

THERE IS
ALWAYS
MORE:
SEXUALITY'S
ARCHIVES

ANJALI ARONDEKAR

If at first glance, the ethical responsibility of an archive is to host wor(l)ds that may otherwise be lost, in the end, its central obligation may be to provide wor(l)ds that may never have left.



Cover page of the Samaj Sudharak, July, 1940
Source: Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archives, Mumbai, India

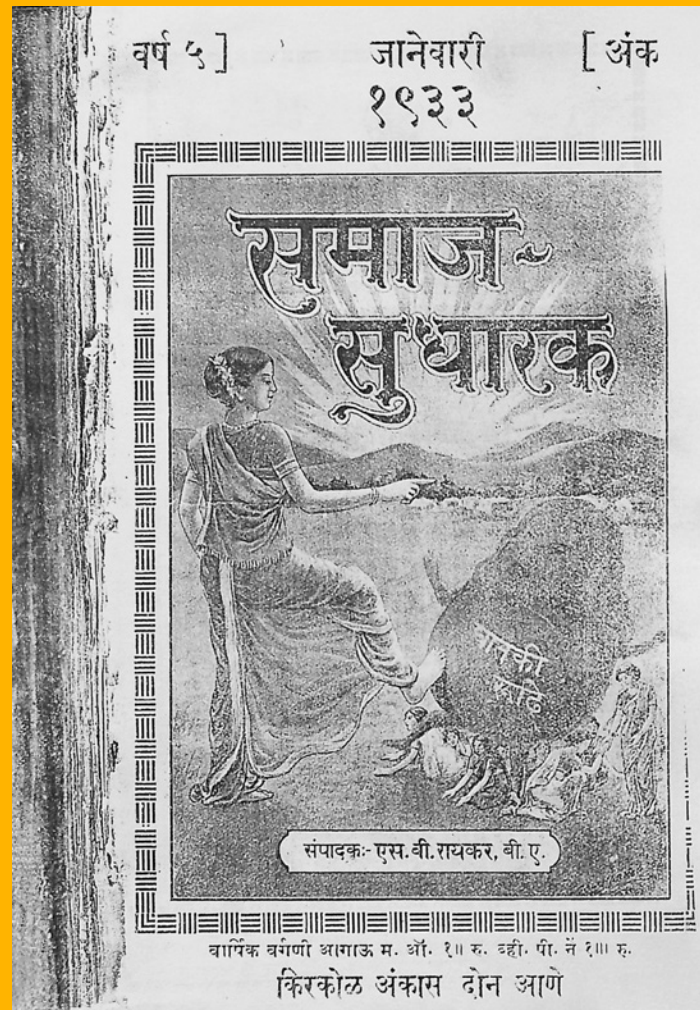
One can no longer broach the idea of the archive without a few rehearsals of some settled axioms. We know altogether too well, for instance, that nowhere are the shifts in histories of sexuality, or in historiography writ large, more forcefully displayed than in the recent debates around archives. The archive is the value form of our history of the present. No longer confined to brick-and-mortar state edifices, the revitalisation of the archive or the archival turn has meant 'more' materials and/or evidence, and a summoning of alternative archival imaginaries. For histories of sexuality of the Global South, more significantly, the archive has become a figuration of such allure that it has produced an explosion of materials that roam over genres, geopolitics, histories, cultural experiences and more. Archives are now collective ambitions, the primary placeholders of futurity and rights.¹

To write a history of sexuality is to embrace the chimeric prose of paucity and plenitude. If the present is marked by an inescapable surfeit of evidence, the past is haunted by an unremitting loss of materials. Marginality and loss, paucity and disenfranchisement: these are the archival forms that have become the common currency of histories of sexuality, especially within the Global South. The missing amphora of sexuality is recovered from the archival detritus of hegemonic histories of slavery, colonialism and nationalism to showcase more liberatory narratives of emancipation, liberation and rights. To note the orthodoxy of such theorisations about histories of sexuality is not to dismiss the considerable productivity of such thinking; after all, narrative economies of loss are always already at work in the worlds we seek to enter, as an excruciating double bind that indents us to the very historical holdings we seek to release. In the face of the casual brutality of dispersed global suffering, there is, '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.²

