

# Saleem Kidwai, Scholar Who Unearthed Long-Buried Literature On Gay Love In India, Dies At 70

By SUZANNE GOLDENBERG

**S**aleem Kidwai, an independent anthology that recovered lost and long-buried writings about same-sex love in Indian literature from ancient Sanskrit texts through Mughal-era poetry and short stories set in college dorms during the 1970s, died Aug. 30 at a hospital in Lucknow, India. He was 70.

The cause was cardiac arrest, said Ruth Vanita, a University of Montana literature professor and the co-editor with Kidwai of the 2000 volume "Same-Sex Love in India: Readings From Literature and History."

A scion of a prominent Muslim family, Kidwai became an eminence in Delhi's LGBTQ community with the publication of "Same-Sex Love in India." The book was widely regarded as a foundational text for queer studies in India and was cited in hearings before the country's Supreme Court, which ended the criminalization of homosexuality in 2018.

"Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanita were the ammunition for us to advocate what our history was and how our culture was and how to reclaim it," said Anand Grover, one of the lawyers who led the case for the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, under which homosexuality was illegal.

That shift helped change the public atmosphere within which the justices would eventually render their decision, Grover said.

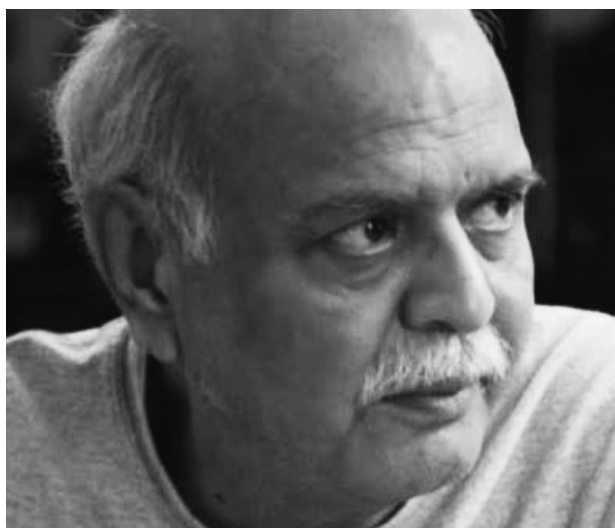
"The mainstream history and for the vast majority of the people, the thinking was that Section 377 is part of our culture, and they had no idea that prior to the British it was a different ballgame," he added.

"Same-Sex Love in India" was a sweeping historical correction that sought to reclaim a rich repository of poetry and fiction celebrating romantic attachments that had been deliberately ignored.

When Kidwai and Vanita embarked on their project in the early 1990s, much of the Indian academy, political establishment and social elite rejected homosexuality as an alien import from the West and an affront to Indian culture and society.

"During the time that the book was first published, it was commonly asserted by homophobic cultural nationalists that homosexuality was never a part of Indian tradition," Shohini Ghosh, a professor at the A.J.K. Mass Communication Research Center in India, wrote in an email. "It served as an eye opener to many, while to others it confirmed that queer love and its many manifestations had a long and vibrant history in South Asia."

Kidwai and Vanita had first met when both were lecturers at Delhi University - though in different colleges and disciplines. Kidwai was an associate professor in medieval and Mughal history at Ramjas College; Vanita taught literature.



Saleem Kidwai in Facebook post dated Nov. 24, 2018

Independently, they had been collecting texts describing same-sex attraction and love from their readings, Kidwai in Urdu and Persian, Vanita in Sanskrit and other languages. "As you'd be reading, you'd find lots of things that would strike you and your gaydar would start tingling," Kidwai later told Project Bolo, a collection of oral histories documenting the gay community in India. "Both Ruth and I had been doing similar things."

Queer studies didn't really exist as a discipline in India at the time. In the Indian media, gay and lesbian couples, when they appeared at all, were mostly confined to the category of tragic circumstance - doomed love that ends, for example, in a double suicide by rat poison or self-immolation.

Even private references were oblique. As Kidwai liked to recount, gossips dissecting the end of a marriage might mention that the man was impotent, though only with women.

Until the 2018 judicial ruling, homosexuality was punishable by up to 10 years in jail. The anti-sodomy law, imposed by the British in India in 1861, was used to blackmail men trying to meet men for sex in public parks and, at the height of the AIDS crisis, to block the distribution of condoms in Indian jails.

There were no gay bars or nightclubs in Delhi. Meetings were arranged surreptitiously, such as by leaving a red rose on a coffee shop table to signal that it was safe to approach.

