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The Encyclopedia Must Fail! – Notes on Queering Wikipedia

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This essay draws on experiences of Wikipedia editing in the context of projects aiming to make Wikipedia more diverse and globally relevant. It offers reflections on some of the tensions, struggles, and solutions to make an intervention into contemporary knowledge making practices.

In 2010, on the occasion of Wikipedia's tenth anniversary, the Institute of Network Cultures in collaboration with the Center for Internet & Society, Bangalore initiated CPOV: Critical Point of View, a Wikipedia research initiative that began with a conference in Bangalore, India (January 2010), followed by events in Amsterdam (March 2010) and Leipzig (September 2010) (About CPOV). The outcomes of the conferences consisted of essays, interviews and artworks compiled in the form of a reader called *Critical Point of View: a Wikipedia Reader* (2011). Among others, Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz, both editors of the reader, lamented in the introduction that in the English speaking world, the commentary on Wikipedia was a fairly settled issue replete with factoids, infographics, and quantitative analyses of the project's reach. What was sorely missing, for them, was a radical critique of the openness and promise of the project. Interestingly, Lovink and Tkacz's lament anticipated a much larger moment in the history of the Wikimedia movement which was to unfold from 2011 onward.[1]

The Wikimedia Foundation was created in 2003, two years after Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger initiated the encyclopedia, with a view to funding the project via charity instead of continuing dependence on Bomis, Wales' for-profit business (Wikimedia Foundation n.d.). From 2003 till 2011, while the Foundation grew in terms of fund-raising, employees and support activities, it still had only two operation offices in San Francisco, California, and St Petersburg, Florida, both within the United States. Eventually, in 2009, as the Wikipedia article on WMF notes, "In response to the growing size and popularity of Wikipedia, the…Foundation announced a Strategic Plan to improve and sustain the… movement" (Wikimedia Foundation). 2011 thus became a significant year because it saw the execution of the Global South initiative, also a part of the strategic plan to expand the operations of the Foundation to three regions namely MENA (Middle East and North Africa), Brazil and India. While the rationale and merits of this much debated strategy are beyond the scope of this article, this background

helps us locate WMF's Global South outreach within a larger narrative of empowerment that informs many education and development initiatives in the above mentioned regions.

Thus, the Wikimedia Foundation opened its first office outside of the USA, in New Delhi, India, in 2011 (Arya, 2011) to make a "catalytic investment" that would increase access to Wikipedia readership as well as content in local language Wiki projects. The strategic plan wiki also observed that "Currently, Wikimedia is heavily optimized for the personal computer…" (Wikimedia Foundation) and while the 'Global North' is increasingly moving to mobile devices, parts of the Global South may be connecting to the Internet and Wikipedia solely through them. Thus came Wikipedia Zero, a mobile initiative that makes content available through cellular phone data and SMS services for free in countries of Africa and Asia (Wikimedia Blog, 2013). For multiple reasons, instead of setting up a WMF office, the India program was transferred to a local partner (Center for Internet & Society, Bangalore), and its focus was narrowed to Indian languages (Meta 2012). 2013 also saw the formation of a Global Chapters Association (Meta), an entity parallel to and rivaling the Foundation's power over the movement (M. contributors n.d.). These developments as I will illustrate later help contextualize the perceived failures, successes and measures of impact assessment in the case of Wikipedia in India.

Another landmark moment for Wikipedia was in 2012 when Encyclopedia Britannica, seen as antithetical to Wikipedia's model of crowdsourced knowledge of the Commons, announced it would stop printing its books (McCarthy 2012). This signaled the establishment of the digital and consequently Wikipedia as mainstream. Lovink and Tkacz's urge to go beyond "factoids" resonates with the fact that much has been published on dystopic/utopic stories around the rise of Wikipedia. This has detailed the influx of editors, readership, number of articles and victory over Britannica but paid much less attention to reading and knowledge making practices in a post-Wikipedia world. These practices are attended to, however, by the likes of Lawrence Liang, Giota Alevizou and others.[2] As Alevizou suggests, "Our collective intelligence emerges within specific media and technological infrastructures and platforms that have specific biases. If it is to avoid overthrowing academic and publishing elites for new media-savvy and literate elite, we need to interrogate Wikipedia in terms of its social and political properties and limits" (Alevizou, 2006). It is, then, the urgent need of the hour to provide a critical retrospective of Wikipedia's unfolding in India in order to highlight

the transactions, the people and conditions of knowledge production that facilitate or create challenges to diversity programs within any movement.

