

TALKING QUEER

Archive, Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 3 - AN ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS, LOSS AND GAINS: a conversation with Pawan Dhall

In this episode we speak to Pawan Dhall, an activist, author, and founder of the *Varta Trust*, an advocacy organization based in Kolkata, India. Among other things, we discuss his new book, *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Movements in 90s Eastern India*, which tells a compelling story of LGBT organizing before the internet age.

Today, I'm pleased to welcome Pawan Dhall. Pawan has been engaged in queer activism since the early 90s in India. He was a co-founder of the Counsel Club in Kolkata, one of India's earliest queer support groups created in 1993. He now leads the nonprofit Varta Trust, a gender and sexuality publishing and advocacy organization. Among other things, today we're going to speak about his new book, *Out of Line and Offline: Queer Movements in 90s Eastern India*, published earlier this year by Seagull.

Pawan, welcome to the podcast.

Thank you, Caio, very happy to be here.

Pawan, in the book, you explore the archive of this queer organisation from West Bengal, the Counsel Club. But before we move on to the details of this archive, I think it would be important if you could tell us more about the club itself. How did it come about?

The Counsel Club was actually one among several such queer support groups that were coming up in India in different cities and towns in the early 90s. Around that time, I was also working as a journalist, so I had this in mind, that someday I would begin a queer journal. And I had, in fact, started work on the journal in 1990, and managed to bring out three issues of that. After that, I got busy trying to find a job. In parallel, there were other things happening. I was connecting with people through newsletters, through word of mouth. In those days, we did not have the Internet, but there were networks, there were connections all over the country, and even abroad. By the time it was 1993, the journal that I was talking about – it was called *Pravartak* – it had wound up, but there was significant interest. You know, I met people who were all talking about the need for a support group. So, we got around in the middle of August 1993, to start the Counsel Club. And we also revived the earlier journal *Pravartak* and renamed it the *House Journal of Counsel Club*. That's how it all started. In the beginning, there were five of us. But very soon, you know, word started spreading, and more and more volunteers and members started coming in. We had our first media exposure in the year 1994, with an article in *The Statesman* newspaper. It was actually written by one of the Counsel Club's members, and they published our post bag address as well. After that, there was no looking back, because within a week, we had about 60 letters coming in. After that, the letters just continued to come in, there was just no stopping. We also moved towards organising monthly meetings. It was like about a year since we had started, but we were finally on our way. And then gradually we took up other activities as well.

So, the Club existed, it had been in operation for many years, and in a way you were immersed in this archive, you were part of it. And then you decided to write a book about it. Why now? Was there anything in particular that encouraged you to tell the stories?

Well, I think this book was in the making for a long time. I think I should talk about why we started Varta itself. The Counsel Club lasted from 1993 till about 2002, and the journal that we used to publish, *Pravartak*, the last issue came out sometime in the year 2000. Since then, you know, I had a desire that I would revive that journal someday or the other. But in 2002, when the group wound up, I had started working in a different organization, an NGO called SAATHII. I spent almost 12 years there. But even while being in SAATHII, in the last few years, I had started working on forming Varta. And I had started talking to people and bringing in other people interested and mobilising people, really. One of the things we decided was that we would start off with a webzine called Varta, which would be like a revival of *Pravartak*. It would, of course, be in a different form, different format, but it would have the same spirit *Pravartak* had, and go beyond also. Because today when we talk about gender and sexuality or LGBT issues, times have changed. I mean, in the 90s, it made a lot more sense to talk about LGBT issues in a more focused manner. But today, you have to recognise the intersectionalities and you have to realise that your battles are not to be fought in silos. You have to connect things. And a queer person is also more than just a queer person. He or she or they could have other marginalities in terms of caste or class or race or location.

All of this was there when we created the Varta webzine, which started off in August 2013. One of the things we'd said that this webzine will focus on is looking at the past. We will look at queer histories, we will look at the archives, at the Counsel Club archives. We will also document oral histories, we will conduct interviews with people who have seen queer lives in the 1950s, and 60s, and so on. And we just felt that even as the queer movements move forward, we cannot forget the past, we have to look back and learn from the past and also realise that things did not start in a vacuum, things did not fall from the sky. Whatever liberties, whatever privileges, that one has today have come through a certain process, and there have been people before who have fought and struggled. So those are invaluable histories which cannot be forgotten. This was already happening in Varta, which is when I found this opportunity through Svrn-Apeejay Journalism Foundation. They were offering fellowships to write about different aspects of India. And I felt that this was a great opportunity. Whatever I had been doing in Varta in terms of articles and interviews, I thought: why don't I try and do that in the form of a long form or a narrative journalism format? I think this was the right time for this, not just because the queer movements have become almost three decades old, but also because of some of the momentous judicial verdicts that had been coming out in terms of transgender citizenship rights, the decriminalisation of queer people, and the right to privacy judgment. All of this had created an environment where I felt that a book on this subject was needed.

