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TURNING ARCHIVAL

The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies

EDITED BY DANIEL MARSHALL AND
ZEB TORTORICI

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ANJALI ARONDEKAR

For the past few years, much ink (toxic and otherwise) has been expended on how to read historical archives. From a diatribe against the hermeneutics of suspicion or reading against the grain (where all readings are necessarily symptomatic readings of something that is missing or erased) becoming the new hegemony, to a rallying call for surface readings and readings along the archival grain (where the surface of the texts bears witness to the violence of the moment), there is a shared sense that how and why we make meanings out of the past must constantly be debated.¹ That the most trenchant challenges to our consumptions of times past have overwhelmingly come from scholars working on histories of slavery, sexuality, and colonialism who are attentive to archival economies of loss, paucity, and devaluation, is hardly surprising. Scholars such as Jennifer Morgan, Indrani Chatterjee, and Beth Povinelli, to name a select few, have foregrounded the fervent born-again historical materialism (if you will) that has plagued, indeed haunted, histories of slavery and colonialism, contrasting it with more robust informal and imaginative economies of survival that are often ignored or elided in such readings. They have variously problematized the triumphant demand for conventional economic histories (even if they are directed to liberatory ends) that preserve rather than trouble the vexed calculus of gender, labor, and capital.²

Even as I write this, archival economies of devaluation abound, as state-sponsored campaigns to purify India of cultural pollution (*sanskritik pradushan*) have become the mainstay of a Hindutva-fueled polity. Within such state formulations, the pollution of the Indian populace derives from its historical amnesia, from its refusal and erasure of proper historical vernaculars, cast in the loss of Sanskrit as mother tongue, or in the aspiration of a *swachh bharat*, emptied of

the corrupting forces of alternative sexualities. Now more than ever, the past founds the moral authority of the Indian nation-state where all forms of difference are coercively shunted aside to make way for a new India shining. When it comes to historical evidence any shoddy travesty of research appears to pass muster, as is evident in the recent appointment of Professor Y. Sudershan Rao as chairperson of the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR).³ For Rao and his ilk, Indian historians need to abandon their Marxist and Western historiographical ways to make way for a Hindutva-infused empiricism that would eschew archival ambivalences and establish historical dates for the “factual” events of the Ramayana and Mahabharata.⁴ Such concerns, with the manipulation, erasure, and refusal of diverse pasts, are especially pressing for the lives of sexual minorities as the legal and economic right to be here and now is often authorized by the evidence of histories past. One has to only recall the past legal challenges around the repeal of the so-called anti-sodomy statute, Section 377, that remained embroiled in debates around the presence/absence of alternative sexualities in India’s past.⁵ As historians of sexuality, we are thus called upon to insist on a protean and diverse past that rejects an instrumentalist and triumphalist Hindutva worldview.⁶

To put it mildly, the reading of sexuality’s past(s), has now clearly become a complicated affair, a balancing act between an embrace of sexuality’s munificent incommensurability (divergent temporalities are fodder for theories of queer difference) and a capture of its genealogical sameness (the past surrenders lineages of our queer presents). The cornerstone of such writing is of course the idea of the archive—more specifically, the archival trace—as the preferred value form through which we accrue meaning. Even as it is almost commonplace, particularly for those of us who work within colonial archives, to argue that historical archives must be read more as registers of selection than empiricism, there is less debate around forms of archival consumption and dissemination, particularly as they unfold in minoritized historiographies.⁷ I want to begin then with one such narrative form that continues to inaugurate most historiographical and ethnographic projects: the problem-event, the detail, the legal case, the anecdote—in other words, an archival trace that is often a tantalizing obstacle to clarity, which then comes alive through our reconstructive hermeneutics.⁸ Most often than not, the turn to such an inaugural problem-event becomes an exemplifying narrative, pointing to something bigger, a critical encounter that opens up potentialities that we as scholars want to and most often figure out.

