the Gomantak Maratha Samaj (henceforth, Samaj) in Mumbai. It is a prominent historical collection of materials from the lower-caste *devadasis* of Western India (Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka) located historically between the colonial Portuguese and the British. Overflowing with materials that continue to be collected, the archive is neither endangered and thus not digitized, as the community—prominent, and affluent members of society today—“cannot prove the exchange value of caste and sex” (p. 10). They are not ‘discoverable’ by historians since they are present everywhere. Thus, they are not considered historically important enough by historians wanting to save and liberate them. Because of its abundance and consequent unimportance, Arondekar argues that the Samaj’s archives becomes seen as errant materiality (p. 8), situated in an uncertain domain where evidentiary regimes transact power with the mainstream.

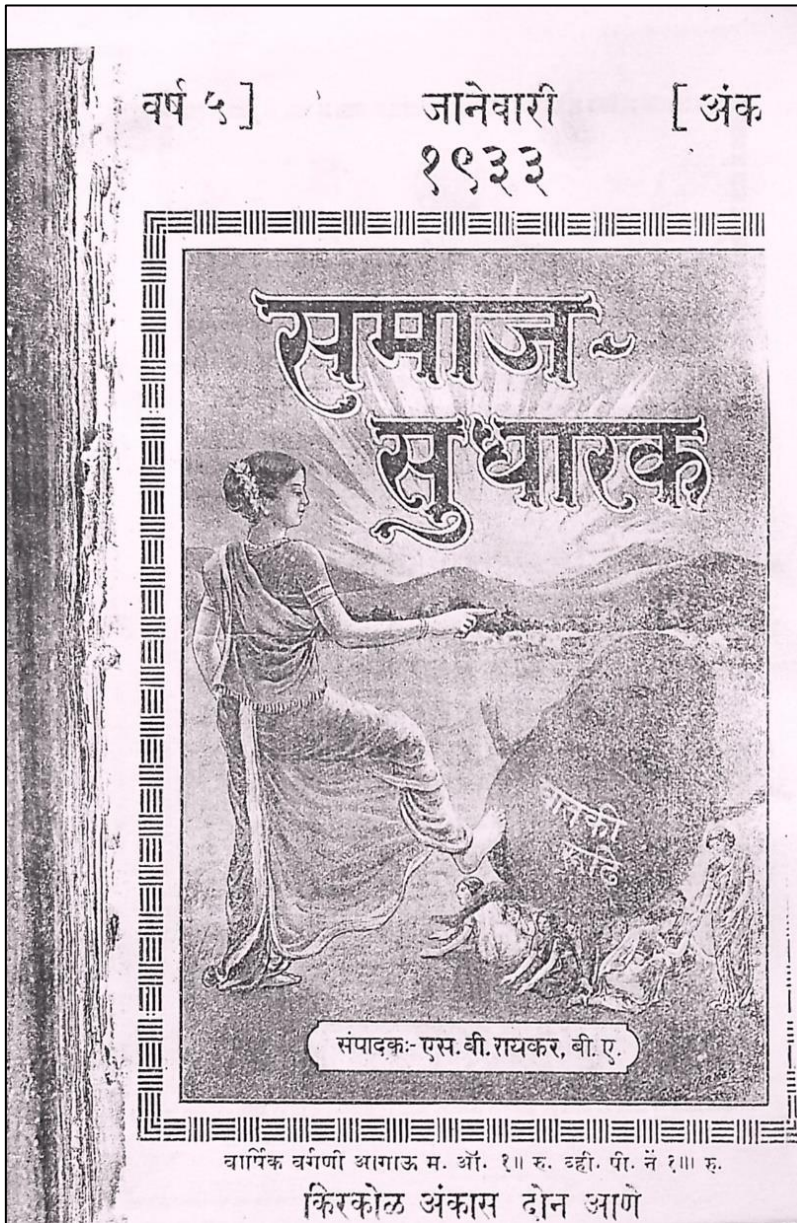


Image 8.2: The cover page of *Samaj Sudharak*, January 1933. Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archive, Mumbai India. (Source: author).

