

Fighting for L.G.B.T. people in India

BOOK REVIEW

An Indefinite Sentence: A Personal History of Outlawed Love and Sex

By Siddharth Dube. 372 pp. Atria Books. \$28.

BY SONIA FALEIRO

In 1988, when Siddharth Dube was a deeply in love 26-year-old, the majority of gay men in India concealed their sexual orientation. A colonial-era law, Section 377, criminalized homosexuality, which was defined as an “unnatural” offense. To protect themselves from arrest, many gay men socialized in public parks and toilets under the cover of darkness. As an Americanized journalist just in from New York, Dube was often shielded from the accumulation of traumas that defined the lives of others. With his partner, a Parisian Bharatanatyam dancer, the cool Delhi nights passed in idyllic fashion. Until the night the police called them in.

“The man sitting behind the desk in the muddy-brown uniform of the Delhi police looked at me with such aggressive loathing,” Dube writes in “An Indefinite Sentence,” his heart-stopping memoir of being gay in India and the world. “I thought, momentarily, that he had mistaken me for someone else. . . . He burst out angrily, almost as if in a rage. ‘You are a homo! You have naked men dancing at your house, exposing themselves. Go back to America! If you want to live here, you will live as an Indian, not like an American!’”

Dube fled. A scholarship at Harvard put him on the path to a career in global health policy, with a special focus on AIDS. “In every way, this was a disease about me,” he explains. “This virus that was intertwined with our essential human longing for sex and

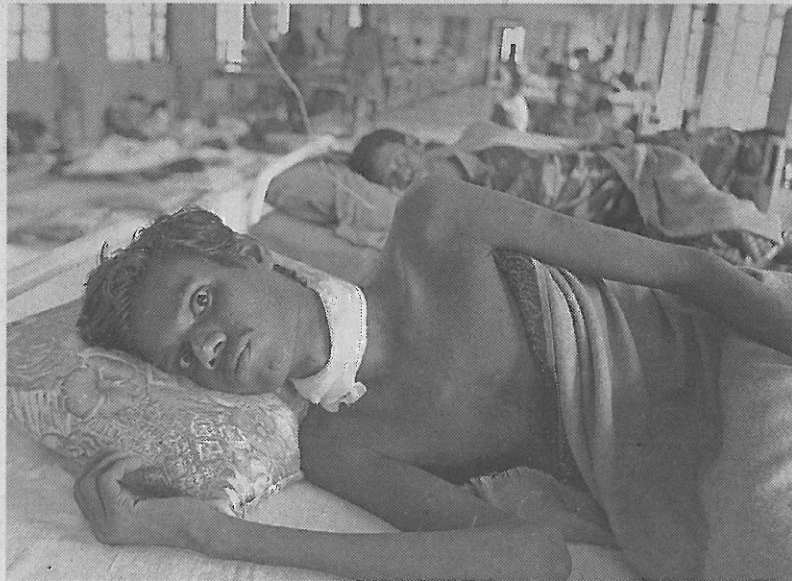
love, and with being outlawed, shamed and persecuted.”

From that distance, it was easier to assess the things — beautiful and terrible — that had defined life in India. There was the magical childhood in Calcutta with loving parents, private yoga lessons and bedtime stories. But then, from the age of 11, there were the seven years at the Doon School, the elite public school in the Himalayan foothills, where sexual abuse by older students flourished and headmasters cruelly advised victims to “become tougher.” It speaks to the author’s transcendental capacity for forgiveness that he was later able to harness the memories of his abuse into fighting for the human rights of others. “My own suffering seemed less random and unfair,” he writes, “now that I could see so many other people who had also been wrongfully cast out by society.”

As the AIDS epidemic gathered ferocious momentum in the United States, the activist and author Paul Monette observed, “Death by AIDS is everywhere around me, seething through the streets of this broken land.” Dube responded by living a life of virtual abstinence. Over the next few years, he poured himself into work for the United Nations, the World Bank and then Unicef. He published two books, including a deeply reported account of one impoverished family’s life in India.

And so, although this is a personal memoir, it is also a memoir of work. Work helped Dube find himself. And work allowed him to live a life he could be proud of. It’s in combining his personal story with the ravages of AIDS he witnessed that Dube advances the genre of queer memoirs in India.