For scholars working at the interstices of multiple minoritized historiographies, such as myself, the problem-event often becomes a crucial way of resolving the crisis of marginality where the scarcity of historical evidence is refused by

the hermeneutical performance of plenitude—where you recover the archival trace for the promise of historical precedence and futurity. In my previous work, I wrote about the pressing impasse that haunts our recuperation of the historical archive, about the hermeneutical demands placed on histories of sexuality, and about the double binds and possibilities that emerge from within such recuperative practices. In this chapter, I want to think more about the analytical forms through which recuperative historiographies gather their salutary force, especially as they service minoritized communities that lack adequate rights and representation. The challenge here is to marshal a queer historiography, as I have previously argued, that “paradoxically adds value to a sedimented historical form (minoritized archives must be resurrected, found, produced for future gains) precisely by staging interest in its modes of reproduction.”⁹

In what follows, I want to talk more about what exemplifying readings of problem-events mean for the way in which we encounter archives, particularly as is the case here, archives of sexuality. Simply put, what makes something an archival event/situation, and not a merely gestural instance, illustration, or example, and, following Lauren Berlant, how to “query the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from”?¹⁰ By this I mean to say, why does the writing of a history of sexuality, as will be the case here, take a particular narrative form, and what creates obstacles to its lithesome storytelling? What are the hermeneutic demands placed on its telling? The provocation of my title, “Telling Tales” is an invitation to move with the archival trace without presuming it as a mode of historical stabilization or recuperation. My efforts here are directed at resisting the impulse (by now well sedimented in sexuality studies) to overread archival evidence (particularly in the historical past) as obdurately and enticingly sparse. Indeed the seductions of such paucity accrue a certain value where you cede to historical difference precisely to lay aside the epistemic work such difference does. In other words, how might we relay something of the messy misalignments that the archival trace offers, without revisiting routinized habits of analysis, even as we attend to the generation of value/capital that is implicit in the form itself? After all, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, “every example must necessarily fail to do its job.”¹¹

More Imagined than Real

Let me begin then with one archival problem-event. A public meeting of the residents and ratepayers of Girgaum (in South Bombay) is hastily convened on July 16, 1911, with the express purpose of protesting “against the growing evil

of women of bad repute coming to reside in increasing numbers in Girgaum." Four unanimous resolutions are passed (under the leadership of Sir Bhalchandra Krishna) and in turn forwarded to the Secretary of Government, Bombay. The resolutions argue (1) that it is "highly objectionable that women of ill-fame should at all be allowed to occupy houses even on main roads and thoroughfares, and generally in quarters inhabited by respectable families and they emphatically deprecate the recent increase of this evil in Girgaum," (2) that "effective steps should be taken to induce house-owners to refuse to let their houses or premises be used for immoral purposes," (3) that the "Commissioner of Police should use all the powers given to him by law to reduce this evil" and "fresh legislation" should be passed to further "empower him," and (4) last but not least, that a committee consisting of the gentlemen from the association, should be appointed to take any steps necessary to "carry out the object of the meeting."¹²

Responding with some testiness, the Secretary to the Government, C. A. Kincaid, writes a long and disciplining letter (dated November 13, 1911) to the ratepayers of Girgaum. In the letter, Kincaid applauds the "spirit" of the resolutions against the "evil of prostitution," but cautions against the inflammatory rhetoric used by the ratepayers, and argues that "he has reason to believe that the growth of the evil is more apparent than real." He further adds that in the "absence of definite statistics" there is no indication that the evil of prostitution has in fact increased in Girgaum—the more obvious explanation for the threat being that "ill-houses of fame" had been shut down in North Girgaum and forced the "women to scatter and invade the southern part of the ward." In case the ratepayers still think it is incumbent on the Commissioner of Police to take action, the Secretary further adds that the Commissioner cannot use the "power invested in him by the law" to take action against a large proportion of these immoral women who are more "kept mistresses/devadasis" than "common prostitutes." And further, even if the women are redistributed and moved to other parts of the city, it would interfere with the goals of the City Improvement Trust that does not have a particular investment in providing "harlot's quarters." To do so would be to endorse such vice, and perhaps, the letter snidely questions, is that what the ratepayers want?

