

# **Gender, Caste and the Imagination of Equality**

edited by  
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- <sup>9</sup> Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, 'Riddle No. 18: Manu's Madness or the Brahmanic Explanation of the Origin of the Mixed Castes & Riddle No. 19: The Change from Paternity to Maternity: What did the Brahmans Wish to Gain from It?' in Sharmila Rege (ed.), *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013): 137–178.
- <sup>10</sup> V. Geetha, 'Social Suffering and Salvation: The Relevance of the Buddha and His Dhamma' in V. Geetha and N. Rajan (eds.), *Religious Faith, Ideology, Citizenship: The View from Below* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011): 123–147.

## ANJALI ARONDEKAR

### Caste, Sexuality, and the *Kala* of the Archive

#### Introduction

What words stake. Marginality and loss, paucity and disenfranchisement: these are the hermeneutical forms that have become the common currency of histories of sexuality and caste. The missing amphora of sexuality is recovered from the archival detritus of hegemonic histories of colonialism and nationalism, and showcased within more liberatory narratives of reform and rights.<sup>1</sup> Even scholars of pre-colonial 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.<sup>2</sup> This orientation to loss, *mutatis mutandis*, surfaces within histories of caste as forms of loss, lack and failure reverberate in the face of, or rather because of, our embattled political horizons.

To be clear here, I am not facetiously lambasting or rejecting such histories of sexuality and caste; rather, my meditations call upon a figuration of historiography that pushes against the binding energies of such melancholic historicism.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> To fix sexuality and caste primarily within such an arbitrary arsenal of loss (while politically exigent) is to refuse alternative histories of emergence. 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 and caste as sites 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.<sup>5</sup> My efforts here, however, are more drawn to grappling with how such recuperative historiographical methods assume, as Geeta Patel argues, their more salutary forms of loss precisely in the service of collectivities, such as lower-caste communities tallying up what they do not as yet have in relation to other constituencies.<sup>6</sup> 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 minoritised caste 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

fulfilment and impoverishment? The challenge here is to engage a historiography of caste and sexuality 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; 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*/art), shuttled between Portuguese and British colonial India for over two hundred years, challenging European epistemologies of race and rule through their inhabitation in two discrepant empires.<sup>7</sup> As the story goes, the Goan Saraswats were historically the primary patrons of the devadas and devised a structure that demarcated *kalavants* who were either *ghanis* (singers) or *nachinis* (dancers) or both, *bhavis* (women who attended to temple rituals) and *fulkars* (flower collectors). Of significance here is that both men and women did menial and physical labour on the farmlands of the Saraswat Brahmins and the Mahajans (elders associated with religious institutions) and were named *chede* or *bande*, literally bodies tied to the land. Included within the Goan devadasi structure were also *Chinade farjand* or *frejent*, a Persian term literally meaning boy but that principally applied to sons of single mothers who had sex with their employers. These latter groups of boys were referred to as *devuli* (male members of the Bhavin class) and were situated lower than the *kalavants* within the devadasi sub-structures.<sup>8</sup>

Tracing its roots back to early eighteenth-century Goa, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj (GMS; henceforth the Samaj) is an OBC (Other Backward Class) community and was established as a formal organisation 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 well-documented histories of reform, particularly in southern India, this community's story in Portuguese Goa underwent very little transformation and exposure until the early part of the twentieth century. Kalavants in the GMS community, unlike the devadasi figurations in southern India, rarely wed deities and were not 'prostitutes' in any conventional sense of the word. Rather, kalavants were mostly female singers, classically trained, placed through ceremonies like *hathi-lavne* into companionate structures with both men and women. Only occasionally do we find references to dedications to deities through rituals such as the *shens* ceremony. And even then, the ceremony appears more as a proxy wedding in which a girl who is to be dedicated to a god or goddess is wed to a (surrogate) groom always represented by another girl dressed as a man, holding a coconut and a knife in hand.