My meditation challenges such an epistemological preoccupation with loss as the structuring mode of narration for histories of sexuality. To fix sexuality within such archival vernaculars of loss (while politically exigent) is to elide alternative historiographical models, to bypass imaginative histories of sexuality, full of intrepid archives and acts of invention. I wish to set the two terms — archive and sexuality — 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 — to shift the emphases away from what is missing towards a recognition of what is at its most ambitious. To do so, my essay invites two sets of ruminations: (1) What if we are to shift our attention from the archival recuperation of sexuality as loss to understanding it as a site of abundance? (2) What are the archival forms and effects that emerge from such a coupling of sexuality and abundance? To enter histories of sexuality

through an imaginary of abundance is not to invest in and stabilise a new knowledge economy of plenitude, or to slide into plodding literalisation (ah, there is more, more, more), mislaying in the process the messy misalignments the concept of abundance lugs along. Vulgarly stated, the concept of abundance I am proposing does not replace paucity with overflow, but rather unravels a set of discourses that are fertile ground for producing and contesting attachments to history — writing. One way to parse the concept of abundance I am proposing here is to see it as inextricably linked to the histories of subordinated collectivities, as a historiographical orientation that challenges the narratives of their constant devaluation. What historical forms does abundance take when we turn to subaltern peoples and pasts? How do such forms of abundance fall outside historical interest and preservation? How might a turn to abundance work against the imperative to fix sexuality within wider historical structures of vulnerability, damage and loss?

Indeed, much of what I will argue invites a movement away from the recursive archival dialectic of fulfilment and impoverishment as the pathway to historical futurity. What happens if minoritised collectivities anticipate such accretions of loss, and curate archives that activate the profits that such losses should or will produce? Rather than dismiss the pull of loss within sexuality studies, I am pushing here for a more strategic and subaltern archival pragmatism: extract value from the hegemonic historical form (lost archives must be resurrected, found, produced for future gains) precisely as we attenuate the very modes of its re/production. If at first glance, the ethical responsibility of an archive is to host wor(l)ds that may otherwise be lost, in the end, its central obligation may be to provide wor(l)ds that may never have left. What to make then of an archive of sexuality that resists recuperative historiography's most cherished mantra: recover, restore, redress. Rather, the archive I will proffer here is an abundant ecosystem, at once imaginative and real, less a record keeper of lost lives, but more a potential epistemology for how we know, translate and amplify our relationship to the past.