The letter ends with a final flourish, saying that "prostitution in Girgaum is a subject which usually comes in for publicity during the monsoon season when there is not much going on in Bombay and the Government are away in Poona." Castigating the ratepayers for their own involvement in the "apparent" evil of this vice, Kincaid adds that the houses in which the women reside are owned and supported by the very ratepayers advocating these resolutions. And moreover, in his own "experiences" of Bombay, "the very gentleman

who presided over the meeting recommended to Government the other day for an honour an individual who counts among his nearest female relations three ladies who according to my Criminal Investigation Department must be classes among those who, in Census parlance, are following dishonourable professions." In a last note, he also reminds the ratepayers that the Government must act "with great caution," especially as the Commissioner of Police is still recovering from "being hauled into court by a woman upon whom he has served a notice" and being told that he had acted *ultra vires* and that the woman is not a "common prostitute." And in an effort to erase any doubts on this question, Kincaid writes that he himself has visited similar houses accused of being "disorderly brothels" in response to like complaints, only to find that one of the members who visits the house is "a member of a Parsi Purity Brigade or Vigilance Committee."

At the heart of the debate between the two sides is a rather peculiar crisis of representation embedded in an even more fascinating palimpsest of arguments. The hermeneutical demand on either side is to make visible or eradicate an object of sexuality that is for all considered "apparent"—a paradoxical term that traffics equally in the realm of the obvious and of the elusive (we know the evil ladies exist but the force of their threat may or may not be real). For someone like myself who is writing a book on these "evil ladies of Girgaum," this exchange inevitably becomes an archival trace laden with the challenges and possibilities of historical visibility. Surely, I must insist, fueled by a corrective historiographical impulse, that what is lost in the back and forth of this exchange are the material histories and contexts of the very object of knowledge that is being debated. The slipperiness of the arguments made on both sides (are they or are they not prostitutes, are they "kept mistresses" or *Devadasis*?) could become the perfect foil for the "real" history of sexuality that needs telling: that to reduce these women to the confines of this debate is to limit our analytical horizons; to forget that these so-called evil ladies became in the decade or so after this event founders of one of the most successful collectivities in Bombay, the Gomantak Maratha Samaj, earning them the moniker of a model minority.

Let me say more about what I mean. I am currently writing a historiography 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. Often referred to as *kalavants* (literally carriers of *kala*/art), these women moved between Portuguese and British colonial India for over two hundred years, in search of artistic training and professional enhancement. The Gomantak Maratha Samaj (henceforth the Samaj) is an OBC (Other

Backward Castes) community and was established as a formal organization 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 ten thousand to fifty thousand registered members. Of singular importance is that the history of the Samaj never disappeared or was erased, as is the case in more well-known historical accounts of *Devadāsīs*, particularly in South India. 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. The Samaj's archives (housed in Panaji and Bombay) constitute an efflorescence of information in Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, newsletters, private correspondence, flyers, and programs all filled with details of the daily exigencies and crises that concerned the community. Often referred to as Bharatatil 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. 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.¹³

The Properties of Evil

Several historical accounts from the period allude to the "evil ladies" of Girgaum as being the progenitors of this successful and celebrated Samaj. Padma Anagol, for example, situates such community efforts to read the evil ladies as morally contagious within a larger respectability movement, orchestrated by largely middle-class (and mostly upper-caste) women. Within such narratives of reform and progress, the evil ladies become purveyors of a curiously fecund set of cultural threats. Here the evil of the ladies shifts from the corruptions of sex to the debasement of *kala*/art, a shift that needs to be rerouted (and stabilized) through a more heteronormative marriage economy. On the one hand, the evil ladies trouble cherished distinctions between *kalavants/naikins*/artists and prostitutes; after all, if they are primarily repositories of arts (*kala*), then their growing presence cannot be regulated within anti-prostitution regulation, and the resolution of the Girgaum ratepayers holds no ground. On the other hand, the rise of such evil ladies and their clientele demonstrates the need for a more robust cultivation of arts/*kala* within middle-class women themselves. In this vein, middle-class men become clients of evil ladies in search of artistic enrichment, not sex, a turn that rouses middle-class women to claiming the domain

of the arts/*kala* for themselves. For Anagol, groups such as the Maharashtra Mahila Mandal (founded in 1902) embody the tensions of such concerns as they plot efforts to both train in the arts and organize against the presence of the evil ladies. Vernacular newspapers of the day, such as *Bodh Sudhakar* and *Subodh Patrika*, Anagol writes, equally register the scale of these efforts, carrying accounts of middle-class women trying to oust the evil ladies from their residences, even as others such as *Indu Prakash* and *Dnyan Prakash* run editorials extolling the bravery of the *naikins* in resisting eviction.¹⁴

