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## Book Review

*Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* by Naisargi N. Dave  
 ISBN-13: 978-0822353195; Duke University Press (2012); Paperback; 272 pages; \$26.95

Reviewer

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### **Spacialising and Contextualising the Queer Movement in India: A Book Review of Naisargi N. Dave's *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* through a Philosophical Anthropological Perspective**

#### **Abstract**

The discourse of the queer movement in India is hardly thought through a spatialised and contextualised understanding of the very identity of a 'queer' individual. Naisargi N. Dave quite beautifully weaves her understanding of ethics in doing anthropology along with her own participation in the queer movement in a city like that of Delhi, while being a lesbian person herself. Her work strikes a chord with the larger philosophical anthropological discourse which hinges upon the irreducibility of humans, despite stratification, or markings. Big concepts like that of the 'self' and 'life' irk a more thoughtful, reflexive and universal understanding. This project is a kind of universalism indeed which transcends the previously viable modes of essential understanding. This reflects a new turn where the ontological question of knowing the "what" or the essence has returned to anthropology, which tries to reach at more universalistic answers, without compromising or ignoring the situated-ness of both the knower and the subject. We find such questions rising up in Naisargi N. Dave's book, Dave's 'Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics', while she grapples with the very identity of the 'queer' individual in a society which refuses to even recognise their existence. It is in the interstitial spaces of such marginalisation that a context is created for claiming of a space of freedom, in order to engage in debates, activism and merry-making, as similarly placed, intimate individuals living each day in anticipation of acceptance, freedom and love.

#### **Keywords**

queer, activism, space, intimate, philosophical anthropology

## Introduction

The disciple of anthropology (and almost all other social sciences disciplines) has been invested in studying humans in different ways, through different perspectives. Historically speaking, there have taken place different paradigm shifts in the lens through which a social researcher looks at the society and tries to make sense of humans existing in them. It can be said that social research has transcended its boundaries of maintaining a “clinical distance” from the observed, where the ethnographer is “faceless”, almost “extra-terrestrial” and represents a pair of hands that writes, to a more engaged endeavour where research becomes a multitude of sensory experiences. It is the general social scientific endeavour to question what the truth is and to find routes to the truth. One such viable method followed in ethnography is participant observation.

Positivist methods that were rendered the most viable ways of reaching the notion of truth have long been rejected by social researchers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These methods were typically generalizing in its approach to the extent that their conclusions could be termed as over-generalised and involved looking at the researched as objects. Interpretive methods, Participant observation, and feminist methods which involve empathetic understanding of the subjects and studying the everyday life as a process have since been given a major space in the discipline of anthropology and other social sciences. However, these anthropological methods seem to focus on the discovery of the status of the particular, and deal in a sense of over-specialization as they believe in the immediacy of experience.

## Contextualising Philosophical Anthropology

Anthropology studies societies and tries to make sense of the culture and takes into cognition the plurality of worlds that seems to exist. However, a very pertinent question that can be asked here is:

If cultural differences are a matter not simply of different representations but of different assumptions about the being of... different kinds of humans, or of gods and animals ... then how is any communication across these worlds possible?” (Das, Jackson, Kleinman, and Singh, 2014)

Due to the impossibility of a separation between knowledge of the world from human cognition, there is a necessity for a discipline that takes into account both knowledge of the world and human cognition, in order to find better ways and routes of answering the question “what makes a human a human”. Such a question can only be answered with a refusal of all kinds of reductionism that fails to capture a holistic, essential understanding of the human. This kind of holistic understanding of human beings can be said to be nurtured amongst philosophical anthropologists.

Philosophical anthropology thus hinges upon the irreducibility of humans, despite stratification, or markings. Big concepts like that of the ‘self’ and ‘life’ irk a more thoughtful, reflexive and universal understanding. This project is a kind of universalism indeed which transcends the previously viable modes of essential

understanding. Earlier, the question “what is the essence of this” would depend upon who the knower is. This reflects a new turn where the ontological question of knowing the “what” or the essence has returned to anthropology, which tries to reach at more universalistic answers, without compromising or ignoring the situated-ness of both the knower and the subject. It requires distancing which is a necessary condition as it plays an existential function while catering to the need to stand back and take stock, or gain a hold over the absorption into the subject, which is something that ethnography entails. It is done in order to arrive at an abstract truth. This is an ethic in itself, which deals in the state of absorption which almost becomes an intense sensory experience and the simultaneous exercise of separating oneself or distancing in order to carry out a process of abstraction, to reach close to the truth of being. Unlike the kind of distancing that is promoted by the Enlightenment thinkers, in philosophical anthropology this separation is not dealt as a superior act, but simply a path to the carrying out of abstraction. Therefore, in order to abstract or bring out the problem, reflexivity is necessary in order to move towards a possible relationship between philosophy and anthropology.