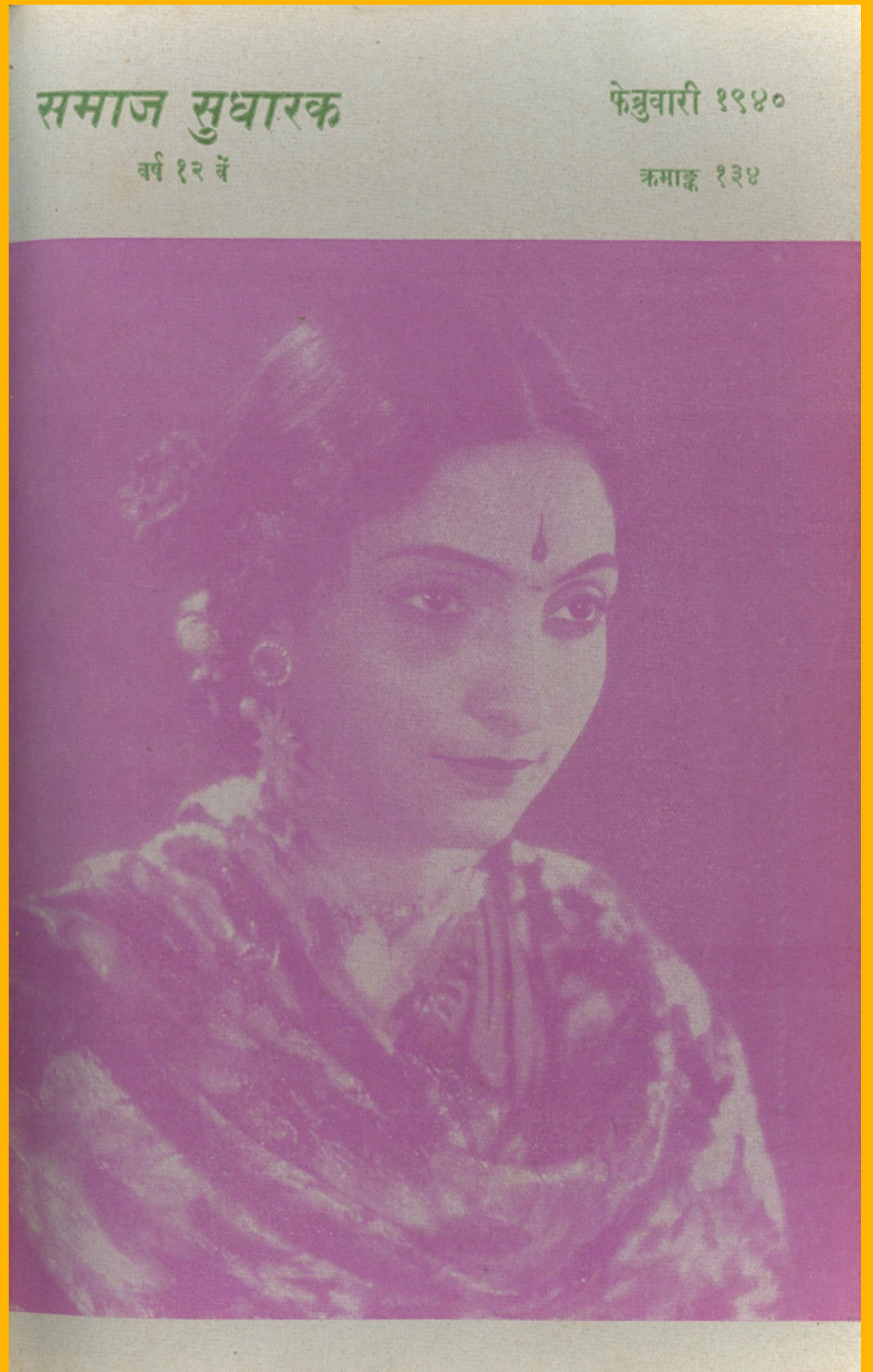


I R.I.P.: RETURN(S) IF POSSIBLE

14 July 2009. 'Tumhi kai karta madam?' What are you doing, madam? This was the question that the caretaker of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj archives in Panaji, Goa, quizzically asked me as I painstakingly placed a fragile document into one of many zip-lock bags. The Gomantak Maratha Samaj (henceforth the Samaj) is a prominent lower-caste *devadasi* collectivity hailing from colonial Portuguese and British India. *Devadasi*, is a Sanskrit term literally meaning a slave/*dasi*, of a god/master, often falsely read as interchangeable with terms such as courtesan, sex-worker, prostitute. *Gomantak* speaks to geographical roots in Goa, *Maratha* is both a caste and regional term, and *Samaj* translates to both collectivity, society and/or community. Bemused by my attempts to preserve rare archival materials that I perceived as being damaged or open to loss, the caretaker's question signalled an unforeseen twist in my orientation to archival research. For her, the preservation of these rare archival materials was of little consequence; after all, as she sternly reminded me, this was an oversaturated archive, so full at its seams, that it struggled to manage the constant production of new and diverse materials. Here the return to a history of sexuality was not through a call to loss (of object and/or materials) but rather through ordinary surplus. When asked about the potential loss of valuable historical materials, the response from the archival custodian was one full of mirth and consternation. For her, the risk of loss is more *ek hasaichi gosht* (a laughable matter), where the preservation of rare archival materials is of little consequence. 'We have more materials than we need/*Zaroori peksha jasht*', she added, shaking her head in amused exasperation at my continued insistence on the looming dangers of archival loss. To this day — she reminded me proudly — new materials continue to enter the Samaj archives, with little effort being expended to either digitalise or republish older, more fragile materials.