Ethnographic and travel accounts of colonial Bombay similarly record the troublesome and vexing history of the evil ladies. Govind Narayan's *Mumbai-che Varnan* (1863) documents the author's migration to Bombay from Madgaon through a series of lush accounts of the city's shifting urban landscape. In a chapter describing the rise of arts and theater in Bombay (circa 1861), Narayan writes with great disgust about the rise of "dancing girls" who appear to have garnered clientele across the city, with their "numbers increasing daily." Of great concern to Narayan is the successful dancing girl's acquisition of properties and her vulgar display of wealth. As he writes, "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."¹⁵ K. Raghunathji expresses a similar articulation of shock and awe in his documentation of the rise of Bombay dancing girls. Writing for the *Indian Antiquary* (1884), Raghunathji provides detailed descriptions of these dancing girls (who are both Hindu and Musalman) and their practices, noting that a large percentage of the Hindu girls appear to have migrated "from Goa and the places around it."¹⁶ He notes that the "Hindu dancing girls are of four sects, viz: Naikins, Bhavins, Murlis and Kasbins. Of these the first two belong to Goa and villages round it, being natives of that district." Unlike Narayan, Raghunathji paints a more flattering picture of these women, extolling their beauty and their generally "intelligent pleasing appearance."¹⁷ While they arrive in Bombay speaking "Goanese" (which we are mysteriously told differs from the "language of Bombay"), they quickly acclimatize and soon read, write, and even compose songs in Marathi. 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.¹⁸ Even as such anthropological accounts are to be consumed with some trepidation (after all, we are rarely provided with any sources for the information that is provided!), references to the women's growing presence and appetite for wealth can also be found in other genres of archival records. Even more recent scholarly studies on the migration into and rehabilitation of "prostitutes in Bombay" (with a

“reference to family background”) applaud the positive efforts of the evil ladies of the Samaj, and contrast them sharply with other organizations like the Association of Tawaifs and Deredars that continue to use “singing girls” as “shield” to propagate more “unscrupulous” and unlawful activity. But the study notes (with some irony) that “the majority of their respondents” are migrants from Goa, whose mother tongue is Konkani, and therefore to be taken with a grain of salt.¹⁹

Of equal interest are also several legal appeals filed on behalf of these evil ladies petitioning the state for support in their claims for maintenance from the families of dead patrons or *yajemans*, residing in or around Girgaum. As in the accounts discussed earlier, the focus continues to be on the acquisition of ill-gotten wealth by the evil ladies and the threat it poses to the sanctioned circulation of capital within family formations. One series of appeals, in particular, stand out in their detailed listing of monies acquired and requisitioned from the family of an upstanding member of society (very much kin of the Girgaum ratepayers association I began with) after his untimely death in 1919. In *Bai Monghibai vs Bai Nagubai*, Bai Monghibai (widow of the deceased Vasanji Madhavji Thakar, who died on November 21, 1919) appeals a previous judgment of Mr. Justice Kanga that awarded monthly maintenance of Rs. 400 to Bai Nagubai Manglorkar as “the permanent concubine of the deceased.”²⁰ According to the details of the previous judgment, the deceased “possessed of moveable and immoveable property of a very large value,” had abandoned his family domicile in Vadgadi and had come to reside with Bai Nagubai, a Goan *naikin*, “in her house in Girgaum and that he continued to reside there until the day prior to his death.” Bai Nagubai claimed monthly maintenance and “alleged that a sum of Rs. 25,000 was specially promised by the deceased” for the benefit of her and her daughter after his death. In the series of legal skirmishes that followed the original judgment of Justice Kanga, much effort is made to determine if Bai Nagubai was the “exclusive mistress” of the deceased, and if she maintained sexual chastity even after his death. Bai Monghibai, the deceased’s widow, argues that the deceased merely visited Bai Nagubai in her Girgaum residence, and was permanently domiciled elsewhere. Acting Judge Lallubhai Shah, who reviewed the widow’s appeal, concurs with her claim even as he is “willing to admit that Bai Nagubai used to live in a house near Kennedy Bridge at Girgaon where the deceased Vasanji used to visit her regularly . . . prior to his death and used to pay her some monthly allowance.” The crux of the appeal relies on the status of Bai Nagubai’s residence in Girgaon/Girgaum: Is it or is it not the primary residence of the deceased? For Shah, the true nature of the deceased’s relationship with Bai Nagubai cannot be ascertained without