As Arondekar describes it (*Introduction: Make. Believe. Sexuality's Subjects*), Samaj members are a *devadasi* diaspora of artists and trained musicians (*kalavants*) who have existed for more than two centuries between the colonial Portuguese and the British in Western India. Referred to at times as ‘Dancing Girls’ in Catholic Goan sources, they are denigrated as lapsed ‘high-caste maidens’. On the other hand, *kalavants* hardly gain any dignity from being placed with Hindus, given the history of caste atrocities against them by Hindus and other local elites. The restitution of the *kalavants* within genealogies of caste and labour in Western India that had Saraswat Brahmins patronise them, demonstrates their longer history of caste exploitation and oppression. The men and women of the *kalavant* community laboured on Saraswat lands, and at the same time, they existed outside the reified category of traditional temple *devadasis* of South India. The

Samaj is an OBC (Other Backward Caste) community in Goa and Maharashtra today that continues to prosper, its archive copious and growing amidst the lament of the erased *devadasis* of India. Samaj members cannot be identified as ‘prostitutes’: “Rather, these *devadasis* were mostly female singers, classically trained, placed through ceremonies like *hath-lavne* (touching hands) into companionate structures with both men and women” (p. 14). They were exempted from anti-prostitution laws under the Portuguese and British as they “remained in structures of serial monogamy, supported by *yajemans*, both male and female, who functioned as patrons and partners through the life of the Samaj subject” (ibid.). Many Samaj members, especially on the Goan side, also had gender neutral names that made property inheritance from *yajeman* partners less contentious, even as many, after the passage of the anti-*devadasi* acts, migrated to Mumbai for work in the Hindi film industry (including the famed Mangeshkar sisters—Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle). The Samaj archive, consisting of multiple genres and vernacular registers (Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese) are replete with recordings of public vocal musical performances that are widely available and distributed, and yet the information about members elide their attachment to a history of sexuality—the history of caste and sexual labour to Brahmin *yajemans*.

This abundance of sexuality’s history that prospers under the *Savarna* radar of expectation is marked by its reduced transactional power. This reduced power then discursively produces the Samaj archive as unspectacular and uninteresting as its materials do not ascribe to the need among historians for ‘veracity’, and instead consist of art, mostly fiction, that Arondekar calls “the production of foundational fiction...that take centre stage in the Samaj’s self-fashioning project...rerouting the demand for archival presence, from conventional evidentiary forms to more imaginative modes of representation” (p. 16). These imaginative writings appear in the Samaj journal, the *Samaj Sudharak* (1929 -), “encompassing issues such as education, marriage, devadasi reform, the perils of prostitution, caste shame, travel, contraception, sports, and even the evils of gossip” (ibid.). Arondekar explains academic disinterest in the Samaj archive by placing it within the heuristic frame of Dalit Studies that battles historiographical conformity on the one hand, and on the other, through its rich traditions of orality and vernacularity, finds itself situated at the cusp of mainstream historiographical interest. While the theme of loss in Dalit studies is associated with Brahminical oppression, this loss does not allow Dalit history to be conveniently assembled within dominant, anticolonial, Hindu nationalist arguments. Similarly, the Samaj’s archival abundance does not allow it to be yoked to the nationalist, missionary cause of improvement and education. Instead, the Samaj’s archival abundance needs to be considered a form of ‘historical realism’ “that engages the living present, provincializing, as it were, the dead language of lost records and archives” (p.21), while embracing “joyful lineages of possibility and freedom” (p. 22).

The first chapter (*In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Archives*) presents readers with the destabilisation of historical truths in the imaginative writings of Samaj archives that is politically motivated and does not claim historical veracity. Its abundant ecosystem of imaginative genres instead highlights the Samaj’s relationship to the past. Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar’s biography, for example, who as the son of a *kalavantin* narratively staged a Saraswat Brahmin attack on the *devadasi* community of village Paigan in 1921 did so as “a strategic drama, directed precisely to protect and advance the interest of kalavantins” (p. 40). This narrative moreover had its desired effect as the Brahmins were admonished and “a school is also established for the kalavantin community in Paigan (through the support of the Portuguese state) that exists to this day” (p. 41). No archival record of the attack exists in other Portuguese records and in the subsequent part of the biography, Paigankar admits to narratively staging the attack towards political ends. The Samaj archive has other abundances: minutes of official meetings that see *kalavants* depend on the Portuguese and their refusal to join the liberation struggle. Essays in the Samaj journal, the *Samaj Sudharak* (1929 -), though mostly anonymous, cover

diverse issues exhorting caste members “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” (p. 46). Early issues of the *Sudharak* (image 8.2) contain short stories, accompanied by images (image 8.1) that emphasise the respectability of art for having sustained the community. The ‘lost letter’ genre in the *Sudharak* muses on topics that discuss sexuality, gender roles, caste, and class formation.

