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What More Remains: Slavery, Sexuality, South Asia

Anjali Arondekar

What more remains? At stake here is slavery's plangent entanglement with the idea of the archive. As emergent archival forms push against, or even record the violence of slavery's past(s), we are asked here to consider anew the persistent failure of such efforts. Central to such failures has been the recovery of an archive of slavery that continues to elude any attempts at a redemptive historiography. As the editors of a recent *Social Text* special issue on the question of recovery and slavery note: the limits of recovery in "the field of Atlantic slavery and freedom" have reshaped the very parameters of historical methods and debate.¹ Indeed, nearly every theoretical account of Atlantic slavery stages the historiography of slavery as the place where *absence* and *archive* meet. A similar reading of archival loss, paucity and erasure even animates scholarship that challenges the foundationalism of Atlantic slavery as the "origin-story" for the African diaspora.²

If absence is the archival norm for Atlantic studies, it is clear that histories of slavery in South Asia perform uneasily within such a model. As Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton have persuasively argued in an edited volume on slavery and South Asian history, a remarkable range of depictions of slavery have existed alongside a thousand years of South Asian history, ranging from stories of enslaved female performers in the seventeenth century, to tales of Arab merchants who delivered slave soldiers to buyers on the Deccan plateau. Such a breadth and diversity of histories, argue the editors, suggests an understanding of slavery more or less "as the condition of uprooted outsiders, impoverished insiders—or the descendants of either—serving persons or institutions on whom they are wholly dependent."³ Even as debates in Atlantic histories shift more generally between a focus on the study of slavery as centered on the concept of property, to the study of slavery as an ontology of alienation and violence (pace Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman et al), Chatterjee, more specifically, draws attention to pre-colonial Buddhist and Hindu materials that locate slaves within a "larger category

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of wealth-in people," demarcating intimate kin-making structures, such as the family, as key archival sources of slave labor and servility.⁴

Chatterjee's emphasis on the family as an insider slave-engendering site, one that comprehends the family form along radically different lines than its typical invocation and usage in Atlantic studies, requires close attention as it speaks to a group of histories that continue to remain sequestered within Indian Ocean recuperations of slave histories. Thus, when Hartman writes that "the most universal definition of the slave is a stranger," a kin-less figuration, and then, "torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider," we must necessarily ask how South Asian histories of "insider" slaves function within, and how they supplement such a cosmos.⁵ Within such histories of the family (often marginalized by the plantation model of analysis), slavery in South Asia appears open to historical change, where over time descendants of slaves morphed into other categories of recognition, rarely through any formal process of manumission or abolition.

Let me be clear: my turn to the variegated histories of slavery in South Asia is not intended to vulgarly suggest that a proliferation of slave-genres necessarily yields a more robust availability of archives. Such an observation would merely literalize archival presence as a matter of found records and histories, without involving a necessary understanding of the dialectics of absence and presence that undergirds minoritized histories. Rather, my brief meditation summons instead a question that lies embedded within such a coupling: what might an archive of slavery look like unmoored from its attachment to absence? I wish to set the two terms of this special issue—slavery and archive—both alongside and athwart one another to stage a different story, one that seeks to discover what each of these terms might do to the other, without assuming a position of negation from the outset. Simply put, if we preserve archival loss or absence as the very marker of slave histories, how does such a gesture at the same time preserve a certain geopolitical distance from other slave life-forms with which such histories might otherwise be seen to collaborate?

To orient readers to a different archival story, I want first to note that there is no authentic, if skeletal, South Asian history of slavery operational here. On the contrary, I am interested more in the contested nature of what constitutes the archive of slavery within and between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean networks. The entelechy of an archive of slavery, therefore, lies less in its recovery, and more in its ability to manifest and materialize differentiated

histories of rule. What matters most is not whether you recover such an archive, or even how well you fail to recover it, but rather that its idea exists at all. Two impulses are central here. The first is one that traces the mobilization of the term “slavery” by anti-imperial intelligentsia in South Asia to describe the condition of colonized peoples in general, leading to the ready assimilation of all categories of impressed, indentured, and exploited laborers into the category of slaves.