“knowing the nature of his visits” to the Girgaum residence. True companionship, for Shah, can only be determined through open and continuous cohabitation with Bai Nagubai, something that the facts of the case do not appear to corroborate. Shah’s judgment is appealed further by Bai Nagubai; she provides evidence that the deceased had rented the Girgaum residence “in her name . . . and that he was nursed there during his last illness and only removed shortly before his death.”²¹

As the story of these evil ladies unfolds in multiple historical accounts of the period, it becomes apparent that the “real” archival substance of their evil unfolds in variegated scenes of capital. From their ostentatious displays of wealth, to their corruption of the family form as value, the evil ladies appear to play exemplary roles in what Mariam Dossal has called Bombay’s “theatre of conflict.”²² At the time of the ratepayers’ complaint against the evil ladies of Girgaum, the city of Bombay appears mired in various struggles around land expansion and reclamation, gentrification, and the increasing demands of native franchise. Preeti Chopra, for instance, argues that the expansion debates pivot around the “joint public realm” where native elites collaborate with the colonial state (with varying degrees of success) to create public institutions of finance.²³ One key stage of such financial ventures circles precisely around the acquisition and control of lucrative land such as the properties the evil ladies of Girgaum inhabit.²⁴ Prashant Kidambi reminds us that this is also the period when the Bombay Improvement Trust (BIT) emerges as the central force in shaping the city’s physical landscape. BIT was an ambitious colonial enterprise that was largely a response to the sanitation risks of overcrowding that had come to the forefront in the devastating aftermath of the Bombay plague. One of its key projects was the construction of thoroughfares such as the Princess Street Scheme II and the Sandhurst Road Scheme III, which opened up a wide corridor in the otherwise crowded locality of Girgaum. Such efforts were however continuously mired in multiple property disputes around land acquisitions as native landlords and homeowners rushed to capitalize on the increasing value of their assets.²⁵

Elided also in our focus on the evil ladies of Girgaum is their emergence in the context of a precarious and controversial period of property tax legislation in Bombay Presidency. The crux of the controversy revolved around the famous Girgaum Memorial Memorandum of 1870 that called for the abolition of occupier’s and house taxes, and what more reformist newspapers at the time such as *Native Opinion* derisively called the “landlord’s movement.” The memorandum principally involved the tax levied on house property by the colonial state and asked for a reduction of the taxes from 7 percent to 4 percent.

The Bombay Municipal Act of 1872 further complicated matters by allowing the upper echelon of ratepayers (primarily landlords and businessmen) to be elected members of the Municipal Corporation. Leading up to 1911, the year in which the Girgaum residents and ratepayers association filed the public resolutions against the evil ladies of Girgaum, the tax rate legislation on property continued to be heavily disputed, with property values escalating (as mentioned previously) thanks to the redistribution of lands due to the institution of the City Improvement Trust. In such a context, the evil ladies' occupation of homes in the main thoroughfares of Girgaum needs to be more carefully examined.²⁶ According to the census of 1901, the number of prostitutes in Girgaum had significantly diminished in numbers (dropping from over 1,200 or so in the late 1890s to about 235 in 1901; figures cum grano, of course, given the unreliability of census reports at the time).²⁷ So the Secretary to the State is right in arguing that a statistical case cannot be made for the rise of evil ladies in Girgaum. Alternately, what the private archives of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj (which contain many property deeds and genealogies of inheritance and distribution) reveal is that the evil ladies of Girgaum occupied and then gradually took possession of the multiple residences they were inhabiting, thanks to their complex negotiation with their *yajemans*/patrons, of a payment system that bypassed cash payments for property deeds.

