

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Naisargi N. Dave**, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*,  
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The activist response to the Supreme Court’s decision, in December 2013, to uphold Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalises homosexuality was saturated with affect. It seemed as if this act of political violence could only be resisted through the force of bare, visceral, and often inarticulate emotion. It is thus not surprising that Naisargi Dave’s rich ethnography of lesbian activism in India (in the period just preceding this judgement, from the 1980s to early 2000s) understands queer activism as not merely being motivated by affect but as being affective, “through and through” (p.4). It contributes both to older conversations about the significant role that emotions play in propelling people to act, and to more recent ones about the affective dimensions of activism (even if this distinction between ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’ could have been spelt out as has been done by previous work in this area; cf. Gould 2009). A crucial way in which Dave contributes to existing scholarship is by showing how the political forms through which activism is pursued end up constraining the ethical and affective impulse that propelled it in the first place. Activism, then, is necessarily about exclusion and loss but such normative ‘limits’ are constitutive of its very (radical and inventive) nature.

For Dave, lesbian activism is an ethical practice—born out of affect—that includes the critique of existing norms, the invention of alternative norms, and the actualization of these in order to live differently. Partly why this is the case is because of the absolute invisibility and not mere marginalization of lesbian identity and existence. Political action thus necessarily needs to be inventive and not just resistant, especially in terms of the invention of possibilities that were previously impossible and unthinkable (namely, lesbian existence). Such an activism of invention, as Dave calls it, is not exhausted by the struggle for formal equality and legal rights.

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Indeed, Dave meticulously plots lesbian activism at varying scales even as she eschews a scalar analysis that moves from the ‘local’ to the ‘global’. “The mutual imbrications of local and transnational, community and state, as they operate in activism” (p.29), are equally evident in local communities of lesbian and bisexual women as they are in public protest around certain ‘critical events’ like Deepa Metha’s film on lesbian love *Fire* in 1998 and the decriminalization of consensual same-sex sex in 2009. In foregrounding issues of ethics and affect, Dave seems to suggest that large-scale political protest is born less out of a sense of righting wrongs than out of a desire and need to imagine and institute new spaces and forms of care, relationality, and sociality. It is these ‘structures of feelings’ that propel wider political agendas of combating invisibility and marginalization through an assertion of ‘rights’. Entry into the norms and institutions of the postcolonial nation-state can, however, be experienced by queer activists as a series of normative limits against and “within which dreams of possibility are variously kindled and assimilated” (p.10).

So, like others documenting queer struggles in India before her (e.g. Kapur 2012), Dave finds the risk of cooption and containment in queer activism, especially around the state and the law. But she offers a richer, more complex story of why this is the case. Her ethnography shows what is lost or foreclosed in the journey from ethical and affective activism to the consolidation of political communities, from the imagined to the real, as she puts it. Just as affect is the mobilizing factor of queer activism and the world it attempts to ethically constitute, what is foreclosed—circumscribed or disciplined in the political attempt to materialize such a world—is also affect. Dave locates this double-bind not merely in struggles for formal rights and equality but also in the spaces of support and solidarity that activists themselves create.

She usefully plots the three models that have evolved in the course of the short history of lesbian activism in urban India, drawing on cases of lesbian organizing in Delhi. The first adheres to a Western model of lesbian identity politics calling on

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women to identify and interpellate themselves not just as ‘lesbian’ but as part of a transnational political community based on this identification. Second, a sexual minority ‘support group’ that is also based on identity but eschews political mobilisation in the name of safety and support. Finally, a collective or ‘platform’ that moves away from identity to undertake advocacy work in which everyone, regardless of sex, gender, or sexuality, can participate. In all three models, Dave shows how affect was the enabling condition for community formation but what also came to be curtailed in the process of development. So, in privileging political competence and dialogue, the first model foreclosed desire and joy, affects that had served to imagine the possibility of a lesbian community and lifeworld in the first place. They were equally sublimated in the second support group model that emphasised vulnerability and fear for the sake of safety and support and distanced itself, in contrast to the first, from the realm of the political. The third model returned from that of the support group “to highlight sexuality as first and foremost political” (p.92). Unlike the first two that rooted themselves in identity, whether politicized or not, the third understood “identity as stripped of affect and as a strategic calculus” (ibid.). Affect was once again de-linked from activism.