Portuguese colonial officials also granted GMS members exemption from anti-prostitution laws, primarily because kalavants remained in structures of serial monogamy, supported by *yajmans*, both male and female, who functioned as patrons and partners through the life of the kalavant subject. Kalavants were also crucially sworn to remain in the spatial proximity of temples, irrespective of whether they performed ritual temple roles or not. One curious feature of such arrangements was that children born to kalavants were often given gender-neutral names that made accession of inheritance (particularly land) less judicially contentious, especially after the death of a particular *yajman*, or patron. With the passage of the anti-devadasi acts, many GMS members gradually made their way to urban spaces like Bombay (now Mumbai) in search of work in the newly emergent Hindi film industry where they could openly pursue their kalavant training, adopt Marathi as their

*lingua franca*, assimilate into society, marry legitimately, and escape the stranglehold of older devadasi histories signified by continued Saraswat condemnation of the Samaj. An early study on the migration into, and rehabilitation of 'prostitutes' in Bombay (with a 'reference to family background') applauds the positive efforts of the GMS, and contrasts it sharply with other organisations like the Association of Tawarifs and Deredars that continued to use the 'singing girls' as 'shield' to propagate more 'unscrupulous' and unlawful activity. But the study also notes that 'the majority of their respondents' are women from Goa, whose mother tongue is Konkani!<sup>9</sup>

Unlike more received histories of devadasis in South Asia that lament their disappearance or erasure, 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. Its archives (housed in Panaji and Mumbai) constitute an efflorescence of information in Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, newsletters, private correspondence, flyers, programmes, all filled with details of the daily exigencies and crises that concerned the community. Often referred to as 'Bharatai 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. The success of kalavants was not restricted to the arts, but extended to the fields of science, literature and philosophy.<sup>10</sup> From the immortal Mangeshkar sisters (Lata and Asha), to the first chief minister of independent Goa, Dayanand Bhandarkar, there are few sectors of Indian society where the presence of Samaj members cannot be felt.<sup>11</sup>

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 and

caste through its survival and geography and holds much potential for a differentiated model of historiography. As devadasis are studied more in southern India, and rarely in western India, we have here the regional twist;<sup>12</sup> 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—let us leave aside here the startling point that the Portuguese occupied Goa for nearly 451 years—enabling a south-south colonial comparison.<sup>13</sup> And last but not the least, Goan historiography itself, long written off as an under-developed and under-theorised 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.<sup>14</sup> 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, minoritising 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 archives of the Samaj must be read as examples of catadrestis, as incitements to analytical reflection that produce 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 non-reproductive and the unfinished. Let me turn then to one such example within the Samaj archives.

### That thrilling dark night

*Bundachi tee romanchkari kaari raatr* (A thrilling dark night of insurrection). May 25, 1921. It is 10 pm 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 realise 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. (*My translated summary*)

Thus writes, Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar, the son of a kalavantin (literally, a term used for women with kala/art, a sub-grouping within the Goan devadasi structure), in the first volume of his much-heralded autobiography, *Mee Kon* (Who am I?).<sup>15</sup> The attack takes place in Paigim, a small village in the taluka of Cancona, 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 neighbouring village.

There is, of course, as is to be expected in any narrative re-telling, a pre-history to the halla (attack). Four days earlier, on May 21, 1921, Paigankar and his comrades hold a general Satyanarayan puja (a ritual that celebrates Lord Satyanarayan, an avatar of Lord Vishnu, that is often held to commemorate an auspicious occasion or to ward off impending evil), calling for a repudiation of caste hierarchies and religious differences. An enthusiastic crowd of over a thousand people from five neighbouring villages gathers, composed primarily of the Devli and Bande castes (the lowest sub-groupings 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 demands an end to brahmin hegemony and speaks passionately at the puja about the need for education and reform. Yet, despite all the excitement and support of the gathered crowd, the puja remains unfinished. No purohit (priest) is willing to step forward to complete the rites, fearful of incurring the wrath of the powerful Saraswats. And the wrath of the brahmins does follow. Paigankar and the larger devadasi community in Paigai are immediately banned from all social functions, their lands confiscated, their businesses shut down and a general sanction is imposed against all of their interactions. Paigankar is seen as the key protagonist in an escalating drama of anti-brahmin sentiment and is asked to appear before the ruling brahmin council. Even worse, hundreds of brahmin youth are rumoured to have taken up arms in retaliation and threaten to attack and destroy Paigankar and his followers. There are signs that such anti-brahmin activities are spreading apace in southern Goa as similar pujas are said to be taking place in nearby Lolegaon, a second stronghold of Saraswat brahmin hegemony. The scene is set for the inevitable events of that thrilling dark night.<sup>16</sup>