The association of the Girgaum residents and ratepayers lists as its members prominent Saraswat shetias, Mohammedan merchants, and a few converted Christians and Eurasians, a motley crew of caste and races that is reflected in the current geography of Girgaum.²⁸ In the back and forth between the members of the Girgaum association and the Secretary to the Government, no such skirmish over tax rates and property values is made visible.²⁹ Instead, the repeated and apparent invocation of "vice" and prostitution seamlessly covers over the economics and exigencies of the Samaj women's day-to-day survival. It is thus with some pleasure that I add here that the economic success of the Samaj is also largely built on their acquisition in the early 1900s of prime property all over Bombay Presidency, particularly in the areas of Girgaum, Gamdevi, and Chowpatty.³⁰

Even as I write this, I continue to discover new archival evidence that can further unpack the telling tales of this problem-event. Generous colleagues working on histories of policing and surveillance in colonial Bombay reference (with great confidence, I would add) the presence of numerous classified files on these evil ladies of Girgaum that still lie outside of the realm of public consumption. As of now, such files remain sequestered within the bureaucratic walls of police archives, their content, like the material of this problem-event,

offering the promise of multiple readings.³¹ Such invocations of classified (and therefore potentially explosive evidence) further concatenate the value accrued around the problem-event. After all, any new historical reading, especially of sexuality's pasts, surely benefits from the continued promise of archival evidence. To hold such evidence in narrative abeyance makes possible further heroic reconstructions of the event, bypassing any narrative-stopping closure of an always-impending authentic history.

In light of such concerns, the scandal now shifts from an evaluation or disputation of the "evil" of the ladies of Girgaum to the apparent entanglements behind their invocation. Let me be clear: reading sexuality here as a cover story is not merely to make the familiar but necessary argument for sexuality's material contexts. It is more an attempt to think of these contexts themselves as being equally locked in the dialectic of the apparent and the real. Within such imaginaries, the matter of the evil ladies of Girgaum works not as an exemplary case that resolves historical ambivalence or loss through its successful recognition and emergence, but rather as a narrative that inserts epistemic discontinuity in how and why we write histories of sexuality.³² Even as the story of the evil ladies morphing into the successful emergence of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj is a crucial and inspiring one, it is more than just another exercise in recuperative and redemptive historiography. Rather, it pushes us to consider the archival trace less as a marginalized, erased archival trace of sexuality and more as evidence of the hegemonic intercalation of property, caste, and sexuality. The exemplar of the evil ladies thus does not affirm or erase their liminality as archival objects; rather it simply presses against our desire for an archival hermeneutics that will recover to restore value to a lost form/collectivity. In this case, the collectivity, as I have noted, is never lost or erased, or missing an archive. As is clear by now, not only do these evil ladies exist in multiple archival forms, but they also maintain and sustain an archive of their own making. Instead, the evil ladies of Girgaum function (then and now) as a fetishistic screen whereby we return over and over again to the vice of sexuality as the familiar place of historical redress and reform. What would it mean to refuse such habits of occlusion, to uncouple sex from the safety of its "evil" form, and to summon its ordinary plenitude within public discussions of culture, capital, and historiography? What would it mean to read the evil ladies not as a seductive exemplar, nor as an exceptional case study that needs decoding (which is of course the preferred form)? After all, there remains the enduring allure of a virtuoso reading (within which I too am mired) that will somehow unravel the secrets of sexuality. Instead, as we have seen, the exemplar of the evil ladies speaks more to a history of sexuality that is unfinished and messy, upending

sedimented mandates of restoration and representation. Bypassing the heroics of recuperative historiography, the exemplar here is less a record of lost lives and more a potential epistemology for how we know, relate, and intensify our relationship to the past. Let us try to imagine that history together.