What then, does it really mean to foster diversity? What may one achieve by populating a space with more women or people of non-binary genders? Foucault writes about *positivity in discourse* as "the conditions of operation of the enunciative function" that "define a field in which formal identities, thematic continuities…and polemical interchanges may be deployed"(Foucault 1972). This defined field also delimits and characterizes the nature of the discourse itself and the truth/knowledge produced within it. Then, in a post-Britannica moment, where Wikipedia is the Archive, we must start by unpacking its terrain as well as the enunciative functions it rehearses. While I agree with Larry Sanger when he calls Wikipedia the common ground "to organise enormous amounts of labour for a single intellectual purpose"(Sanger 2006), is the nature of this kind of labour – its social and political context and the identities of those who participate – being rendered transparent in the process?

As a participant in the Critical Point of View conference, my encounter with the "back end" of Wikipedia was an academic one, diving headlong into questions of sock puppetry, anonymity and the policy of neutrality. I started contributing content to the English Wikipedia in 2012. On 7th January, 2012, I chanced upon a news article on the life and works of Bama, a Dalit writer from the state of Tamil Nadu in the southern part of India and immediately recollected having read Bama's landmark work in university, *Sangati* (1994), a novel that revolved around the lives and interiorities of women in a Dalit commune in Tamil Nadu. Historically, treated as the lowest in the Hindu caste system, Dalits continue to be discriminated against. Many Dalit women especially, as demonstrated in *Sangati*, are doubly oppressed in that they are abused not only by members of upper castes but also by men within their community. By January 2012, having become a regular contributor, I decided to create an article on Bama. Within a few minutes of creating the article, it was nominated for deletion (Wikipedia). In the next two days, I argued my way out of my first Wikipedia deletion and the article survived. While having repeatedly heard about the unevenness of the Wikipedia's knowledge geographies and the presence of fervent deletionism, that someone would decide Bama, a pioneer of marginalized women voices and a noted author with multiple web links, mentions and more, not noteworthy by Wikiverse standards within minutes of its creation, baffled me. At the same time, being associated with the Wikimedia Foundation as a consultant made me want to belong to the editor group that

understands the complex process of consensus building and negotiations on the platform.

My experiments with editing that follow in the last section of this essay must be seen as a journey of engagement that strives to maintain this strategic insider/outsider position in relation to the encyclopedia in order to retain my agency to make knowledge interventions. Failure and queering in this essay, then, go beyond their literal definitions and become metaphorical for a mode of sustained but often frictional engagement with the encyclopedia where one can formulate an alternate imagination of Wikipedia. In doing so, as I will illustrate, I do not only intend to speak to Wikipedians and allies in Free and Open Source Software communities but also to a much larger audience of news and information networks that regularly privilege and archive knowledge of places, personalities, scandals and more. Thus, if Wikipedia must simultaneously become the place where we write, the book that we publish and the classroom that we imagine, the tropes of failure and queering must be engaged in each context to generate a productive mode of practice that posits the encyclopedia as a formation or an ongoing process rather than a fixed site. Phrases like "live" and "anyone can edit" not only signify its instability but also the desires for it to remain dynamic and the hope that we can modify it.

In the course of this essay, I will endeavour to make two provocations to move the debate away from the preoccupation with numbers and participation. In my first provocation, I wish to draw attention to two points. The first is the vision statement of the project that says, "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge" (W. F. contributors n.d.). The second is the hope for a digital democracy that resembles Wikipedia's workings. In a *Wired* article stating what formal politics could learn from Wikipedia, Carl Miller says, "It has achieved something that mainstream politics has cause to envy: the routine, active engagement of hundreds of thousands of willing volunteers of often radically different background and opinion to create something used, supported and trusted by millions"(Miller 2014). These statements indicate deliberate incorporation and echo the idea of freedom of expression as an unalienable human right. At this juncture it is necessary to unpack what freedom here really means and whether the freedom to participate, the right to access as well as to express, can be seen in isolation from the conditions (of discourse) that prepare, preserve and retain or inhibit the exercising of these rights. The Foundation and the Wikimedia movement do recognize this nuance as is demonstrated in their stance on Internet freedom at large and the move to black out

Wikipedia for a day to oppose SOPA/PIPA in the U.S.A. (Magid 2012). However, even providing absolute freedom to participate and recognizing the equality of all stakeholders in the project does not naturally translate to the realization of "free" and "open." To understand this, one must go to the heart of this rights discourse.