The book has precursors. Firdaus Kanga’s novelized account of his life in Bombay, “Trying to Grow” (1991), is



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A patient infected with H.I.V., at a government hospital in eastern India.

one important example. Another is “Because I Have a Voice” (2005), in which the editors Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan brought together an indelible set of essays and personal narratives from across the country. At the opposite end of the class spectrum, A. Revathi’s gut-wrenching “The Truth About Me” (2010) recounted the normalized violence facing the country’s hijras — a term for a variety of third gender. But Dube’s return to India in the 1990s, at the height of its AIDS crisis, equipped him to chronicle another vital story. His critical and vivid reporting of the time brings to mind the achievements of David France in “How to Survive a Plague.”

In 1996, doctors in India told The New York Times that the death toll from AIDS could reach 20 million, or

even 50 million, by the end of the century. That year, after a group of prostitutes in the southern city of Madras were arrested for solicitation, a researcher working for Dr. Suniti Solomon, the microbiologist credited with pioneering AIDS research in India, drew samples of their blood. The women didn’t know what they had consented to. The six who tested positive for H.I.V. were immediately transported to a government-run reformatory where they were confined to a tiny room. They were refused legal and medical aid and access to their families.

A pattern was set in place. “Forever after in India,” Dube writes, “AIDS was thought of as a disease of women prostitutes merely because the first indigenous cases were detected among

them. They were accused of spreading the sexual infection to hapless men, who then spread it to their innocent wives and babies.” On the pretext of protecting the public, human rights abuses became rampant.

Some doctors didn’t just refuse to treat victims; they leaked their status to the media. Prostitutes were imprisoned in such large numbers, the government had to set up makeshift camps to house them. And Hindu supremacist politicians censored any public conversation about sex and sexuality. In 1996, vigilante groups empowered by such politicians burned down movie theaters that screened Deepa Mehta’s film “Fire,” because it focused on a lesbian relationship. The idea that homosexuality is a disease brought to India by Islamic invaders is popular even today. Last September, after the Supreme Court overturned Section 377, a politician from the prime minister’s Bharatiya Janata Party called homosexuality “a genetic disorder, like having six fingers.”

Such statements betray an ignorance of traditional values. “Hindu mythology,” the author Devdutt Pattanaik writes in “Shikhandi,” his retelling of popular myths, “makes constant references to queerness.” A key character in the war epic Mahabharata was born a woman and becomes a man. A great king experiences life as both a man and a woman. And, in an oral retelling of the story of Lord Ram, the Hindu god is so moved by the steadfast devotion of his hijra subjects that he promises, “Never again shall you be invisible.” In the literary history “Same-Sex Love in India,” the academic Ruth Vanita reminds us that pre-Islamic texts feature “men and boy prostitutes and dancers who service men . . . in descriptive, nonjudgmental terms, as normally present in court

and in daily life.”

Nationalist politicians, more so than anyone else, should by now be aware that it was the British, with their Victorian prudery, and their fear and distaste of Indians, who criminalized homosexuality. They empowered the police to arrest hijras without a warrant for merely “appearing” to be “dressed or ornamented like a woman.”

By the time of the AIDS crisis, these forms of persecution were widely embedded in Indian society; they forced vulnerable groups to take the lead in the campaign to spread awareness. In Madras, one of the H.I.V.-positive prostitutes isolated at the start of the epidemic started working as a peer educator. In the coastal state of Goa, Dominic D’Souza, a young gay man, fought to dissolve the law that had allowed the state to isolate him in a TB sanitarium after he fell ill. Collectives of prostitutes mushroomed across the country. On one memorable occasion, a protest outside Parliament shut down the main streets of the Indian capital. In the time they had, many victims catalyzed transformative change in how the public approached the unprecedented crisis.

By reminding us of their achievements, Dube gives his readers the substantial gift of hope. The sentiment is, in fact, the spine of his memoir. “The impoverished, the reviled and the outcast — whether black or untouchable, whether girly boy, faggot, hijra or whore — never stop fighting for dignity and justice,” he writes. “There is hope in this — undying hope. It makes bearable the most indefinite of sentences.”

Sonia Faleiro is the author of “Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay’s Dance Bars.”