The second chapter (*A History I Am Not Writing: Sexuality’s Exemplarity*) explores how the Samaj archives can be read against the normativity of archival expectations, especially as an archive of sexuality, where instead of reading it as an archive of loss that performs abundance as a cache for the future, can be seen from the perspective of a strong discursive presence. Here Arondekar suggests ‘timepass’ as a heuristic description when approaching archival exemplars that refer to *kalavantins*. For instance, in a public meeting at Girgaum (Bombay) in 1911, taxpayers complained of the presence of ‘evil’ women in their area who loitered around the main roads, thoroughfares, and occupied ‘respectable’ quarters. The secretary to the government however took note of the fact that these ‘evil’ women were hardly ‘common prostitutes’; they were kept mistresses, the residences they occupied financially sustained by taxpaying members who were responsible for the moral decline of their own localities. Though these ‘evil ladies’ were in monogamous relationships with taxpaying partners, they were considered a threat to conjugality. Their existence was devalued through the heuristics of ‘timepass’ that described their artistic activities (*kala*): “Here the evil of the ladies shifts from the corruptions of sex to the debasement of *kala* (art), a shift that needs to be rerouted (and stabilized) through a more heteronormative marriage economy” (p. 73). Art and *kala* thus needed to be increasingly cultivated by middle-class heteronormative ladies to keep out the evil ladies and protect conjugality. Writings from early Bombay regularly express shock that these ladies (the ‘Bombay Dancing Girls’) can be so monied, given their perplexing backgrounds as both Hindu and Muslim and as migrants from Goa. This perplexity was added to by the legal petitions by *kalavantins* to the British state, demanding maintenance from the families of dead patrons or *yajemans*. This generated further debates on the legal nature of ‘true companionship’ (p. 71). Indeed, the culture of petitions in Bombay mobilised Samaj members to attain success: form groups, buy prime property in Bombay, and seek upwardly mobile professional positions in Bombay’s emerging entertainment industries.

Arondekar introduces us to how geopolitics played an important role for *kalavants* at the cusp of Indian independence in chapter 3 (*Itinerant Sex: Geopolitics as Critique*) that shifts our historical orientation to how traveling *kalavantins* located between Portuguese Goa (decolonial in the Latin American Studies sense) and British India (postcolonial in the South Asian Studies sense) were marked by their detachment—non-contribution to resistance movements outside their local contexts. This intersectionality made them illegible to the western gaze, and Samaj members were hardly ignorant of this conundrum either. Arondekar cites B.D. Satoshkar’s letter in the *Sudharak*’s September 1947 issue that warns Goans about having to make a choice between India (Maharashtra and Karnataka) or Pakistan where they ran the danger of being seen as dangerous outsiders and vassals of the Portuguese state. The other option was to remain as lower-caste *devadasis* in an independent but Brahmin Goa. “Last but not least, there is always the option of leaving Goa and embracing the (false) promise of Portuguese citizenship in foreign lands, even as such fidelity demands a painful abdication of culture and language, and their histories of sexuality” (p. 91). The importance of geopolitics for a history of sexuality that describes *kalavants* thus methodologically reiterates a diversity that has the potential to craft south-south transnational networks to generate robust “place-bound ontologies, epistemologies, and technologies” (p. 93). Here, the Samaj’s sexuality or *kala* “forges a historiographical lexicon in which genealogies of the past and future merge into a pragmatic poetics that reads geopolitics anew,” wherein the Samaj “strategically mobilizes the

politics, desires, and identities made possible by the reach of geopolitics” (p. 97). The upward mobilisation of the Samaj that internalised this geopolitics is exemplified by the lower-caste democratic revolution of Goa after 1961 and the rise of Samaj member Dayanand Bandodkar (BSP—Bahujan Samaj Party) as a leader, who as a trader, used the Samaj’s lineage of sexuality, kinship, and geopolitics to enable his own business success in South Asia (p. 96):

The Gomantak Maratha Samaj, our geo-history here, is neither familiar nor identitarian nor salvageable. It is more a sprawling, geo-epistemology (here and there) that animates the spaces we seek to occupy. It is knowledge less through heroic exemplars—however moving or nimbly organized—than within archival economies that are restless, experimental, and pragmatic, aimed more at the unravelling of space and time. Itinerant sex as heuristic summons attentiveness to places that are ikde aani tikde (here and there), inherently nonrecuperative, not discovered (again). To be ikde aani tikde, as we have seen through the Samaj’s history of sexuality, is to focus more on the analytical and political itineraries historical methods follow, and the lessons of geopolitics they bypass or leave behind.

