

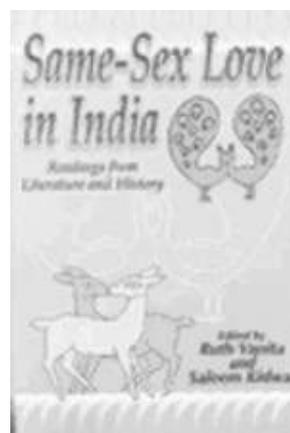
Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History

(St. Martin's Press, 2000, 355 Pages)

by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai

Reviewed by Annie George ¹

This book details the history of ideas in Indian written traditions about homoerotic love. It focuses on analyzing written texts to show how such love was expressed in writing as well as the ways in which homoerotic, passionate and/or romantic attachments were viewed.



The selection has been categorized into ancient Indian texts, medieval texts in the Sanskrit tradition, medieval texts in the Persian-Urdu tradition, and modern Indian texts. Each category is preceded by a detailed and comprehensive introduction. The selection of modern Indian texts is the widest, and perhaps most interesting because the modern section traces the increasing homophobia in India as evident in writings that were produced from the 19th century onwards which, the editors claim, were influenced by colonial legacy, the imposition of British anti-sodomy legislation into India, and the import of Victorian morality. The heterosexualization of qawali poetry, which till then celebrated homoerotic love, is just one example. Another example,

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about which the editors comment, is the Indian academy's studied silence on homosexuality, and it is very fitting that this collection works as a statement to change and challenge that position.

The book presents a range of differences in written texts about homoerotic love. The texts represent differences in time periods, religions, linguistic communities and religious and social groups. Other variations in this book are in texts ranging from Urdu poetry, short stories, extracts of novels, and literary texts. Texts are from non-religious as well as Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim materials and sources. They represent many major Indian languages including English, and also classical languages Sanskrit and Persian. The sources also range from well-known to the more obscure, lesser published writers, as well as political and religious figures. This wide diversity is held together by the commonality: texts from similar, shared literary, intellectual traditions and cultural continuity of the geographic region which is modern India, which the focus on homoerotic love.

The book has a well-presented and argued introduction where the editors problematize and present their understandings of the main themes of the collection — love, gender, friendships, marriage, and India. They also present a detailed discussion on the methodology used for the selection and translation of the pieces presented. On the issue of translation, the editors have attempted to correct bowdlerized translations in order to more accurately understand previously underplayed homoerotic texts. Of particular importance is the fact that most of the pieces have been personally translated by editors, and that formerly translated pieces have been translated again by them, keeping in mind the new sensitivities which do not gloss over or hide same-sex and sexual references in the original.

Each section has a comprehensive introduction where the editors state their views about the selections, while also discussing dissenting opinions. Each selection has its own introduction as well as references to the version of the text used in the edited volume. The editors provide detailed justification for their selections, putting us in the thought processes of their selections, whether of written and oral texts, great versus little traditions, and for presenting already published materials. The selections in this volume bridge the written and oral traditions of India, the so-called "great" and "little" traditions commonly assumed as Brahmanical, Sanskritic and non-or anti-Brahmanical, vernacular texts. The editors make the case that the texts they select show that the processes of assimilation happened with both traditions.

The editors clearly state the limitations of their choices in texts, translations and omissions. In that sense, these limitations extend their goal to continue the historical tracing of published materials from antiquity and the

transformation through time of the ideas of same-sex love. Throughout, the editors claim that their views are not conclusive nor their selection exhaustive. Their stated position to encourage re-readings and revision of their texts in the spirit of the continuance of this discourse on the history of homoerotic written traditions in India shows their awareness of their own place in the rewriting of this history.

This collection defies stereotypes of the heterosexual nature of Indian culture and modern Western understandings of homosexuality as a 19th century invention. One of the explicit aims of this book is to counter homophobic myths existing in India and elsewhere that homosexuality was imported to a particular society, say India, from elsewhere, like the West. This history of homoeroticism is to assure homoerotically inclined Indians of a long historical tradition which did not view same-sex love as inferior. In that sense, this book makes several statements: it ruptures the silence of Indian academics on same-sex love, while also using literature and history as tools to strengthen the hands of those who are trying to promote more tolerance for erotic and sexual diversities in India and elsewhere.

The only incongruous part of this book was the section in the introduction to the modern texts that deals with the English language press, radio, TV and films and the sections that discussed the treatment of homosexuality in the 1990s in films. While this discussion is a useful presentation of contemporary treatment of homosexuality in print and visual media, it detract from the main theses of this book which is on literary texts.

This book will be of interest to historians of sexuality, sociologists and anthropologists of gender, and students of gender and south Asian studies. It expands the repertoire of works in South Asian sexualities, and in so doing, deepens all understandings of love and sexualities, same-sex and otherwise.