

**AIDS SUTRA:
UNTOLD STORIES FROM INDIA**

*Edited by Negar Akhavi
Anchor, 352 pages, \$13.95*

Reviewed by BEN FRUMIN

NO ONE SEEMS to know exactly how many people in India are living with HIV or AIDS. Many shocking statistics—like the CIA’s jaw-dropping prediction earlier this decade that India would have 20 million to 25 million AIDS cases by 2010—have been branded as vastly inflated. Still, the most recent, and most reasonable, estimates from the United Nations and World Health Organization are frightening in their own right. They put the number of Indians living with HIV at roughly 2.4 million in 2007—approximately 7% of the world’s 33 million-strong HIV population. The only countries with larger infected populations than India are South Africa and Nigeria.

Like many governments of afflicted countries, India for too long unconvincingly insisted that it didn’t have an HIV problem. Though the government has begun to come around on this issue in recent years, the millions of Indians living with HIV or AIDS remain largely misunderstood, blamed and shunned by their communities. Victims of this epidemic are often ostracized, the disease viewed as a justified punishment for immoral behavior.

In an attempt to counter the brutal stigmatization of HIV and AIDS in India, there is an admirable if nascent drive to normalize, understand and accept the millions of

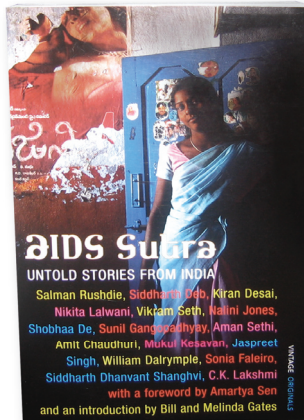
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Indians suffering from this disease. “There are nearly three million Indians living with HIV today,” write Bill and Melinda Gates in the introduction to the collection *AIDS Sutra: Untold Stories from India*. “If we’re going to stop AIDS, we have to embrace every one of them—regardless of social class, line of work, or circumstance.”

AIDS Sutra is one effort to help attain this goal. This bold collection of 16 stories by some of the subcontinent’s most respected authors and journalists, while slightly flawed, is largely excellent, and takes us inside the lives of Indians stricken with HIV and AIDS, engendering the sort of understanding and acceptance of their condition that is a necessary precursor to successfully fighting the disease.

Among the strongest pieces in *AIDS Sutra* is William Dalrymple’s simply told but heartbreaking story of a family doomed by the cyclical, tangled mess of religion, caste, poverty, prostitution, hopelessness and disease that forms the sticky web of their inescapably despairing lives, entrapping not just this generation but also the next. In this case, a once-resentful sex worker, forced into the world’s oldest profession by her mother, years later pushes her own daughters into prostitution. Both daughters then die of AIDS. “We have a lot of misery to bear,” the woman tells Mr. Dalrymple. “But that is our tradition. That is our karma.”

Kiran Desai, winner of the 2006 Man Booker Prize for *The Inheritance of Loss*, showcases what is easily the best writing in *AIDS Sutra* with a fantastic piece that captures with startling reality and penetrating wisdom the lives of sex workers in the coastal state of Andhra Pradesh. The young writer Sonia Faleiro also produces a



fine piece on the complex, corrupt and disturbing relationship between prostitutes and the police in Bombay. And Siddhartha Deb adds a compelling and sharply reported piece on the HIV/AIDS risk of intravenous drug users and sex workers in the insurgent-plagued hill district of Manipur.

AIDS *Sutra* is, however, more than a depressing ménage of accounts of HIV/AIDS patients who may view themselves “as time bombs, ticking down to a death,” as the American writer Nalini Jones deftly puts it. Ms. Jones’ story, “Love in the Time of Positives,” imparts a message of hope in the face of anguish through the story of two HIV-positive Indians who were each temporarily and almost fatally devastated by the disease before finding love, comfort and companionship with each other. Similarly, C.S. Lakshmi’s short but powerful piece about sex workers in Chennai shows the relative triumph of many infected prostitutes who, through a sort of communal empathic understanding, have overcome the adversarial relationship with their bodies that many women in India, infected or not, experience, achieving a peaceful acceptance of their bodies and their virus alike. “I know I am HIV-positive, but it is only a condition, not a curse,” one woman says. “I have the right to a normal life.” It’s that normality—not only the seeking of it by those infected with the virus, but the need for it to be acknowledged and understood by the healthy—that is the overriding theme of the book.

Despite this noble message, AIDS *Sutra* is not without its problems. For instance, Salman Rushdie’s piece on eunuchs is slightly disappointing in light of the author’s considerable talent. Several other pieces in this collection wander from the topic of HIV/AIDS, painting intriguing portraits of at-risk communities of sex workers and truck drivers that disappointingly contain only glancing brushstrokes in-

dicating how the virus has or may affect them directly. In several of these stories, it’s almost as if the disease is half forgotten by a writer who’s fallen in love with his sources, HIV/AIDS relegated to the edge of an otherwise well-told story.

Also, many of the collection’s authors involve themselves unnecessarily in their stories. More than one tells the reader about what he ate during his reporting, as when Amit Chaudhuri explains how he “breathlessly” stopped at a Domino’s in Bombay for a pepperoni pizza on the way to an interview at a hospital. Such wincing asides ought to have been edited out, as should some other glaring no-no’s, including Mr. Chaudhuri’s puzzling use of that journalistic sin of sins, “according to Wikipedia.”

But at its core, AIDS *Sutra* is an act of admirable charity aimed at raising awareness about and money for a debilitating epidemic. The book was produced in collaboration with the India AIDS Initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The writers donated their time and efforts, and the book’s proceeds will go toward a fund for children affected by HIV/AIDS in India.

While there’s little doubt that AIDS *Sutra* will open some eyes and change some minds, it’s debatable whether publishing a high-minded literary collection in English is the most effective way to achieve the wider goal. While any book with an agenda risks diminishing its potential influence with a preaching-to-the-choir existence in an echo chamber, AIDS *Sutra* seems particularly susceptible to this problem. It isn’t India’s English-speaking intellectual elite whose eyes must be opened to the reality of HIV/AIDS; it’s the poor, marginalized, stigmatized and outcast, many of whom are illiterate in any language, let alone English. Theirs are the eyes that need the most immediate opening.

There’s a telling example of this problem near the end of Mr. Deb’s story. Hav-

ing befriended a 23-year-old sex worker named Siami in Churachandpur (a district in the remote eastern province of Manipur), Mr. Deb follows her to a dilapidated wine shack where she turns tricks, hoping to look around. At first, Siami's pimp is wary of Mr. Deb, justifiably concerned that he'll get into trouble if Mr. Deb mentions any of their illicit activities in a local newspaper. "But," Mr. Deb writes, "when I told him that I was writing about it in a book unlikely to ever make its way into Churachandpur, he became friendly, inviting me in with an eagerness that was all the more surprising because of the squalor of the shack."

Mr. Deb is right. It's incredibly unlikely that a copy of *AIDS Sutra* would ever make its way to a poor, struggling, forgotten district like Churachandpur. And even if a copy of the book did somehow find its way there, how many among Churachandpur's impoverished citizens would—or could—read its highbrow English prose? Of course, the people of Churachandpur aren't this particular book's targeted readers. While that's not necessarily a problem, it does raise an important issue. It isn't enough for members of at-risk communities like the young sex worker Siami and her anxious pimp to be characters in a book meant to raise awareness and engender understanding about HIV/AIDS among India's intellectual elite. These people—the real live victims who could benefit as much as anyone from the lessons of *AIDS Sutra*—ought to be on the receiving end of outreach efforts like this book, not just characters in them.