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## People like us

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**Aids Sutra**  
**Foreword by Amartya Sen**  
**Publisher: Vintage Books, 347 pages**

"If I were to sit under a tree and tell you the sadness we have to suffer, the leaves would fall like tears," says *devadasi* Kaveri in *The Daughters of Yellamma*, William Dalrymple's contribution to *AIDS Sutra*.

*Devadasi* (literally "god slave") are girls – as young as six – "dedicated" to the goddess Yellama by their families. The parents give up their daughters as a form of devotion, then profit from the girls' earnings as prostitutes, a career that starts as soon as they reach puberty.

Like all sex workers, *devadasi* are in greater danger of contracting the disease. Another *devadasi*, Rani Bai, was understandably traumatised when her mother gave her up to be a god slave. But as an adult, when she has three children, she only keeps the son. She dedicates both her daughters to the goddess, and both die of HIV/AIDS while in their teens.

One of the things that makes HIV/AIDS horrifically different from other diseases has nothing to do with what it does to a victim's body – vicious cruelty and ignorance, which continue to dog the ailment even decades after the world first came to know of it. For too many years, people with HIV/AIDS have been cast out or persecuted.

There are many ironies surrounding the disease. Many still believe that HIV/AIDS is punishment for certain actions. Although it has been proven again and again that even the "virtuous" and "innocent" fall prey to the disease, there is still a stigma left over from the days in which it was thought to target only gays and drug addicts.

Reading *AIDS Sutra* reinforces what has always been true. Even if victims contract the disease by engaging in socially unacceptable behaviour, whatever they did is never nearly as shocking as the vile ways in which people react to them.

*AIDS Sutra* is the work some of India's best writers, a Nobel Prize winner of

Economics, and the world's richest man. With the blessing and support of Amartya Sen, and Bill and Melinda Gates, 16 writers sought out those whose stories are rarely told. Proceeds from the book will go to support children affected by HIV/AIDS in India.

*AIDS Sutra* reminds the readers of something that must be remembered: If HIV/AIDS has brought out the worst in some people, it has also brought out the best in others. In the stories, this includes the victims themselves.

Prostitutes in India, both male and female, have lashed out against police brutality and violent customers. Many of the people interviewed in this book have found meaning from becoming counsellors and empowerment from helping others.

In *When AIDS Came Home*, Shobhaa De learns that her children's driver is HIV-positive and insists on getting him treatment. She sits with him when he dies, finally seeing him, slapped in the face by this sudden intimacy after years of barely registering his existence.

Writer Nalini Jones goes for a walk with the HIV-positive people who have agreed to speak to her. Without thinking, she shares her water bottle with them. Later, friends and family worry that she might have caught the virus. Jones, in turn, is furious at herself because she has a cold and could have passed that onto people who need to be careful about infections.

That moment sums up the point of *AIDS Sutra*, one which HIV/AIDS activists have been trying to get across for long decades: HIV-positive people are far less dangerous to society than society is to them.

"Human ordeals thrive on ignorance," writes Amartya Sen. "To understand a problem with clarity is already half way towards solving it."

This may be why although I find myself saddened or enraged while reading the book, more often than not I felt inspired and determined. There might not be a cure for HIV/AIDS yet but what is desperately needed in the meantime – understanding and compassion – are things we can all certainly give.