Kidwai had left his teaching job at Delhi University in 1993, and there were no major grants or establishment support for a project of this kind when he and Vanita embarked on the book. The two academics struggled to find a publisher, releasing the book first through a U.S.

imprint in 2000 and publishing an Indian version a year later.

In the two decades since its publication, "Same-Sex Love in India" has undergone 19 printings.

"By translating literature about same-sex love from 15 Indian languages composed over more than 2,000 years, the book challenged the modern homophobic idea that homosexuality was a foreign import," Vanita said. "Homosexuality wasn't a foreign import. Homophobia was."

Kidwai was born Aug. 7, 1951, into a large landowning clan in Lucknow, the capital city of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. He moved to Delhi at 17, ostensibly to study history at Delhi University, but also because he had realized that Indian small-town life would be too constraining for a gay man.

He received his bachelor's and master's degrees in history and started teaching at Delhi University in 1973.

He was granted leave from the university in 1976 to pursue PhD studies at McGill University in Montreal.

On a terrifying evening in October 1977, Kidwai was among about 150 men arrested in an armed police raid on two Montreal gay bars. The men were subjected to compulsory VD tests and threatened with criminal charges.

The raids provoked massive street protests the next day and, months later, Quebec banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. (The criminal charges, however, were not dropped for years.)

By then, traumatized by his arrest, periodic court appearances and the constant threat of deportation, and disillusioned at the prospect of living openly as a gay man in the West, Kidwai fled Montreal and his PhD program to return to his university job as an associate professor of history in Delhi.

He was open about his sexuality with his family and close friends, a circle that expanded even more rapidly after he left academia once he became eligible for voluntary retirement. In the 1990s, he became increasingly active in Delhi's gay community, where he was in constant demand at conferences and on television talk shows.

After moving back to Lucknow about two decades ago, he worked with television producers on a documentary about the late singer and actress Begum Akhtar. He also published English translations of Urdu novels and a memoir, and he entertained a constant throng of visiting Indian and Western academics, eager to tap Kidwai's vast knowledge of the Mughal Empire, Hindustani classical music and Urdu literature.

Survivors include three sisters.

Asked by a Project Bolo interviewer whether he had any regrets in life, Kidwai replied wryly: "If I was to believe in rebirth, I would want to be born gay. Believe it or not. . . . I'm not a masochist but I've had fun."

THE WASHINGTON POST

## Hate Crimes Rise To Highest Level In 12 Years Amid Increasing Attacks On Blacks, Asians

By DAVID NAKAMURA

WASHINGTON

**T**he number of hate crimes in the United States rose in 2020 to the highest level in 12 years, propelled by increasing assaults targeting Black and Asian victims, the FBI reported Monday.

In all, the federal agency tallied 7,759 hate crimes last year, a tumultuous 12 months marked by a global pandemic, a divisive presidential election and upheaval in the economy. The total marked an increase of 6% from 2019 and the most since 2008, when 7,783 hate crimes were reported.

It is the sixth time in the past seven years that the number of attacks rose. The number of hate crimes reported has increased by nearly 42% since 2014, according to federal data.

Attacks targeting Blacks rose from 1,930 to 2,755,

and the number targeting Asians jumped from 158 to 274, the data showed. Those figures come as civil rights groups have warned of increasing hostility toward minorities, amid a rise in white nationalism and an increase in violent crime levels nationwide.

Attacks targeting Whites rose to 773, an increase of about 16%.

Congress mandates that the FBI collect hate-crime data annually based on reports from local law enforcement agencies. In 2020, the number of agencies that participated in that effort fell for at least the second consecutive year - to 15,136, which is 422 fewer than in 2019. Of those agencies that did participate, the vast majority reported no hate crimes.

Congressional Democrats and civil rights advocates have criticized what they describe as a large undercount in the number of hate crimes and other bias incidents, saying local police are poorly trained in how to identify and catalogue hate crimes and lack sufficient resources

or interest in investigating them.

Stop AAPI Hate, a grass-roots groups based in California, reported 6,603 hate incidents against Asians from March 2020 - the start of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States - through March of this year.

Of that data, which was collected through self-reporting portals online and was not thoroughly vetted, about 65% consisted of verbal harassment, such as name calling, and 12.6% involved physical assault.

In May, Congress approved the Covid-19 Hate Crimes Act, which requires the Justice Department to appoint an official to expedite investigations into hate crimes reported to federal authorities. The bill also seeks to improve reporting of hate crimes among localities by bolstering online reporting channels and offering resources in more languages to help immigrants.

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