The ‘limits’ that these forms of queer organising encountered are not merely suggestive of the complicated relationship between politics and affect but also of the complexities of mobilizing around (sexual) identity. Dave finds problematic both the support group’s *and* the activist platform’s attempt to take these complexities head-on. It is fair to say that these two models are paradigmatic of queer organizing in India. The sexual minorities support group, which now operates under the aegis of NGOs in most Indian cities, embodies what Khanna (2005), drawing on a Foucauldian critique of sexual categorisation, calls an identitarian logic. Identifying oneself as a sexual minority also serves to emphasise commonality and obscure difference (of class, caste, and religion). For Dave, the social use towards which the space of the support group was put was premised on a particular understanding of lesbian subjectivity—as

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being “the ‘raw’, unpoliticised Indian woman who simply desires other women and has no ambitions for a politics around that desire” (p.75).

In sharp contrast, the activist platform moves away from the support group’s identity politics model towards one of intersectionality, the custodian of which is the ‘properly’ political activist. Dave is quick to underscore the limits and costs of de-linking queer activism from identity in this manner. She speaks of the discomfort and disquiet that activists expressed with a non-identitarian platform as circumscribing their vision of politics which was centrally about affective and ethical ties: “politics was for them intrinsically about love, care, and connection; about using the fact of queer marginality as a reason to invent new ways to be” (p.96).

Both the activist platform and the support group were based on sharp divisions between social and political spaces and those who could and could not participate in a public queer activism. These reflect deeper internal divisions of class and accessibility suggesting that some sexual subalterns are more subaltern than others in terms of their in/ability to participate in political processes. Such divisions and exclusions—that reflect if not replicate existing social divides in India—are not peculiar to lesbian activism. Central to Dave’s point about the necessarily limited nature of such activism is its differential market value, as determined by varying scales and imperatives (at the regional, local, national, and transnational levels), which posits, moreover, particular challenges to sexual subaltern politics as affective and ethical practice.

Dave’s is a fascinating study, so rich and detailed in its intimate telling of the textures of everyday activism that one is absorbed as if reading a novel. She is exemplary in dealing with the internal and invariably intimate conflicts of activist lives besides the everyday ethical quandaries thrown up by activism (especially as it ‘NGOises’) with critical insight but not judgement. She provides a long-awaited critique of the manner in which the Indian women’s movement has marginalized—even as it catalysed—lesbian struggles by setting up a (false) set of hierarchies that

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prioritise class over sexuality (especially at a time when the movement itself has become better resourced under economic liberalisation).

Dave eschews these forced divides in making it clear that hers is a study of women ‘of means’ (educated, urban, and largely upper-caste), a criteria that she says determines lesbian activism in India. While there is truth in this claim, it is also true that there is growing scholarly attention to the activism of non-metropolitan sexual minorities like hijras and kothis (cf. Dutta 2012). Engaging with this work could have enabled Dave to explore in greater depth how the field of sexual subalternity is differentiated in terms of geography, caste-class, language, and religion—not to mention the more recent disjunctures based on trans-identifications (on which she is surprisingly silent). Part of the problem here is with the book’s claim to being representative of ‘queer activism in India’—especially given the title—while being necessarily limited in terms of its regional, metropolitan, and class-caste focus. While no book can clearly be representative of a field in its entirety, it is by recognising the kinds of complexities born out of the intersectionality of class, caste, religion, and gender, and as mediated by the current neoliberal moment, that we can move towards a genuinely expansive understanding of activism in relation to sexual subalternity.

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