The other is an impulse that seeks to understand the identificatory network that undergirds most histories of slavery—that “slaves” exist here and elsewhere—as a structural affiliation that precludes a closer understanding of the remarkable range and life-forms of, and under slavery within South Asian history. Thus, even as it is critical that we remind ourselves that slavery was inside of other Oceanic exchanges in ways that did not always echo the economic and affective models of plantations, it is equally urgent that we not recuperate yet another stable history of slavery through its lost “Asiatic” form. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s well-received 2013 exhibition, “Africans in India: From Slaves to Generals and Rulers,” for example, extends histories of slavery through its focus on the success of African slaves as they rose from slavery to positions of authority in the subcontinent. Yet such exhibitions, despite or perhaps because of their success, continually suture histories of slavery primarily to the black African body. Of particular significance to the South Asian conversation is the way that this exhibition has become a carefully touted exemplar within India as well, serving as a telling alibi for the selective pasts of slavery that Indians have chosen to forget or erase. Slavery is once again safely and primarily coupled with the idea of an “outsider” Africa, thus sanctioning a strategic disavowal of its simultaneous “insider” history within South Asia.⁶

Such a selective absence of slavery within hegemonic histories of South Asia has, of course, its own history of political expediency. As postcolonial nation-states, like India, wrestled with the legacies of colonial policies of divide and rule, along with their own concomitant and oftentimes rocky commitment to minority representation, slave histories of pre-colonial India receded (literally) to the past. The demand for usable histories led to a focus on the contemporary (read: postcolonial) condition of dispossession, rather than to a space for careful attention to slavery’s variegated pasts. Exemplified in collections such as *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (1985), the term “slavery” served more to allegorize conditions of unequal labor

and new forms of bondage within newly independent India, than it did to engage carefully with the term's regional and temporal lineages. The generic usage of slavery forestalled the fostering of specialized historical research on the topic, despite the availability of materials in multi-sited archives. For Chatterjee and Eaton, any scholarly study of slavery in South Asia must be situated within such intellectual shifts animating Indian historiographical circles. At a time when the U.S. academy witnessed an efflorescence of studies on Atlantic slave histories—studies that focused on complex questions of genealogy, gender and sexuality, to name a few—historical work in South Asia was transposing concepts of race into concepts of caste where “the identification of slaves and of the descendants of slaves was pegged to the removal of ‘untouchability,’ and therefore to *jati*-based (caste-based) affirmative action promised by the central government.”⁷ While the collapse of all forms of unequal bondage into the category of slave foregrounded slipperiness as the animus of the term, it equally erased the distinctiveness of race, ethnicity, and caste within such formulations.

In what follows, I want to turn to a subaltern history of sexuality and slavery in Portuguese India to proffer a different kind of archival hermeneutics. My aims, overly ambitious as they seem for such a brief essay, are threefold: to call attention to the displacement of slave pasts within histories of sexuality that are themselves routinely displaced; to locate such displacements in an itinerant archive of profit and pleasure; and to open a dialogue between the interdisciplinary fields of area studies and sexuality studies with an eye to understanding how histories of slavery can reshape, and even devastate, these very field-formations.

Itinerant Sex, Itinerant Slave

“What happened to the Vedic *dasi*/slave?” demanded Uma Chakravarti, in an essay that has by now become canonical for most feminists working on sexuality and historiography in South Asia. For Chakravarti, the transition of the Woman Question, the perennial bugbear of feminist efforts, from the colonial to the postcolonial, revolved problematically around the recuperation and persistence of Vedic genealogies about the role of women and men and the instrumentalization of those genealogies by colonial and native intellectuals, alike. The essay depicts the stabilization of an Aryan past by Orientalist scholars like Max Mueller and by native writers including R.C. Dutt, Jadunath Sarkar and others, all coinciding with the nineteenth-century

focus on the Vedas as a source for a pure, pre-colonial past. Some cherished historical truths, argued Chakravarti, emerged from those hoary nineteenth century debates that attempted to “manhandle,” as it were, the Woman Question: first was the golden age of women during the Vedic period, as Aryan woman, progenitor of upper-caste humanity, and the proper subject of historical recovery emerged; and second was the strategic disappearance of her kin in servitude, the Vedic *dasi*, enslaved by the Aryan woman and her kind. Even as Chakravarti herself does not narrate the story of that Vedic *dasi*, per se, her essay reminds us of this figural disappearance, functioning as a rallying call for a feminist history of caste and slavery, a history that, when it comes to that disappeared Vedic *dasi*, still remains to be written.⁸

As a scholar who works on histories of sexuality in South Asia, I have always, in equal measure, been galvanized and perplexed by Chakravarti’s call for the search and rescue of this Vedic *dasi*, a call quoted by scholars and activists *ad nauseum*, but ironically rarely connected to sedimented histories of slavery in South Asia. After all, we still need to ask: what does it mean to be a “*dasi*,” a subject/object of enslavement, and what do the terms of that enslavement entail? Given the proliferation of slavery as a generic catch-all term to describe the subjugation of gendered bodies, it becomes even more important to parse out the historical lineages of Chakravarti’s “*dasi*” along with the archival forms through which she is translated and accrued as feminist capital. Of significance here is that such invocations of foundational histories of slavery are crucially attentive to the determinism of archival economies of loss, paucity, and devaluation.