To borrow from political philosopher Hannah Arendt, citizenship and participation in democracies hinge on the idea of "having a right to rights." If one tries to imagine the political economy of Wikipedia akin to a democratic, self governing State form that upholds the right to expression, Arendt's formulation becomes extremely pertinent. Proposed towards the end of *Part Two of The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1968), Arendt's plea wasn't geared towards justice in a State where citizens are granted "fundamental rights" but rather towards the condition of statelessness that excludes thousands of refugees, migrants and those that do not easily belong or are not recognized by a single nation state. Where does one seek recourse if one does not even feature in framework that relies on rights-based discourse? In that sense, the act of conferring rights upon someone also involves imagining the citizen/consumer.

In the case of Wikipedia, an encyclopedia where "anyone can write!" albeit within the framework of rules and liberties (the rights only conferred upon editors), the situation may be less dramatic than Arendt's post-War Europe. However, it is similar in producing "unintelligible" and yet-to-be imagined participants on the fringes of the Wikipedia community, some of whom I interacted with at the National Crafts' Museum in New Delhi as a part of India's first GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) project.[3] A GLAM Wiki or Open GLAM Wiki project involves collaboration among Wikipedia contributors, employees of the institution and others interested in writing articles about the institution's collection.[4]

Having mostly understood and received the idea of a GLAM collaboration from some pioneering and inspiring partnerships at Smithsonian Archives, NARA (National Archives and Records Administration), British Library and other institutions–all outside of Asia-it was a challenge approaching and explaining the idea of Creative Commons licensing and the importance of open digital collections to Indian museums (mostly government funded). The journey to our first successful collaboration also required understanding that those who worked at the Crafts Museum, for instance, were not necessarily archivists, curators or trained museum professionals. Most of them were also Hindi speakers and were not regular computer users. Thus, the guidelines and GLAM resources could not help us work around issues of computer literacy, typing in

Indian languages, the availability of keyboard layouts, sourcing metadata and finding primary documentation in English. At the same time, my experience at the Crafts Museum also reminded me that volunteer time and labour are the foundations of Free and Open projects and are yet largely rendered invisible. The onus is on project volunteers to "find" or reallocate time from other activities to instead devote time to collaborative projects such as Wikipedia for the greater good. Even though the volunteers that are part of the fundraising campaign exhibit a range of diverse professions and ethnicities, it was difficult for staff members and volunteers who did not possess a personal computer, accessed the internet from cyber cafes and most importantly, had a different conception of non-work time, to relate to them. Contributing to Wikipedia also meant carving out time from daily work schedules, a negotiation that involved everyone from the museum director to employees. Although mostly focusing her analysis on the American OSS community, Ashe Dryden observes that "marginalized people in tech – women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people, and others – have less free time for a few major reasons: dependent care, domestic work and errands, and pay inequity"(Dryden 2013). To extend Dryden's observation, the term "free" becomes a threshold for receiving (free knowledge in this case) and producing, both of which need equal attention.

Coming back to the question of Wikipedia's imagined/expected contributor, the GLAM collaborators were mostly craft workers or those associated with crafts and folk art management with fluency in Hindi language and hardly two people in a group of seven knew how to use a computer. The problem is multi-layered and the "learning curves" huge. Achal Prabhala, a Wikipedia researcher and activist proposed the 'Oral Citations' project in 2011 to overcome Wikipedia's heavy dependency on the printed word (Cohen, 2011). As Prabhala explained, "Germany, whose entire population is a fraction of India's online population has a massive footprint on Wikipedia. While a country like India is behind … " (P.K, 2011). The oral citations project was also one of the longest running threads in the history of Wikipedia mailing lists. Its Meta documentation page does not show any activity beyond September 2011 (Meta, 2011). This was perhaps my first encounter with the absolute paradox of open: making a platform open access does not automatically translate to equality of participation, ease of access, or cultural acceptance of the medium. The question remains: where does one start? Does one wait for these thousands of un-become (those who cannot participate and cannot be recognized) digital citizens standing in the shadows to gradually emerge and adopt new technologies or does one rework the project's imagination to make space for various stakeholders who may not speak/write and document in the same way? Although it is

beyond the scope of this essay, one might also ask if there is space within mammoth free knowledge projects such as Wikipedia to learn from communities such as the crafts persons.