Something that I found fascinating about the book is that you really show how queer mobilising shaped people's lives over various decades. And to show that trajectory, you go back to the people who have been part of the movement, and you interviewed them again today, asking them to look back at those years of activism. This was quite a fascinating approach. Why was that important to you, to proceed in this manner?

Well, I think it followed quite naturally. I mean, I could have done a more literature review-based kind of writing, but since the emphasis of the book was on narrative journalism – and journalism was also my first profession, my first job, actually – I just felt that if we are talking about narrative journalism, we have to go into life stories. I needed to talk to people, I needed to probe deeper into their experiences. And almost all of these individuals were well known to me for many years. I had met them as part of Counsel Club's activities, and I was very curious to find out about where they had reached after so many years. And at the same time, within my family circles and friend's circles, there would often be conversations, where people would ask me whether the queer movement has led to anything positive: has it had any impact? Has it changed people's lives in any way? And I would give a short answer to the effect that there have been some changes legally, or in terms of policy. But this would be a very unsatisfactory answer. I personally wanted to know more. And I was very curious also, because I was involved in the queer movements. I just wanted to hear from everyone about what they felt, three decades, or two and a half decades later. Did it mean anything at all to them? Does it mean anything to them today? So, these were the questions that were doing the rounds in my head. And that is the reason why I took this approach.

Initially, I made a list of people I would approach. Not everybody agreed to talk to me, actually. I also looked through the letters in the Counsel Club archives to see which stories might be more interesting or appealing to the reader. There are hundreds of stories in those letters, but there were a few which really stood out. Today, you know, when we talk about queer issues or LGBT issues, or I should say LGBTIQ+ there is an entire spectrum of genders and sexualities, and that also has to be brought forward. So, I tried to select my respondents according to the spectrum. Of course, there are many of these gender and sexual identity terms which are in use today, which were not there in the 1990s. But to the extent possible, I tried and selected my respondents accordingly. And that also included the allies, people who were influencers or supporters of the movements and who played a very important role in helping us reach where we are today.

Pawan, in the book you were very upfront about the fact that you are yourself part of the history you are narrating, and you also acknowledge that placing yourself in the narrative was one of the most difficult parts of the work. I wonder why: can you elaborate on that?

This is also your toughest question [Laughs]. It's something which is very difficult to resolve. I was part of the movements, I was carrying out many of the activities, which would have impacted the lives of the people I have spoken to. So, you know, it was almost like an appraisal in the sense that I wanted everyone to be absolutely frank, brutal if necessary. I just wanted them to speak their heart out. At the same time, I was also a little scared, if there was any criticism, of what I would feel or how I would feel about it. When the book writing process was starting, I had all of these thoughts and I had all of these dilemmas in my mind. And I decided that I have to put it down in the book itself, because I have to be honest to the reader as well. At the same time, it's not an exercise in self-flagellation, you know, I do have my own side of the story, I do have my own opinion about how things happened. In those days, there were tensions, there were fights, there were arguments. And I had my own say, so I also decided that yes, I will listen to everyone. But that doesn't mean that I don't have anything to say. All of this may not have actually ended up in the book in that much detail. But this was the thought process, which was going on in my mind.

Another issue that was quite interesting to me: as the very book title suggests, this is very much a history of queer mobilisation offline, meaning before the Internet revolution. In the book, you give a lot of attention to letters, to letter writing, because at the time the communication between queer movements and their members was done through letters mostly. And you also suggest that this practice of reading and writing letters was a form of community-making, a way in which queer people were forming a collective identity. My question to you is, thinking about the state of queer politics today, how do you think the Internet changed things?

I think the Internet has been a mixed blessing. It speeded up things, it helped in many ways, in terms of connecting with more and more people. It also helped with anonymity to a certain extent. But we all know that the Internet,

the online world, has its own disadvantages. And sometimes it also amplifies the existing disadvantages for certain groups of people. Let's say women, or even queer persons, or other marginalised communities. The Internet can actually enhance that marginalisation. From the point of view of the queer movements, I think there has been a huge loss. I acutely feel that loss because I think that in the pre-Internet world, we were together, even if we were not always physically together. Say, the monthly meetings of the Counsel Club, which used to happen every first Sunday of the month, and then they became fortnightly meetings. It wasn't as if that everyone was able to attend all the meetings, especially people living in the districts. The issue of distance was there. But at the same time, there was a certain closeness, a bonding, which I think is very difficult to have over just the Internet. So, in those days, when we were together, physically together to write letters, or to plan events, and publish a journal and all. It was a much stronger bonding, and one had a feeling that, you know, this is a family, something that one could rely on for many things for which the family by blood would never understand. That seems to have gone for me, and I'm sure for many others from my generation. I feel very sorry sometimes for the Millennials who have never known a support group like the Counsel Club, or any other similar queer support group who have never known that kind of closeness and who today, they grew up with a lot of information available to them, but with very few options, very few people around them to help them make sense of that information. Yes, there are helplines, there are many other professionals now, mental health professionals. But I don't think a professional can ever replace a friend, a queer friend. You know, we really have to look at the role that these friendships have played in our lives. And I think the Internet has not done a very good job of facilitating those queer friendships.