After the attack, another extraordinary set of events follows. Paigankar, and twenty-five kalavantins from his village, travel to Panjim, acquire legal representation and submit a writ appeal to the Governador-General of Portuguese Goa, Jaime Alberto de Castro Morais (1920–25). In the appeal, Paigankar et al. write, 'We, a Gayak Kalavant Samaj (community of singers and artists), based in Paigai, are endeavouring 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.'<sup>17</sup> 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' (Old) and 'Novas Conquistas' (New Conquests) in Portuguese Goa. Often referred to as the Republican period in Goan history, the years 1900–1926 have been heralded as a time of renaissance for Goan arts, culture and politics.<sup>18</sup> 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, Satar, Ponda, Sangem, Quepem and Paigankar's taluka, Cancona. These talukas lacked the density of population and the economic heft of the areas under the Old Conquest. One positive byproduct 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.<sup>19</sup> Goan devadasis were to be found more predominantly in the New Conquests where Hinduism (allegedly) thrived with less persecution, and where

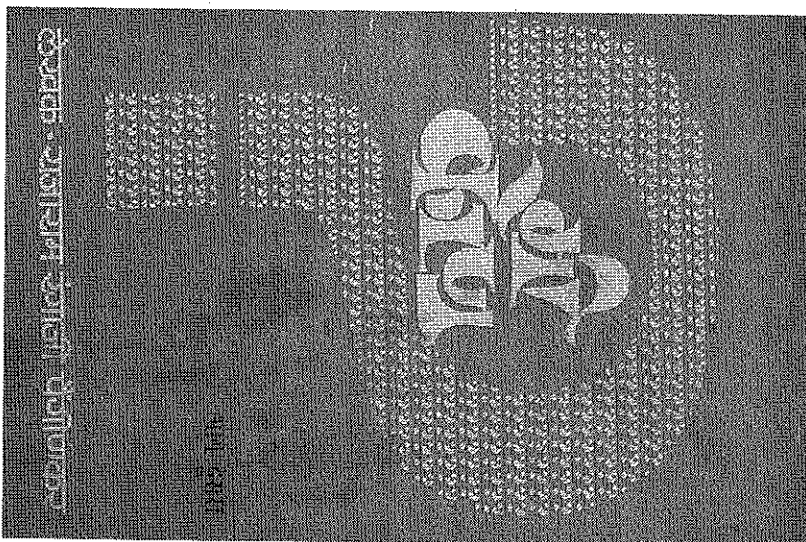
temples remained relatively unscathed.<sup>20</sup> The Census of 1920, for example, the year before this halla took place, notes that Goa officially had four hundred and five *bailadeiras* (dancing girls), mostly located within the talukas of the New Conquests.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, it would come as less of a surprise that Governor Morais responds positively and in an unprecedented fashion to the submitted appeal. So moved is Morais by the plight of the distraught women accompanying Paigankar, that he immediately censures the Saraswat brahmin community of Paigin and orders official protection for the kalavants. News of the appeal and its aftermath spreads like wildfire across Goa, and editorials appear in both the Portuguese and vernacular press, as the kalavantins appear to have incited the beginning of a grassroots resistance against the brahmin hegemony. And last but not least, the Governor's judgment founds 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 archives, or in the Portuguese colonial archives in Lisbon. However, the case, Kalavantin Bhima versus the Saraswat Council of Paigin, is repeatedly referenced in Paigankar's biography as a mark of the community's successful campaign for reform. The brahmins, we are told, are asked to return the seized lands and monetarily compensate the kalavants for lost revenue and damaged property.<sup>22</sup>

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, *Mee Gharavar Halla ka Ghadvoon Aani* (Why did I Stage the Attack on my House?), recall that when the above mentioned account appears in the first volume, Paigankar explains that the attack was, in fact, '*ek saubhadr 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 precipitates the ritual of the reformist Satyanarayan puja. Paigankar, for example, recounts his degrading experiences at the residence of a local Saraswat brahmin where he is invited for a meal, only to