My current work engages the emergence of *devadasis*, marked descendants of that Vedic *dasi*, in Portuguese India. *Devadasi* is a pan-Indian term taken from Sanskrit that literally means a slave (*dasi*) of god (*deva*); it is often rendered falsely interchangeable with archival embodiments of sex-worker, courtesan or prostitute. Available configurations of *devadasi* histories garner their archival value through charting a narrative teleology that extends from bondage to freedom, and clearly draws from set mythologies of slavery. *Devadasis* are rescued from their doomed enslavement to sexuality and reconstituted in more redemptive contexts such as religion and the arts.⁹ My emphasis here on thinking of the *devadasi*, or the Vedic *dasi*, much like Uma Chakravarti has done in her work, grapples instead with slavery’s multiple life-forms and histories.

Let me say more about what I mean. My current work engages the complex graphs of empire as they mark the movements of a prominent community of devadasis, the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj*, as they traveled back and forth between two discrepant empires, the Portuguese and the British, principally in the western states of Goa and Maharashtra. Available colonial records register the presence of these devadasis as early as the seventeenth century in Portuguese India, predictably describing them as depraved *bailadeiras* 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.¹⁰

Available historical records provide a clear account of enslavement and labor by suggesting that these devadasis were brought to Goa by the migrating Saraswat Brahmins, a group that came in search of fertile lands and sustenance. In these accounts, devadasis were described as being primarily “chattel,” enslaved workers, whose services shifted into regimes of sex and art only after their migration into foreign lands. The term “Gomantak,” for instance, is the Sankritised toponomic of the state of Goa, and denotes the prosperity of its cattle herds. The irony, however, is that Goa is geographically and topographically ill-suited for cattle-rearing, while the term clearly references the nomadic Brahmins who came to its shores in search of lands and resources. Such a shift is reflected in official notations of the existence of *Devadasis* as a social group in the 1904 census of Goa. Of note are the multiple terms used interchangeably over the years to reference these devadasis—they are initially referred to as *Bhandis* (slaves) or *Adbhaktis* (half-slaves), terms that eventually yield to a more amorphous term, *Kalavants* (literally carriers of Kala/art).¹¹

Unlike the well-documented Indian histories of social reform and rehabilitation, particularly the ones that come from Southern India, the devadasis’ story in Portuguese Goa underwent very little transformation and had even less exposure until the early part of the twentieth century. *Kalavants* in Portuguese India, 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 *hath-lavne* (touching hands) into companionate

structures with both men and women. Portuguese colonial officials too granted the kalavants exemptions from existing anti-prostitution laws as the women remained in structures of serial monogamy with *yajemans* (patrons) through the life of the *kalavantin*. These are the contexts within which the Vedic *dasi* enters Goan historiography.

Of equal import is that the Samaj's own archives are efflorescent and abundant. The Samaj—the term in Hindi and Marathi to denote a collectivity or movement—as I have theorized elsewhere, has maintained a continuous and copious archive since its inception in 1929.¹² Contained within these archives are over fifty documents called “*kharid patr*” (letters of sale), letters that note the relationship of a devadasi with one or two *yajemans*, dated between 1906–1927. What is curious about such letters of sale is that they bypass the nexus between subject and property that is the staple form of engaging histories of slavery. Instead, the letters speak of the *deva/dasi's mulya* (worth) through a vernacular of capital that requires the *yajeman* to provide a *hawala* (guarantee) also known as a *hami dene* (to give assurance of), as part of the *kharid* (the sale).¹³ Several historical accounts from the same period allude to the Goan devadasis as problematic purveyors of their historical *dasi* status. For example, Govind Narayan's *Mumbaiche Varnan* (1863) describes the rise of arts and theatre in Bombay (circa 1861). Narayan writes with great disgust about the rise of Goan “dancing girls” who appear to have garnered clientele across the city, with their “numbers increasing daily.” Of great concern to Narayan is a particularly successful dancing girl's acquisition of properties and her vulgar display of such wealth. He writes that “she spent nearly four thousand rupees” on an initiation ceremony for her daughter to become a devadasi, reminding him of the “stories of the matriarchates mentioned in the Puranas.”¹⁴ What happens, he too seems to ask, of the silenced Vedic *dasi*?