### **Queer Activism in India: Spaces, Contexts and Queerness**

To delve further into an understanding of what philosophical anthropology entails, I have engaged with the book, “Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics”, by Naisargi N. Dave, which was published in Durham and London by Duke University Press, in the year 2012. In this part of the essay, I shall be using the terms “queer” and “lesbian” interchangeably at times like the author, where queer means any alternative possibility of sexuality that is not heterosexual, while “lesbian” refers to a woman who is attracted to another woman.

Naisargi N. Dave begins her research in the summer of 1999, right after the right-wing campaign against the screening of the movie ‘Fire’. While the movie was not supposed to be a ‘lesbian’ movie and probably depended on an artistic understanding of female intimacy, it was turned into one through the arsons that were carried out in cinema halls after its release. The very word ‘lesbian’ came to the forefront through attempts at censoring the movie. Following these protests, there were counter protests organised by Lesbian and other queer women throughout the country. For the first time, lesbian women seemed to be brought out of the closet, into the streets across Indian cities, carrying placards and chanting slogans. The author talks about the manifesto that was written by a collective that was founded as the after math of these counter protests, CALERI or Campaign for Lesbian Rights, “Lesbian Emergence.” This manifesto was a result of a large number of debates, taken place at the rooftop of a café, where the space was claimed through such discussions.

In this book, she paints a rather comprehensive picture of what entails activism and in what ways it is actually an ethical and spatial process. She explores the lesbian identity and lesbian activism in India in ways that can be

termed as philosophical, where she delves deep and immerses into experiencing her field and at the same time, takes a step away in order to take control of her immersion into the field of subjects. The spaces in which Dave engages in order to grasp a better understanding of the situation play an important role in theorizing about an identity that seems to lie only on the fringes of the societal order. The author works with various lesbian organisations which consists of lesbian rights activists, and at the same time tries to reach close to the essential truth of the “what” of a lesbian person. It is a research conducted by a lesbian woman, on lesbian women, who are realised as a mirror to the knower’s own self. There are many such incidences where Dave expresses how she comes near to the realisation of the true essence of her own self, through the narratives that have been present here.

Naisargi Dave delves into the becoming of a lesbian person in the context of India. She points out to Kath Weston’s (1991) concept of alternative families consisting of queer lovers, siblings and even parents formed out of amiable bonds that may or may not be related by blood. She reflects upon her own experiences around other lesbian women, engaging in everyday mundane activities, as a family, in an apartment in Delhi. At the point of initial emergence of the Indian lesbian identity around the first quarter of the 1990s, an important question that emerged is: “how might we live as queer Indians” (4). Such living played out in spaces that were marked by friendship, comradeship and intimacies that question a heteronormative idea of what amiability is. These intimacies emanated out of the need for belonging and played around the contexts of activism and togetherness of bodies that engage in activities that are perceived by the larger society as non-natural.

She asks certain important questions in the process of writing. These pertain to “why are activists, activists? Why do these activists act?” (4) The answers that were derived revolved around the realm of the ethical, where the action of activists depends on them collectively nurturing ethical ideals. “They act out of conflicted, sometimes uncomfortable, beliefs in the possibility of justice.” This action is directed towards a desire of new freedoms that are imagined, which the activists strive to enable.

Dave goes on to make a reference to the notion of “homosexual asceticism” that has been talked of by Foucault. Foucault (1988, 116) believed in a radical ethics which was neither asceticism nor a form of identity politics. “It was neither renunciation of the existing nor adherence to a new code of what homosexuality is and must be.” His radical ethics was thus relates to a “rethinking of the ethical relation of the self beyond identity and moral law. Thus homosexual asceticism seems to be a work that one performs at becoming homosexuals.

The author looks at asceticism as a form of “philosophical labour.” She talks of how Foucault, in “The Use of Pleasure” defines philosophy itself as:

An ‘asceticism’... an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” and “the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known. (7)

It is in this ascesis, this differently thought out space that the queer movement, and especially the lesbian movement in India was made possible.

The author believes that Indian queer activism is firstly, “a commitment to philosophical exercise, to think differently, to ask new questions of oneself in order to analyse and surpass the limits upon what can be said and done”. This relates to an exercise of “problematization” or a critical reflection upon norms. Secondly, “it is the emphasis not on the reversal of power or on a reversal of existing structures, but on the imaginative labour of inventing heretofore unimaginable possibilities”. Thirdly, it is a “creative relational practice” that is exercised in order to live differently (8).