The fourth and final chapter is a postscript or Coda (*I Am not Your Data: Caste, Sexuality, Protest*), providing additional examples of abundance from postcolonial India that cannot be read through the lens of either recuperation or evidentiary genres. Arondekar’s analytical turn to ‘abundance’ demonstrates a shift from the usual liberatory mode of writing the histories of sexuality, to a mode of writing the present that is continuous and “without return or the fear of loss” (p. 25). Moving to the other cases, Arondekar describes how the anti-CAA protests in India were aimed at dismantling evidentiary regimes that demanded paper-work measured against the legal and human rights of minoritised subjects. She moves poignantly to virtual family communications between herself, her partner Lucy, and her mother (Aai) during the pandemic, a condition that again required evidentiary papers (passports and visas) and that contributed to the heartbreak of physical separation (p. 124). The *Acknowledgements* section, coupled with the first two sections of *Primary Sources* (*Call Me Rama*) and (*Only You*) are even more poignant. Arondekar describes drawing her inspiration to approach the Gomantak Maratha Samaj archive (the archive of her own community) from her parents. Encountering a letter by her father (Baba and/ or Rama) in the *Sudharak*’s July 1949 issue, she finds him “excoriating Brahmin fathers and patrons and calling for an end to the biological determinism of blood relationships” (p. 135). “Reading Baba amid the pages of our Samaj archives has meant finally saying yes to Rama. It has meant speaking with, and to, a parent who forged an extraordinary life, despite, or because of, the damning calculus of caste, class, and sexuality” (p. 136). Arondekar ends the book by writing an emotional ode to her mother who suffers from dementia, based on a photograph from 1957: “Aai’s photograph summons that history of abundance, asking not to be restored to memory but to be set adrift on a voyage of identifications. Perhaps such abundance leaves us inarticulate; perhaps we are daunted by the weight of its promise” (p. 137).

Abundance is a deeply powerful book. Drawn by the magnetic force of Arondekar’s words, I have never quoted verbatim in a review as extensively, as I have done in this case. *Abundance* is also poignant, necessarily personal-political in the feminist sense, and hence, inspiring. It provides a significant point of learning for many of us struggling scholars of colour in the Western academy who have never dared to write the incommensurable and illegible—errant materialities that subvert epistemic categories about South Asia that Western academy generates for itself—couched as it being authored for and by us. Many of us do not dare to write histories that are not discoverable, histories of ourselves, because of our seemingly omnipresent Otherness that has become ubiquitous. The regular shock expressed at how

affluent or educated we are, or our grandmothers were before us, is familiar; it made me smile. Our 'discoverability' is weighed against the hubris of our 'discoverers'. Our ubiquitousness and resistance to being discovered, daring to claim that we are as relatively 'unmarked' as our discoverers are, invites retribution—the label of boringly different—the demand that we compete for affluence. Being boringly different obliterates our diversity, our different histories of the continuous present, our proliferating relationships across groups and regions, our secret loves, our hidden shames. Many of us who, for the sake of being accepted as unmarked, have lived with being uninteresting, hiding our difference under identities that serve to place us within legible genealogies, have forgotten our discomfort, our awkwardness. We have compromised.

The tussle for South Asian South Asianists lies in the conundrums surrounding writing ourselves—selves that are unspectacular but all over the place—as we consider writing anew and differently about a resistant-to-discovery modern South Asia. Reading *Abundance*, parts of it for the second or third time, and marvelling at the courage of the book, I caught myself wondering whether the tragedy lies elsewhere (not that there has to be a tragedy every time). In her reiteration of there being no loss and no absence and no recuperation required for the *kalavants* and *kalavantins* of Western India, *Abundance* exposes our own awkwardness about our ordinary South Asian selves in the West that exists between ubiquitousness and Otherness. How do we write ourselves, even as we continue to be ourselves. This methodological difficulty generates a loss that *Abundance's* readers confront. Readers understand at their very cores, the exhaustion inherent in constantly reinventing Indian history, making it discoverable, fundable, publishable, and deliverable in Western classrooms—a sleuth-self pushed to repeatedly jump the final hoop towards financial security and dignity. The liberation here is not in allowing ourselves to metamorphosise into the data bringers of the West—insiders who jump into dangerous pools to fish out the treasure lying hidden underneath. The liberation lies in being ourselves as powerfully as we can, at the expense of being deliciously boring. This book shouts out at us, excoriating us like Arondekar's Baba (or Rama) would, to make relationships out of choice that are not dominated by what the hegemonic system gives us, whether through blood, or through other equally binding lineages. In its call to us, asking us to rise to the unspectacular, *Abundance* is also deeply political, perhaps as political as Paigankar's staged narrative attack against the *devadasis* by the Saraswat Brahmins of Paigan, written to a politically activist end in 1921.

Not only is the book important for undergraduates, postgraduates, and researchers on gender, sexuality, caste, historiography, archival studies and methods, Western India, and South Asia that is characterised by multiple and intersecting geopolitical colonial histories, this book is mostly important for South Asian readers. *Abundance* will speak differently to each South Asian reader, inviting them to introspect on their locus as co-producers of evidentiary regimes. But not to make a mistake here, *Abundance* does not judge its readers. It is equally unproblematic to become like Dayanand Bandekar who used the ordinary lineages available to him, to enable his own success.