In the *Indian Antiquary* (1884), K. Raghunathji expresses a similar articulation of shock and awe in his documentation of the rise of “Bombay Dancing Girls” who are, in fact, Goan devadasis. Raghunathji provides detailed descriptions of these dancing girls, noting that a large percentage of the Hindu girls appear to have migrated “from Goa and the places around it.”¹⁵ Unlike Narayan, Raghunathji paints a more flattering picture of these women, extolling their beauty and their generally “intelligent pleasing appearance.”¹⁶ While they arrive in Bombay speaking “Goanese”—a language that we are

mysteriously told differs from the “language of Bombay”—they quickly acclimatize and soon read, write and even compose songs in Marathi, one of the most widely spoken languages in the state of Maharashtra. As in Narayan’s account, Raghunathji too emphasizes the “large sums of money” that the women appear to have access to, describing in excruciating detail the gold ornaments the women routinely wear. These dancing girls, he notes, “as a rule,” “load themselves with jewellery,” such as bodices “richly ornamented with gold, silver, and velvet, lace or pearls.”¹⁷ References to the women’s growing accumulation of and appetite for wealth can be found across archival records of the time, demonstrating some degree of anthropological accuracy even as we understand them critically to be a particular type of history-making.

There is obviously much more to say about *dasis* and histories of capital, and I leave you with a rich and vibrant historical excerpt of one itinerant collectivity. This is not to disengage from the provocations of archival recovery; it is more to grapple with archives of slavery that are open to geopolitical displacements, and that offer reinvestments in a new social order. The challenge here is to narrate differentiated histories of slavery, while maintaining a continued attentiveness to the epistemological hegemony of the Atlantic model, particularly in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, even as it is incumbent upon us to probe slavery’s recursivity through both a questioning and an understanding of its geopoliticized forms, it is important that we do so not through structural resemblances, but through differences of form and function. These differences are not lost histories but archival remnants that are sedimented and therefore provide continued opportunities for new ways of critical archival engagement.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Stephanie Camp, my earliest provocateur in all matters historical.

Anjali Arondekar is associate professor of Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Duke University Press, 2009), winner of the Alan Bray Memorial Book Award for best book in lesbian, gay, or queer studies, Modern Language Association (MLA), 2010. She is co-editor (with Geeta Patel) of “Area Impossible: The Geopolitics of Queer Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2016). Her current book project, *Abundance: On Sexuality and Historiography*, grows out of her interest in the figurations of sexuality, ethics and collectivity in colonial British and Portuguese India.

Notes

1. Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max Mishler, Samantha Seeley and Shauna Sweeney, "The Question of Recovery," *Social Text* 125, 33: 4 (December 2015): 1–18.
2. Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* Vol. 73 No.3 (2012): 453–474.
3. "Introduction" in *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton, eds. (2006), 1–16.
4. Indrani Chatterjee, "The Locked Box in Slavery and Social Death," in *After Slavery and Social Death*, John Bodell and Walter Scheidel, eds. (Forthcoming).
5. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (2007), 5.
6. <http://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/africans-india-slaves-generals-and-rulers>
7. Chatterjee and Eaton, "Preface," xi.
8. Uma Chakravarti, "What Happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. (1988), 27–87.
9. Two classic examples of such efforts are B.R. Patil, "Devadasis and Other Social Evils," *Social Defence* 34 (1973): 24–33, and Harshad R. Trivedi, *Scheduled Caste Women: Studies in Exploitation with Reference to Superstition, Ignorance and Poverty* (1977).
10. See Rose Maria Perez, "The Rhetoric of Empire: Gender Representations in Portuguese India," *Portuguese Studies* Vol. 21 (2005): 126–141, and Luis Madureira, "Tropical Sex Fantasies and the Ambassador's Other Death: The Difference in Portuguese Colonialism," *Cultural Critique* No. 28 (1994): 149–173.
11. See C.R. Boxer, "Fidalgos Portugueses e Bailadeiras Indianas (Seculos XVII e XVIII)," in *Revista de Historia*. Universidade de Sao Paulo, Departamento de Historia, (1961), 83–105, and in Mario Cabral e Sa, "Here lived Batabai," *Goa Today* (2003) Accessed July 9, 2005, (<http://www.goacom.org/goatoday/2003/jan/CoverStory.htm>).
12. Anjali Arondekar, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 25:3, 2015: 98–121.
13. The bulk of the archives are now housed at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj Society building in Mumbai, India. In 2004, the Samaj offices were moved from Gomantak Maratha Samaj Sadan, 345 V.P. Road, Bombay 400004 to Sitladevi Co-op. Housing, Society Ltd., 7–16/B Wing, D. N. Nagar, New Link Road, Andheri (W), Mumbai 400053. A partial archive can be found at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Dayanand Smriti, Swami Vivekanand Marg, Panaji 403001, Goa. The letters of sale are located in an unmarked file in the archives in Mumbai.
14. *Govind Narayan's Mumbai: An Urban Biography from 1863*, Edited and Translated by Murali Ranganathan (2012), 261–2. The original Marathi text utilizes more lavish and efflorescent language.
15. K. Raghunathji, "Bombay Dancing Girls," *Indian Antiquary* 13 (June 1884): 166.
16. *Ibid.*, 167. Note that in the original text they are referred to both as "girls" and as "women."
17. *Ibid.*