As the caretaker of the Samaj archives reminded me, there is no dearth of materials, and as such, no inheritance of loss. Rather than safeguard against the (inevitable) destruction of fragile archival materials, the caretaker's obiter dicta folds archival surplus into an unexceptional consistency: more materials, we are told, keep coming in. Archival abundance here does not merely signify a surfeit of materials, but more a deliberately embraced historical project. In all its ostensible substance (we have so much), the Samaj archive displays an errant materiality that remarkably eschews the exigency of preservation.

The caretaker's disinterest in the reproduction of the Samaj archives through digitalisation equally stanches cherished archival routes of aspirational value. The digitalisation of minoritised archives, we are endlessly reminded (and for the most part, rightly so), safeguards against the risk of lost value, especially within the treacherous landscapes of post/colonial worlds. As such, the Samaj's lack of investment in





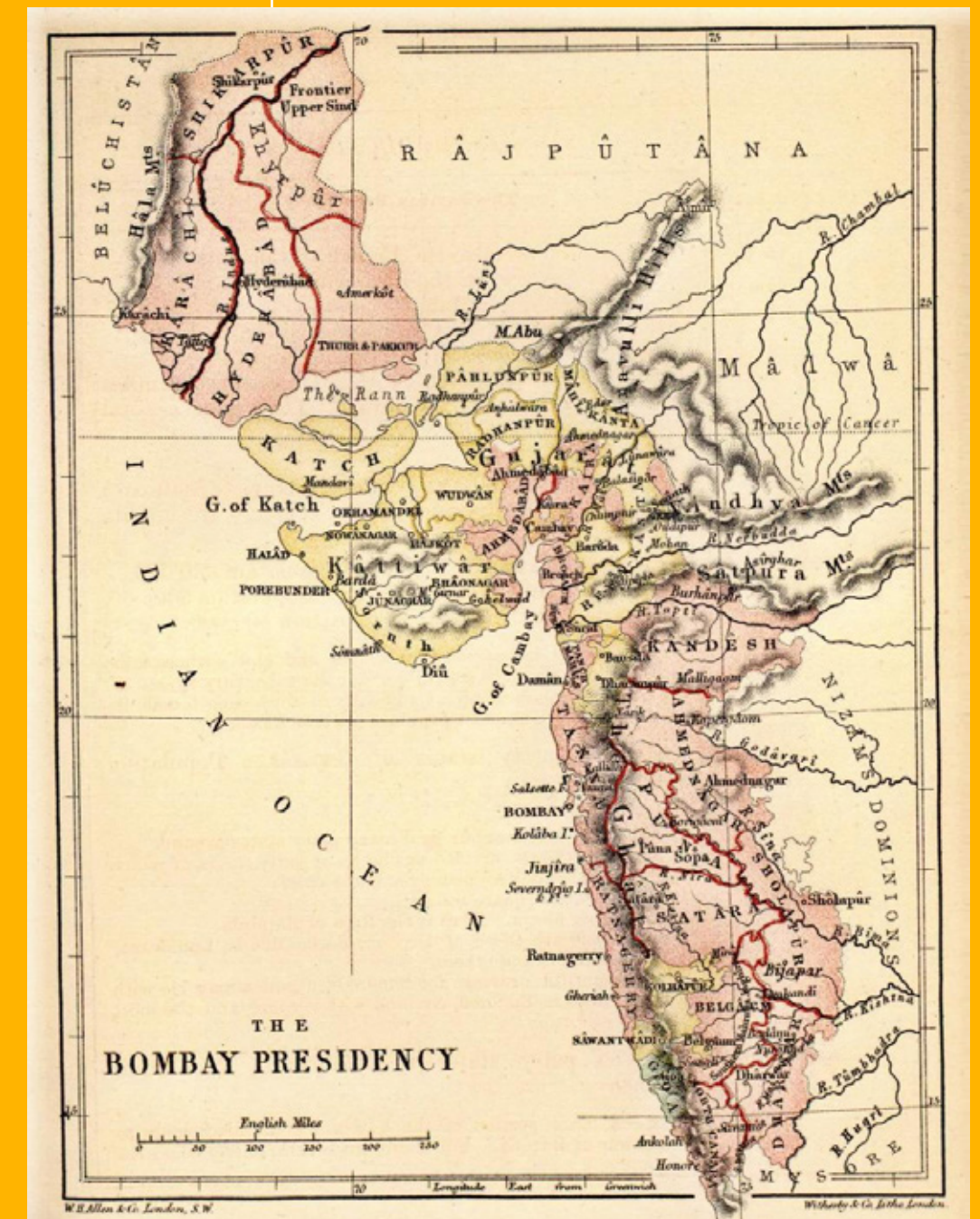
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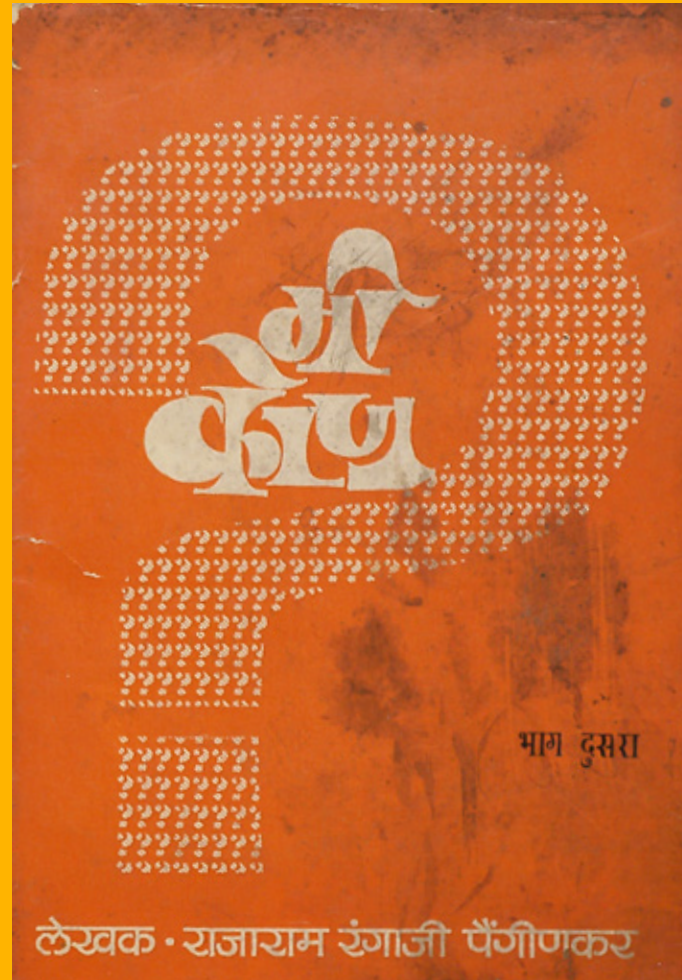
digitalised pasts and futures speaks further to an almost counter-intuitive embrace of archival abundance: a refused relation to the valued reproductive imperative. In contrast to the imperative to immure and preserve materials through digitalisation, the Samaj archives appear instead to be focused on the sustenance of an archive whose abundant productions negotiated an unexpected pathway to futurity. What remains instead is the promise and failure of archival recuperation, the looking for, and a queer historiography about found archival objects that are so plentiful that one must look askance.

Tracing its roots back to early 18th-century Goa, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj is an OBC (Other Backward Castes) community and was established as a formal organisation in 1927 and 1929 in the western Indian 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. Often referred to as *Bharatatil ek Aggressor Samaj* (an aggressive community in India), this *devadasi* diaspora is now routinely lauded (by the left and the right in India) for its self-reform and progress. From the immortal Mangeshkar sisters (Lata and Asha), to the first chief minister of independent Goa, Dayanand Bandodkar, there are few sectors of Indian society where the presence of Samaj members cannot be felt.³ 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 through its survival and geography and holds much potential for a differentiated model of historiography. *Devadasis* are

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 Cover page of the Samaj Sudharak, May, 1940
 Source: Gomantak Maratha Samaj Archives, Mumbai, India
 Map of Bombay Presidency from Pope, G. U. (1880) Text-book of Indian History: Geographical Notes, Genealogical Tables, Examination Questions, London: W. H. Allen & Co. Pp. vii, 574, 16 maps.