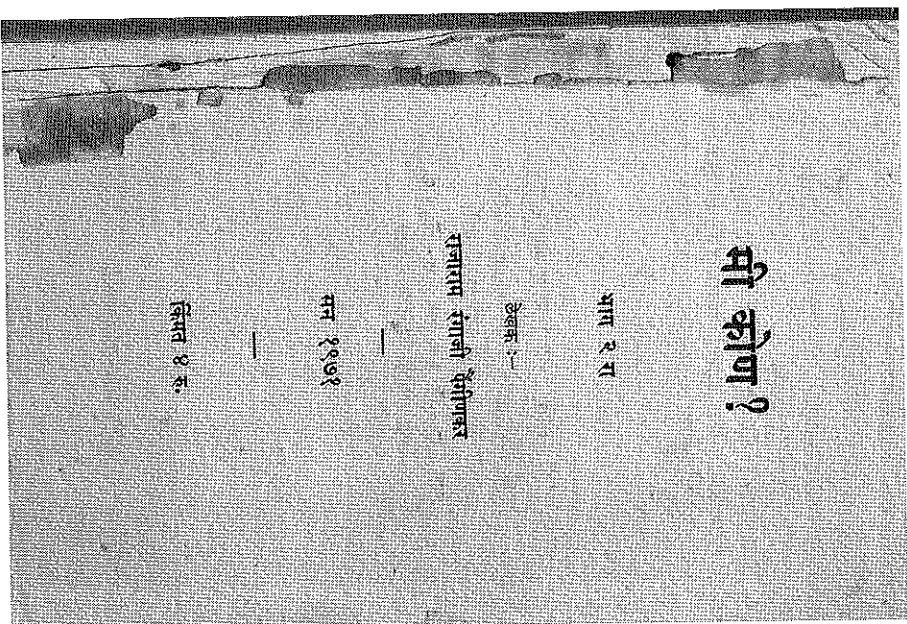
FIGURE 1: Front cover of Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar's *Mee Kon* (Volume II: 1971)



A signed copy of the text is archived at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Mumbai, India.

Source: Published courtesy of the Samaj.

Figure 2: Title page of Paigankar's *Mee Kon* (Volume II: 1971)



Source: Published courtesy of the Samaj.

then be asked to partake of the food in a soiled plate used to feed animals in the house.<sup>23</sup> Such experiences are compounded by the fact that the *yajmanans* who frequent kalavantin houses are themselves Saraswat brahmins. Paigankar's own bio-father, a well-known

Saraswat businessman in the village, aggravates the situation further by urging Paigankar to appear before a brahmin village council, and pledge contrition for his actions. Paigankar even attempts to contest a legal claim against the seizure of kalavantin lands by the brahmins, but his efforts are thwarted by a lack of funds and a general fear of brahmin reprisal. With the sanctions against the kalavantis worsening each day, a sense of urgency and desperation defines 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, persuades six comrades to attack his home on that fateful night. The comrades are given detailed instructions about when they should attack, from which vantage point, and for how long. Each individual is asked to recite prepared lines explaining their whereabouts at a neighbour's residence, should any of them be questioned after the attack. Not a soul is 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 remain in the dark. Such secrecy, writes Paigankar, guarantees the narrative heft of the attack as the heinous work of frenzied Saraswat youth. Bhima, the young kalavantin, who serves as the director behind the scenes, sets the stage perfectly for that fateful night of insurrection. Mobilising established economies of rumour, fear and humiliation, Bhima, along with her sister kalavantis, ensures that the larger village community truly embraces and anticipates the fiction of the attack. Guns are mysteriously set off around kalavantin homes prior to the night of the attack, and a general fear of Saraswat retaliation suffuses all conversation.<sup>24</sup> An attack on Paigankar's home thus provides the necessary climax to such calculated and frenzied fear, so perfectly scripted are the conditions of its production. And the staging, as we already know, does produce its desired effects. In addition to



the alleged case against the Saraswats, a school is also established for the kalavantin community in Paigain (through the support of the Portuguese state) that exists to this day.<sup>25</sup>