Notes

- 1 See Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading"; Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*; and Stewart, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion."
- 2 See Chatterjee, "When 'Sexualities' Floated Free of Histories in South Asia"; Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*; and Morgan, "Accounting for the 'Most Excruciating Torment.'" Within South Asian studies, in particular, the early work of the Subaltern Studies Collective attended to the elitist compositional and distributive logics of archives in colonial and postcolonial India. Yet for the most part, the focus of the collective has still largely been recuperative and reparative, and only more recently supplemented by the work of feminist historians such as Indrani Chatterjee and the emphasis on more discrepant and gendered histories of labor, governmentality, and affect.
- 3 For a prescient reading of this appointment, see Thapar, "The Appointment of a Historian Whose Work Is Unfamiliar." The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's litany of mistakes, backflips, controversies, and denials of India's diverse past is by now well known and too extensive to be rehearsed here in its entirety.
- 4 "Historians Raise Questions," *Firstpost*.
- 5 For an extended exegesis on the use of historical archives in the efforts to repeal Section 377, see Arondekar, "Time's Corpus" and Kapur, "Unruly Desires, Gay Governance, and the Makeover of Sexuality in Postcolonial India." For further reading, see Nagar and Dasgupta, "Public Koti and Private Love."
- 6 When I first conceived of this chapter it was 2017, and we lived in a pandemic-free world. Since then, much has changed for all of us, but the authoritarian manipulation of our pasts continues unabated in Narendra Modi's India. Now, Modi's propaganda machine routinely merges historical fiction with scientific facts, arguing for the primacy of a Hindu science amidst the unfolding health drama in the world. See "'Cow Urine Is Pure Elixir': To Fight Coronavirus, Hindu Mahasabha Hosts 'Gaumutra Party,'" *Outlook India*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-cow-urine-is-pure-elixir-to-fight-coronavirus-hindu-mahasabha-holds-gaumutra-party/348809>.
- 7 Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 32–33.
- 8 Berlant, "On the Case." See also Damousi, Lang, and Sutton, *Case Studies and the Dissemination of Knowledge*.
- 9 Arondekar, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts."
- 10 Berlant, "On the Case," 666.
- 11 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 47.
- 12 All records of the event were found in an unmarked file at the Mumbai offices of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj. The file was buried in a box containing paperwork on the acquisition of the Samaj building in Girgaum. The available records contain typewrit-

ten letters from the Residents and Ratepayers of Girgaum (July 16, 1911) and a response from the Judicial Department (dated November 13, 1911). What is curious about the contents of the file is that the letters contain corrections that have been penciled in, with no indication of whether the letters were revised and resent. The official record can be located in the papers of the Judicial Department, Maharashtra State Archives, and is titled "Protest by the rate payers and residents of Girgaum, Bombay against the evil of women of bad repute, 1911," J. D. Volume 208/1911, 235. The bulk of the archives is 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.

- 13 For more historical detail on the emergence of the Samaj and on the presence of *Devadasis* in Western India, see Arondekar, "Subject to Sex." Other texts that gloss briefly on the history of the Samaj include Bhohe, *Kalavant Gomantak*; Khedekar, *Gomantak Lok Kala*; and Satoshkar, *Gomantak Prakriti Ani Sanskriti*. The brief history of the Samaj I provide here is one that I narrate repeatedly and verbatim in all work that touches on the Samaj's exemplarity. Part of the challenge of writing about a collectivity that is known and not known all at once is that historical details become routinized only through their constant repetition.
- 14 Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India*, 123–37.
- 15 Ranganathan, *Govind Narayan's Mumbai*, 261–62. The original Marathi text utilizes more lavish and efflorescent language.
- 16 Ranganathan, *Govind Narayan's Mumbai*, 166.
- 17 Ranganathan, *Govind Narayan's Mumbai*, 167.
- 18 Raghunathji, "Bombay Dancing Girls."
- 19 Puneekar and Rao, *A Study of Prostitutes in Bombay*, 169, 160. For a broader understanding of late colonial debates on prostitution in Bombay, see Tambe, "Brothels as Families."
- 20 *Bai Monghibai vs Bai Nagubai*, August 11, 1922.
- 21 *Bai Monghibai vs Bai Nagubai* (1922) 24 Bombay Legal Reporter (BOMLR) 1009 and *Bai Nagubai vs Bai Monghibai* (1926) 28 BOMLR 1143. Other cases that deal with questions of maintenance and similar "evil ladies" include *Bai Appibai vs Khimji Cooverji* (1936) 38 BOMLR 77 and *Yashvantrav vs Kashibai* (1888) Indian Law Reports 12 Bom 26. Kunal Parker, writing on similar questions, proposes that colonial courts in India augmented *Devadasi* reform through innovative and often unprecedented translations of the law. Legal norms that previously applied to different castes represented within Brahmanical taxonomies were extended to include an innovative set of patriarchal norms with respect to the sexual behavior of Hindu women. For example, the *Devadasi* was cast less as a "temple dancing girl," and more as a "Hindu girl" engaging in sexual activities outside of marriage. Such a shift from the "tradition" of *Devadasis* to the aberration of their sexual practices allowed the courts to legislate against the *Devadasis* as prostitutes without engaging their more complex functions as repositories of art,