Queer activism in India also transcends geographical limits due to the effective trans-national influences on it. In fact, few of the first lesbian helpline groups like ‘Sakhi’ were started by foreign queer women who wanted to help out Indian queer women connect with each other. At that time, during the 1990s, Sakhi became a trans-national network for the support of Indian queer women, who would write letters to the group in order to communicate with other women like themselves. The volunteers of Sakhi would write back to them or send them the address of other queer women who write to them, in order to create a communicative link between the two persons. Moreover, the word ‘lesbian’ itself has been put under critical radar by many Indian queer activists as somewhat of a foreign export. Many have even suggested more Indian and Sanskrit versions of the term lesbian such as “Samalaingik log”.

Dave finds such endeavours to forcefully claim difference from an already accepted universal term not viable since all these words refer to the same thing and carry the same meanings. For her, when activists call same-sex desiring people as “samalaingik log”, “those words feel foreign because they are – contrived markers rather than sites for passionate subjective attachment or collective mobilization.” Scholars who try to historicize alternative sexualities do little justice to the habitus and the historical moment in which those terms were produced. Other groups of lesbian activists have tried to replace the term ‘lesbian’ with the Hindi phrase, “aisi mahila jo dusri mahilion ki taraf aakarshith hoti hai” (the kind of woman who is attracted to other women) (18). However these phrases also don’t make much sense by stating the obvious truth.

Dave, in the third chapter talks about spaces for queer women. These include health centres and parlours where screening of pornographic material, massages, movies or dances were held in order to cater to lesbian consumers. Some of these queer women were also married and had children. It can be said that their notion of “who am I” goes beyond the boundaries of heterosexual conjugal relationships and their truth can be described as something which transcends boundaries of norms and morality.

It was surprising for the author that neither her Indian origin, nor her American birth prove to be of any disadvantage to her in the field. She was out in the field as a lesbian woman with a minimal level of commonality, which helped forge the quality of her relationships with her field. Her queerness and

gender mattered infinitely more than her class or nationality or language. It is important to note how her queer 'self' becomes a mirror for the other queer women in the field and how it was actually a dialectic process. She found reflections of her own true self and identity in her field.

At one point in her book, she was criticized by her much older activist friend for being 'too foreign' for not already being aware of lesbian activities in parlours, to be a much common thing. Dave decides to actually see for herself what takes place in parlours. She had short hair, and a helmet hung by her waist when she entered the ladies parlour and asked for eyelash threading. She was met with a smile from this lady in the parlour who asked her to wait in another room and later attempted to unclothe her, which is when Dave escapes this place. It seemed to the ethnographer that probably it is in her embodiment of her queer truth that probably seemed like hints to the parlour lady to be a sexual approach. This is also not to say that her way of presenting herself is the only way of expressing oneself as queer. However, her presentation of her 'self' definitely went beyond the normative notions and normative truths about a female body which probably revealed her queerness. The space of the parlour also becomes important in her work as she later shows how it becomes a space for pleasure-seeking and a cruising and hook-up spot for other lesbian women, some of whom were even married.

For certain queer activists being a lesbian entails a default involvement in activism. However, Dave critiques such a notion. She believes that the lesbian identity is borne out of desire and pleasures of one's own body which indeed informs the true essence of their identity. It is ironical when volunteers of 'Sangini' replied in a negative manner to the letter writers demanding for blue films or showing inquisition in lesbian sex and possibilities of pleasuring oneself. Imagining oneself as a lesbian is itself a process which involves desiring and looking for possibilities of pleasuring oneself that goes beyond a heterosexual structure of sexuality.

For Dave, "It was not always a lesbianism of monogamy, law, resistance to patriarchy, suicide pacts, or lifelong fidelity. In a world like the Health Club, lesbianism could be as simple as services to be provided, skills to be honed, and pleasures to be had"(50).

Naisargi N. Dave's tenor of philosophical anthropology also lies in her realisation of closeness with the field being a complicated thing. She purports:

For an ethnographer of activism, the space between participant and observer is a particularly perilous place – the expectations for participations are high, as are the research consequences of not meeting them. For example, I once had to refuse to sign a protest letter, my efforts to remain in the good graces of the group being protested branded me a sellout in the eyes of some other groups.  
(25)

Dave did however participate energetically in every debate, knowing she was subtly influencing discourse and decisions. Yet, in sharing the same spaces of

physical apartments, cooking, making placards and in doing activism, a context is created for an identity to flourish: an identity that didn't even have a proper identification in the lexicon of Indian languages. Through immersion and detachment with her fellow queer women, Dave concludes an abstract geography in which her own identity as a queer woman finds space to breathe. It is through this abstractness that the author seems to attempt an approach towards a reality of not just her own being, but of the entire population of queer Indians, searching for a space where they would find respite in being their true selves.

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