### The halla in the archive

Does the revelation that the attack was so deftly staged denude it of salvific historical value, or does its narrative veracity (but, in fact, an event was being staged) inaugurate a different orientation to archival production? Let me explain what I mean. For anyone who works within historical archives, it would come as no surprise that any hegemonic text making confident claims to historical truth will be destabilised, 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 minoritised archives where the 'subversion/resistance hypothesis' (despite or perhaps because of the contaminations of Foucault and subaltern studies) continues to function as differences 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. 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, routinised 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 Hindu-centric) history, Paigankar asks his readers to recapitalise our political commitment to compensation through an understanding of the staging of archives. The architecture of the mob attack too reprises a set of representations so central to any subaltern history of opposition or resistance.<sup>26</sup> Within the lineaments of the story, Paigankar accesses earlier stylised 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 meconnaissance 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 re-enact 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 such that we, as readers, are asked to retool our 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, dramatisation, staging, picture frame, window, and above all as the assemblage, or installation of a critical aperture, a supplemental time space.'<sup>27</sup>

Such a supplementary archive equally draws attention to the weight of origins as places of commencement within liberationist

histories of sexuality and caste (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,' particularly when it comes to the histories of sexuality?<sup>28</sup> 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 this attack?') 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 his revelation, the reviews express gratitude for Paigankar's canny historical sense, urging readers to learn from his 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.<sup>29</sup>

As we have already seen, initial efforts to organise the community were primarily led by Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar as early as 1902. He 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/Group) to Gomantak Maratha Samaj (Goan Maratha Collectivity/Group), 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 sub-castes of devadasi labour, emphasising more 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.<sup>30</sup> 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). In many ways, the Samaj's early struggles around self-nominalisation anticipate many of the paradoxes that have now become the mainstay in discussions of rights and representation. At issue here 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 marginalisation.<sup>31</sup>

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 travelling 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 the Samaj women. Sexuality featured heavily in all discussions of the reform as the structuring mode through which to forge futures, as a space of radical possibility for opening up larger avenues for

the Samaj's development. Members were urged to strategically mobilise their devadasi histories as pedagogical tools, to create the much-needed societal discussions on sexuality and morality, and, in so doing, to *sudhaar/improve* not just themselves but society as a whole. Despite such expressed zeal for large-scale social change, no salutory reference or connection was made to the ongoing liberation struggles, either in British or Portuguese India.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the early absence of any collective involvement by the Samaj in resistance movements outside 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, 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 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 Mumbai and Panaji being 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 to join any social project outside its own historicity.

### Radical abundance

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's archives stubbornly enact readings that

unsettle the foundational link between historical reproduction and archival preservation. Radical abundance here is presence without return, or the fear of loss. 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 archives opens up the question of how we record histories of sexuality and caste in many different keys.<sup>33</sup> 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 labour 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.<sup>34</sup> 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 routinely elide any attachment to histories of sexuality. Mostly hagiographical in nature, these archives of voice and sound have been routinely utilised 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.<sup>35</sup>

Alternately, the Samaj's own archives, as I mentioned earlier in the essay, are massively messy, and contain multiple genres of archival records, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, private correspondence, flyers, programmes, replete with the



FIGURE 3: Cover page of *Samaj Sudharak*, January 1930



Source: Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archives, Mumbai, India

minutiae of everyday life in the Samaj. Such efflorescence appears startling, almost jarring, pushing against archival expectations of absence and erasure. The Samaj archives are housed in open collections in Mumbai and Panaji, and have always been available

FIGURE 4: Cover page of *Samaj Sudharak*, January 1933



Source: Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archives, Mumbai, India

for public viewing since their formation in 1929. In fact, the Samaj's incitement to archive is only surpassed by its startling disinterest 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 archives 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 Mumbai and Panaji) was one full of mirth and consternation. For them, the risk of loss is more '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 archives appear 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 and caste 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 archives, with little effort being expended to either digitalise or republish older, more fragile materials.<sup>36</sup>

I have thus far elaborated on the textual nature of the Samaj archive, its overflow of writing, if you will, as a supplement (in the Derridean sense) to the over privileging of the visual or the 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 highlights the difficulty of narrating a history drawn from such different, incommensurate, and textured archives. My reading centres, 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). Instead, I have struggled to read the history of the Samaj neither as a seductive exemplar, nor as an exceptional case-study that needs decoding (that is, of course,

the preferred form). After all, there remains the enduring allure of a virtuosio reading (within which I, too, am mired) that will somehow unravel the secrets of sexuality. Rather, the Samaj archives speak more to a history of sexuality and caste that is unfinished, messy, upending sedimented genealogies of recuperation and representation.