- culture, and religion. According to Parker, these concerns substantially impacted the interpretation of the 1861 Indian Penal code with reference to the *Devadasis*. By focusing on the prostitution of minors dedicated to temples, Parker suggests that *Devadasi* reform groups rerouted provisions intended to protect minors, to nullify adoption by *Devadasis*, and to outlaw any and all dedications of girls to deities. Such a turn to the protection of minors became a crucial part of the judicial reform movement aimed at eliminating *Devadasis*. See Parker, "A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes."
- 22 Dossal, *Theatre of Conflict, City of Hope*. See specifically chapter 7, "Urban Planning or Crisis Management? 1860–1930."
- 23 Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise*.
- 24 In a similar vein, Padma Anagol notes that "residents of various towns and cities often sent complaints to police authorities to remove kalavantins from what they considered respectable neighborhoods and to house them outside the city or town limits." Anagol cites the example of a complaint carried by Ahmadnagar residents against prostitutes. See *Nagar Samachar*, February 23, 1878, and *Dandio*, March 22, 1879, Native Newspaper Reports (NNR), 1878–79; NNR was a weekly report of Indian-language newspapers compiled by the British colonial state for distribution amongst its civil servants.
- 25 Kidambi, "Housing the Poor in a Colonial City." See also Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, 70–76.
- 26 Rao, "Community, Urban Citizenship, and Housing in Bombay, ca 1919–1980." See also Rao, *House But No Garden*. I am grateful to Nikhil Rao for providing early feedback on property disputes in Bombay. For a broader historical view of the twists and turns of the ratepayer/landlord's movement, see also Dossal, "A Master Plan for the City" and Dossal, *Imperial Designs and Indian Realities*; Batley, "The Need for City Planning"; Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism in Western India*; and Wacha, *Rise and Growth of the Bombay Municipal Government*.
- 27 Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, 60 and 168.
- 28 Pace, *Elites in South Asia*, 89.
- 29 S. M. Edwardes provides the following detailed description of the topography of Girgaum in *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island, Vol. 1, 1873–1927*, Bombay, Printed at the Times press, 1909–10:

The Girgaum section is bounded on the North by Girgaum Back road, on the south by Thakurdwar road, on the east by Girgaum Back road and Bhuleshwar road, and on the west by Back Bay and Charni road. Like Chaupati and Phanasswadi its interior portion has arisen upon the side of ancient parts, such as Borbhat and Mugbat, with the old Girgaum village as its original nucleus. Its most noteworthy buildings are the Muhamadan sanitarium at the corner of Queen's road, the old Police Court on Girgaum back road, the Allbless Bagh on Charni Road and the Portuguese Church opposite the Trans terminus. The latter building which actually lies just outside the sectional limits was founded in 1773 and rebuilt in its present form in 1836. The neighbourhood of Charni road has of late years been taken up to some extent of the building of middle-class Parsi flats; but the bulk of the section still retains its old character as a Brahman settlement. (41–42)

- 30 A recently curated exhibition by Tejaswini Niranjana and Surabhi Sharma, "Making Music, Making Space," documents musical histories of Girgaum, giving their audiences a small glimpse of the rich and networked worlds of these *naikins* and *kalavantins*. In the exhibition, the audience is also provided with an annotated map of Girgaum that marks all the residences and buildings occupied by collectivities such as the "evil ladies." See India Foundation for the Arts, 2015, <http://www.indiaifa.org/events/making-music-making-space-june-15-17-2015-studio-x-mumbai.html>.
- 31 I am grateful to Shekhar Krishnan, a wonderful chronicler of the varied histories of Bombay, and his deep familiarity with police and municipal archives. Krishnan, for some time, has been attempting to help me gain access to these notorious classified files that he tells me have been seen but not catalogued. For a taste of Krishnan's wide-ranging knowledge of colonial Bombay, see his website at <http://shekhar.cc/>, accessed February 28, 2022.
- 32 Durba Mitra has brilliantly reminded us that the exemplarity of prostitutes/evil ladies and their kin is constitutive to the very making of colonial epistemologies and the structure of the archive itself. For more detailed analysis, see her second chapter on "Repetition: Law and the Sociology of Deviant Female Sexuality," in Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*.

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