Let's go back to the question of the archive, which in this case is mostly composed of letters. As you describe them, they're personal stories, but they're social histories as well. And I'm always very curious as to how we as scholars, or as activists, how we navigate these different dimensions of queer experience. As you mentioned in the book, these letters, they speak about desires, about love, about hopelessness, about hope, about despair. In a very important way, they are an archive of people's feelings. How do we make sense of that? How do we navigate that?

I would say two things. One, of course, is that, when I look at the letters collectively, and individually, I just feel that this is such a deep, such a rich insight into the sexual lives of Indians. By and large, it's a reflection of the struggle that India as a society was undergoing, and maybe still is undergoing in terms of coming to terms with its uh sexual self. If India were a person, then it would be a person with a billion personalities, with so many variations in terms of what people felt about sexual issues, gender issues, issues of love, sex, desire, all of that. But there is always this great trouble being taken to make everything uniform, make everything fit into narrow categories so that nobody's worldview is disturbed and all that. But these letters do just that, they are meant to disturb you, they are meant to make you think that life is just not what you imagine it to be, your little perfect

little world of heteronormativity or heterosexism. That is not the way things are, people are far more diverse than many Indians would like to believe. And the whole point is that if you as a society, as a culture, are not going to accept this diversity, then you are going to be in trouble. If people are not going to have fulfilling lives, which includes their genders and sexualities, if that doesn't happen, then it's not going to be a happy place on Earth. India is not going to be a happy place on Earth. So, this is one of the prime thoughts that come to mind. There's a second thought around these letters being an archive of feelings. I feel that we often talk about movements. And, somehow, when we talk about the movements, we talk about the macro picture. Let's say the Section 377 movement, that is, the struggle against Section 377, or the struggle for decriminalisation in India. If you look at the media headlines, you will find only the macro picture, which does not tell you what exactly is happening deeper down in society, in the lives of queer people. So, if you go deeper into the layers, you will come across these individual stories, the micro histories, and, very often, the decisions that people take in their individual lives is what ultimately translates into the macro picture. You know, if you look at, say, a Pride walk happening in Kolkata or Mumbai, there are thousands of people. Together as a mass, they are enacting a Pride walk. But what about the individual stories?

Something else that resonated with me is your argument about how the reality of discrimination, of stigma, really pushes queer people towards innovation. I do agree with that. And I wonder if you think that the archive and especially queer practices of archiving are a form of innovation?

Well, yes, it is an innovation in the sense that whenever we as persons, or whenever queer people or any marginalised group of people, when they tell their own stories, I think that is a form of innovation. Because in the larger scheme of things, in, say, the commercial media, the popular media, or even in the more popular academy discourses, gender and sexuality diversity have had a long struggle to be visible. And even now, we know things may be happening in pockets. So, it's very important for queer people to tell their own stories. And this could be in the form of webzines like Varta, or many other journals or web zines that come out today. It could be in the form of films or any other literary form. And archiving is yet another way of putting out our own stories. And history is a very contentious issue anyway. I don't think that any history is perfect. And this again relates to the point about placing myself. I am not ever saying that anything in my book is the exact truth. It certainly isn't. It would have been dependent on the way people spoke to me. And then the way I understood them, and all of these are subjectivities. And history is very subjective. Even so, it is very important for people who are marginalised to narrate their own histories. So, definitely archiving is very important in terms of telling our own stories about the way we started our struggles, our tears or laughter, our joys, and sorrows, all of that.

That being said, what do you think is the potential of the archive for queer mobilisation?

I think that as we move forward, we also need to look at the past. So today, I feel that more than same-sex marriage, what what we really need is more and more intersectional mobilisation to bring about anti-discrimination measures. This could be in the form of another legal verdict, it could be in the form of practices, how programmes are managed, how government services are delivered. At all these levels, you need to bring in anti-discrimination measures. But for any advocacy to take place, you need an evidence base. Essentially, you need stories. You need numbers also, but you also need stories. And that is where the archives come in again. Because these archives will give you those stories, they will give you those 'pull at the heartstrings' kind of substance, which will encourage people to think differently, which will encourage them to change their policies, change their practices. And the archives can bring forth so many stories about how discrimination has been taking place through the years. And these stories can then bring forth the nature and the expanse of the loss people have suffered because of discrimination. So, I think that's where the potential is in terms of political movements or advocacy.

After this powerful conclusion, I want to thank you, Pawan, for this amazing chat.

Thank you, I enjoyed sharing my thoughts. I intend to write more. There are many other stories around the queer movements and queer histories which I would like to narrate, and the more I hear from people, the better.

Amazing. Thank you so much.

Thank you, Caio.