

MURAJ: In Focus -Sayan Bhattacharya, Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies

By Austin Kraft

Like their research endeavors, Sayan Bhattacharya’s schedule is full and multifaceted. Between teaching the course “Transgender Studies Now” at the University of Minnesota, leading the class “Love, Life, and Death in Contemporary India” at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, and conducting archival work in the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies, Sayan’s spring semester is brimming with academic exploration. A Ph.D. student in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies (GWSS), Sayan researches queer and trans movements across India. Despite their hectic schedule, Sayan found time on an April morning to speak with the Minnesota Undergraduate Research & Academic Journal (MURAJ) to shed light on their nuanced work and reflect on the complexities of contemporary research.

Sayan’s involvement with queer and trans communities in Kolkata, India, motivated them to research the role of memory in LGBTQ groups in India, particularly in the context of death and remembrance. “Death is a daily occurrence in queer and trans life. How do we reckon with loss... rituals that we use to remember the dead?” Sayan asks, leading to their central research question, “How do we feel responsible toward the dead?” They hesitate to call this work an investigation, noting that “when investigating something, there is a definite answer”; this research, Sayan clarifies, “is a set of questions about the impact of death.”

Sayan has spent years with this sensitive topic, honing their understanding of the care that this inquiry requires. In queer and

trans communities across India, they note that in the event of queer individuals’ deaths, “many of these deaths haven’t even been documented... there is a limit to documentation.” In particular, Sayan notes, there may exist no record of a deceased person’s queer identity. If that person had not disclosed that identity to their family, for instance, how do the people who knew that information ethically handle the situation? “The moment that you’re [disclosing that information], you’re giving out information that the person did not want to share,” Sayan says. “To share it is unethical.” With the challenging and emotionally fraught context of these interactions, Sayan began to explore the work of memory in circumstances that refuse any straightforward answers.

For Sayan, data come in the forms of archives, oral narratives, and ethnography. Seeking to understand the role of memory in the event of a queer or trans person's death, they read newsletters, pamphlets, and other media to understand the myriad perspectives on a single event; what one source mentions may be omitted elsewhere. During the summer and winter breaks of 2017 and 2018, Sayan traveled to India for fieldwork in West Bengal and North India. Sayan works with only those individuals with whom they have been able to build a rapport over a year or longer. "I need to be able to set up a rapport with them," Sayan explains, acknowledging that producing these histories is a form of labor for the individuals being interviewed. In asking people to recollect an intimate friend's death, Sayan recognizes that the conversation "always involves the potential for harm in terms of instigating or provoking their grief even further." Like other varieties of research, regulations establish standards for this fieldwork. Even with compliance with the Institutional Review Board, though, Sayan's work presents unique challenges because "people really want to talk, to process their trauma... [T]he idea of harm gets complicated." Given the vital role of consent throughout the conversations, Sayan always informs their interviewees that they can suspend the conversation at any time if they do not feel comfortable. Collecting oral histories is a slow and unpredictable process, but it is a necessary component for Sayan's holistic exploration of memories that are rarely captured on paper.

After interviews, Sayan changes the names in the oral histories to maintain security, but such measures are not foolproof.

Gender and geographic location may still be deduced from a changed name. Language also figures into Sayan's consideration of how they request consent of those being interviewed. Writing consent forms in Hindi, Bengali, and English, they prioritize accessibility and clarity. The means by which consent is requested is significant because there is cultural variance in definitions of consent. Sayan states that often people feel unsafe signing on a piece of paper and would rather provide verbal consent. To augment their existing data, they will be returning to India in July for a full year to conduct fieldwork on a research grant.

At this point in the exploration, Sayan has directed their research attention to an emergent optimism in queer and transgender movements due to the recent decriminalization of homosexuality and a legal judgment that grants citizenship rights to transgender individuals in India. However, these progressive developments are also accompanied by everyday violence faced by queer and transgender communities in India. They intend to probe the politics of this optimism for their dissertation.

Sayan's research is in conversation with queer and transgender studies, transnational feminist theories and South Asian studies. However, they critique the U.S. exceptionalism of queer studies in their research with queer and transgender communities in India. Their work interacts with scholarship from the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis, when many queer scholars wrote about what it means to live with death. Sayan views their research as a project that is in conversation with activists and

groups like ACT UP, an international AIDS advocacy group.

Prior to their studies at the University of Minnesota, Sayan wrote a master's thesis on the interactions between the non-profit sector and queer and feminist activism in West Bengal. While earning their master's degree, they worked as a long-form journalist. One of their favorite research stories, Sayan recalls, was a "long piece for a magazine on how a lot of spiritual gurus are sophisticated businessmen." The article received substantial backlash. During that period, Sayan started volunteering with queer groups in Kolkata, leading them to pursue a degree in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies. "[Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies] is such a vast field," they observe. "[It] challenges you to see the world through a new lens... It doesn't require you to have a particular skill-set, [but rather to] be constantly curious about not simply what is happening but the why of what is happening."

Sayan is supported in their research by a network of scholars, friends and activists both on campus and in India. They thank their advisers Jigna Desai and Aren Aizura for all the conversations. At Tretter, Rachel Mattson has given Sayan great opportunities to not only work with materials from South Asia but also to learn about the differences between the work of an archivist and that of a historian. Nasreen Mohamed and Marina Uehara have been generous mentors from Sayan's first year on campus. Sayan also says that without the support of their friends, they would not have been able to do any of the work they are doing and they assert that they are their most important

collaborators, critics and support systems.

Whether writing multilingual consent forms or conversing with students from other academic departments, Sayan emphasizes the importance of being able to speak across multiple audiences, advising that "you should be able to translate research to communities who may not be familiar with this form of academic communication."

As Sayan looks ahead to a year of fieldwork, they also contemplate the path that led them to this stage in their research career. Since their controversial article on spiritual gurus, Sayan has gained a sharper perspective on research, especially in the face of alternative facts and ideological polarization. "In this particular political moment [when it is] difficult to parse out what is true... research is absolutely central."

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