#### Endnotes

1. Some sample texts include, G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar, c. 1850–1940* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003); Ratna Kapur, *Erotic Justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* (Portland: Cavendish Publishing, 2005); Naisargi Dave, *Queer Activism in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
2. See Indrani Chatterjee, 'When "Sexualities" Floated Free of Histories in South Asia', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2012, 71 (4): 945–962.
3. Stephen Best makes an exemplary case for pushing against the melancholic attachments to the history of slavery. See 'On Failing to Make the Past Present', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 2012, 73 (3): 453–474.
4. See Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economics of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 3–4 and 'The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall: Archiving the Otherwise in Postcolonial Digital Archives', *differences*, 2011, 22 (1): 146–171.
5. For an excursus on the relationship between sexuality and archival hermeneutics, see Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
6. Geeta Patel, 'Risky Subjects: Insurance, Sexuality, and Capital', *Social Text*, 2006, 24 (4): 50–51.
7. Available colonial records register the presence of these devadasis as early as the seventeenth century in Portuguese India, predictably describing them as depraved *bailadeiras* and/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 Rosa Maria Perez, 'The Rhetoric of Empire: Gender Representations in Portuguese India', *Portuguese Studies*, 2005, 21: 126–141 and Luis Madureira, 'Tropical Sex Fantasies and the Ambassador's Other Death: The Difference in Portuguese Colonialism', *Cultural Critique*, 1994 (28): 149–173.

8. Archana Kakodkar, 'The Portuguese and Kalavants', unpublished paper, 1991. I am grateful to Dr. Kakodkar, Senior Librarian (Retd.), Goa University, for her invaluable help in locating crucial sources on kalavants in the Historical Archives of Goa. She is the only scholar so far who has worked extensively on cataloguing the history of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj.
9. S.D. Puneekar and Kamala Rao, *A Study of Prostitutes in Bombay: With reference to Family Background* (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1962, 1967): 169, 160. For a broader understanding of late-colonial debates on prostitution in Bombay, see Ashwini Tambe, 'Brothels as Families: Reflections on the History of Bombay's Kothas', *International Journal of Feminist Politics*, 2006, 8 (2): 219–242.
10. Archana Kakodkar, 'Devadasis of Goa', unpublished paper. While female singers such as Moghulbai Kurdikar, Kesarbai Kerkar, Lata Mangeshkar and Kishori Ammonkar remain the most well-known GMS members, others of note include the first composer of Marathi musical drama, Hirabai Pednekar, former chief minister of Goa, Shashikala Kakodkar, and Sulochana Katkar, retired President of the Goa Congress.
11. For more historical detail on the emergence of the Samaj, see Anjali Arondekar, 'Subject to Sex: A Small History of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj', in *South Asian Feminisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). Other texts that gloss briefly on the history of the Samaj include Gopalakrishna Bhobe, *Kalavant Gomantak* (Goa: Kala Academy, 1972); Vinayak Khedekar, *Gomantak Lok Kala* (Goa: Government Press, 1980); and Balakrishna Dattaraya Satoshkar, *Gomantak Prakriti Ari Sanskriti* (Pune: Subhada Sarasvata, 1979).
12. There is a small and well-recycled set of writings on the cultural history of devadasis in southern India. Some key texts include: Amrit Srinivasan, *Temple Prostitution and Community Reform* (London: Cambridge University, 1984); Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2011); Uttam Kamble, *Devadasi Ari Nagnapuja* (Bombay: Lokrangmaya Griha, 1988); Jogan Shankar, *Devadasi Cult: A Sociological Analysis* (Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994); Frederique S. Marglin, *Wives of the God-King* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985); Kakoli Chakraborty, *Women as Devadasis: Origin and Growth of the Devadasi Profession* (Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 2004); and Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
13. 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 P.P. Shirodkar, *Goa's struggle for Freedom* (New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1988); M.S. Deora, *Liberation of Goa, Daman and Diu* (New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1995); and Arthur G. Rubinoff, *India's Use of Force in Goa* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971).
14. Trichur, 'Politics of Goan Historiography', in *Lusotopie*, 2000, [www.lusotopie.sciencepo-bordeaux.fr/somma2000.html](http://www.lusotopie.sciencepo-bordeaux.fr/somma2000.html): 637–46. For a further sense of the peculiarity of Portuguese colonialism and its afterlife within Goan historiography, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonial, and Inter-identity', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 2002, 39 (2): 9–43.
15. The translated summary I provide here covers over eight pages of text in Marathi. Part of the challenge here is to render the affective tone of the description of the attack within the limitations of translation. Rajaram Paigankar, *Mee Kon Vols. 1 and 2* (Margao: Gomantak Chapkhana, 1969).
16. Rajaram Paigankar, *Mee Kon Vol. 1* (Margao: Gomantak Chapkhana, 1969): 73–80.
17. *Ibid.* 84–87.
18. Rochelle Pinto, *Between Empires: Print and Politics in Goa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
19. Silvia M. de Mendonça-Noronha, 'The Economic Scene in Goa: 1926–1961', in *Goa Through the Ages Vol. II* (New Delhi: South Asia Books & Goa University, 1989) and Jose Martins, *Historia da Misericórdia de Goa* (Nova Goa: Imprensa Nacional, 1910).
20. See Robert S. Newman, *Of Umbrellas, Goddesses and Dreams: Essays on Goan Culture and Society* (Mapusa: Other India Press, 2001); Paul Axelrod and Michelle A. Fuerch, 'Flight of the Deities: Hindu Resistance in Portuguese Goa', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1996, 30 (2): 387–421.
21. *Censo da População do Estado da Índia* (Nova Goa: Imprensa Nacional, 1920). See also, C.R. Boxer, *Fidalgos Portugueses e Bandeirantes Indianas (Seculos XVII e XVIII)* (Sao Paulo, 1961).
22. In addition to multiple references in Paigankar's *Mee Kon*, the case is also mentioned in Váman Radhakrishnan, *Purnashatra* (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.
23. Such invocations of caste-shame and humiliation routinely appear in available 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 other backward class communities, such as the Samaj and Dalit communities. See Gopal Guru (ed.) *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