Front cover of Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar's *Mee Kon (Who Am I?)* Vol 2 (1971). A signed copy of the text is archived at the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, Mumbai, India

studied more in southern India, and rarely in western India. We have here the regional twist; 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 — so we have here a south-south colonial comparison.

Two extraordinary features make this Goan Devadasi Samaj noteworthy: it is unabashedly celebratory of its past and present history of sexuality, and it is the only Devadasi community that maintains its own extensive and continuous historical archive. Unlike the familiar histories of loss that accompany the excavation of queer lives, the archive of this collectivity offers a radically different relationship to the past. The Samaj's archives are massively messy, and contain multiple genres of archival records in Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, private correspondence, flyers, programmes, replete with the minutiae of everyday life in the Samaj. Such efflorescence appears startling, almost jarring, pushing against archival expectations of absence and erasure. A second key feature of the Samaj archives is the relative paucity of 'veracity' genres such as memoirs, testimonials, and biographies. Indeed, the only available biography, to this day, remains Rajaram Rangoji Paigankar's *Mee Kon/Who am I?* (1969), whose storyline is itself mired in the production of a foundational fiction. Fiction provides the vitalising properties of the archive, deliberately rerouting the demand for archival presence, from conventional evidentiary forms to more imaginative modes of representation. Here, the 'truth' of the Samaj is not what is at stake; rather genres of self-fashioning are. The Samaj archives are housed in open collections in brick-and-mortar buildings in Bombay and Panaji, and have always been available for public viewing since their formation in 1929. I have spent the last ten years or so, reading and sitting with the materials in the Samaj archives, and have as yet read, at most, about 50–60 percent of the available materials.⁴ In fact, the Samaj's incitement to archive, as previously mentioned, 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 with 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.

More confounding still is the Samaj's relationship to principles of archival provenance and circulation. As I noted earlier, the archives of the Samaj have not been read, circulated or memorialised, beyond a repeated reference to the glories of the Samaj's success as an aggressive, self-reforming collectivity. Such a historical elision is particularly telling because there is no mystery surrounding access to the archives, no governmental bureaucracies to accommodate. In the story of the

Samaj, archival surplus repeats itself in a historical calculus, so minor, so unspectacular, that it does not appear to excite historical recuperation. As a historian colleague once asked me with great exasperation, why is this not just a failed archive? If it has not been read, and is so evidently available, surely, there must be nothing there. The Samaj's provenance thus marks both archival abundance and historical minoritisation: it is at once removed from the archival mandates that govern minoritised histories, even as it is intimately acquainted with them and their most subtle efforts on history-writing. Let us imagine such a history together.

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Instead of providing a more conventional listing of the many excellent monographs and special issues published in the past decade on new/found archives of sexuality in Asia, Latin America, Africa, Middle East, I want to turn to a slightly different exemplar of the explosion of such archives. I recently served as a regional editor for Asia for a new encyclopedia on LGBTQI+ histories of sexuality. Together, the six editors of the encyclopedia reviewed over 600 entries on new archival research on queer history across the world, with topics ranging from more familiar topics such as sodomy and human rights, to more unfamiliar ones on issues such as queer working-class bars and homosexual blackmail. See Anjali Arondekar, Associate Editor (Asia), and Howard Chiang, Chief Editor, *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History* (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2019).

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See Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3–4

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For more historical detail on the emergence of the Samaj, see Arondekar, 'Subject to Sex: A Small History of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj' in *South Asian Feminisms*, ed. Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012). Other texts that gloss briefly on the history of the Samaj include Bhobe, *Kalavant Gomantak*, Khedekar, *Gomantak Lok Kala* and Satoshkar, *Gomantak Prakriti Ani Sanskriti*.

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The bulk of the archives are 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 Sittladevi 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.

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