24. Rajaram Paigankar, *Mee Kon* Vol. 2: 43–56.

25. References to the land awarded for the establishment of the school can be found in 'Matriz Poinguini', unpublished land documents at the sub-treasury office, Chauri, Canacona, Goa and *Paijini Temple Documents* (in Marathi, Modi and Portuguese) located at the Parashuram Temple in Patingini, Goa.

26. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in India Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

27. Op. cit.: 12

28. Elspeth Probyn, 'Suspended Beginnings of Childhood and Nostalgia', *GLQ* 1995, 2 (4): 439–465. See also Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

29. Rajaram Paigankar, *Mee Kon* Vol. 2: 13.

30. 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 by the term primarily as 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 for each other. See Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: History, Memory and Identity in Western India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

31. In many ways, the Samaj's debates around self-naming anticipate the paradoxes that Wendy Brown invokes around the limitations of rights discourses for minoritised communities (in her case, women and/or queers). See 'Suffering Rights as Paradoxes', *Constellations*, 2000, 7 (2): 208–229.

32. See Pratima Kamat, *Farar Far, Local Resistance to Colonial Hegemony in Goa 1512–1912* (Panaji: Institute Menezes Braganza, 1999).

33. 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'. See Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2008): 44.

34. A small sampling of notable singers from the Samaj, between 1930–1959 (all women) would include: Saroj Welingkar, Tarabai Shirodkar, Saraswati Rane, Kumodini Pednekar, Kesarbai Kerkar and Mogubai Kurdikar.

35. An excellent example of such ellisions is Janaki Bakhle's *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

36. The bulk of the archives are now housed at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj Society building in Mumbai, India. In 2004, the Samaj offices moved from Gomantak Maratha Samaj Sadan, 345, V.P. Road, Mumbai-400004 to Shtadevi 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 and Mrs. Archana Kakodkar in Mumbai and Panaji, respectively (June 9 and June 16, 2012).