The second provocation I wish to make is about the relationship between the technological and the political. Gabriella Coleman, in her endorsement of Anita Say Chan's book, *Networking Peripheries* writes that Chan's "rich ethnography of ICTs… demonstrate(s) the historical logics at work that nevertheless play out uniquely in different places and contexts" (*Networking Peripheries* 2014). I find Coleman's use of the term 'historical logics' extremely useful in summing up. It indicates that technologies in themselves are not apolitical or divorced from the cultures they operate in. Similarly, the rise of a new technology does not render obsolete the ideological. Hence, it is very important to consider closely the process of production and the decisions taken therein as not completely innocent or mechanical means to achieve a larger goal.

In the past decade of Wikipedia's growth, it has witnessed some major expansions and initiatives: the Wikipedia Offline Project to support reading access to Wikimedia content without an Internet connection and Wikipedia Zero to enable mobile access to Wikipedia for free in developing countries. Its sister project, Wikimedia Commons is one of the largest repositories of freely licensed audio-visual content online. At the same time, maps uploaded on Commons have also been implicated in contemporary historical conflicts.[5] I propose that these acts are all constitutive of Wikipedia's political and social life beyond its existence as an encyclopedia and a virtual community, an invocation to consider that a space/an archive does not come to "be" as it is now but is rather made by and in turn invites more who mark that space as white, masculine and rational among other things.

So, what, then is the collective effect of these diverse labour practices on the very nature of the knowledge produced on Wikipedia? Do the policies of noteworthiness and neutrality render transparent the identities, processes and the site on which "factual knowledge" is produced? To cite an instance, when I was contributing to the article on Asaram Bapu, a self-styled Indian religious leader who was arrested on charges of sexual assault of a minor, his article was the subject of frequent vandalism and controversial editing. For two self-identified female editors including the author, it seemed logical to include news reports of the potency tests conducted on Asaram since

details of the victim's hymen examination existed already. However, as one male-identified editor, Mr K. argued:

> The victim results establish the fact that she was assaulted so there is no need for expert analysis to add them to the article. But the potency results imply that Bapu was capable of the assault. Per BLP he is supposed to be presumed innocent until proven guilty through proper analysis, including DNA, by medical and legal experts and proceedings in a court of law. Insinuating that he could have done it goes over that reasonable BLP barrier. *(Talk Page archive, Asaram Bapu)*

What constitutes the reasonable BLP (Biographies of Living Persons) barrier? Does the famed Wikipedia "good faith" policy override it? Through a consensus of three versus two, the seemingly voyeuristic information on hymen examination stayed while the information on the potency test was removed because even while applying BLP rules, editor discretion and consensus building play an important role. This account is a classic case of mediation of information through policies. It is also a reminder that consensus may not be something to celebrate in all cases. A month later, the article also witnessed a raging debate on the usage of the word 'rape' in the article or discussion pages at all because unless established, rape would be a provocative word and imply criminality despite the fact that news publications worldwide, from where Wikipedians were citing, were constantly calling it "alleged rape." One can always attribute zealous objectivism to a bunch of editors but what is of more concern are rules and policies that can be instrumentalized to systematically include or exclude factual information.

And, hence the encyclopedia must fail!

Queer theorist Jack/Judith Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure* proposes "failure" as an alternative methodology to uncover the hidden absurdities within mainstream cultures (2011). For Halberstam, comedy films, anthropomorphic cartoon series and other pop culture products that seem absurd on the surface, become sites from which to mount a critique of heteronormativity. Halberstam also brings back the tropes of irreverence and playfulness to "queer" history writing itself. To extend Halberstam's proposition, and to revisit what I suggested in the beginning, failure does not necessarily mean a state or a result but should in fact be seen as a subversive process similar to the talk pages of Wikipedia entries, as shadows and mirrors to the article space's information. In doing so, failure gains transformative potential as a strategic tool in history writing that permanently etches difference in its grain. Much reimagining of Wikipedia will have to be done in reworking the language of collaborative FLOSS projects.

To contextualize the Wikimedia movement's gender gap within a larger history of gender equality movements that make interventions on behalf of women and people of non-binary genders, the "gender gap" as it is called in the Wikipedia movement is abysmal. A 2011 study showed that about 91% of Wikipedia's editors self-identified as male (Poeter, 2011). In 2012, the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) blog reported that it continues to be the case that nine out of ten editors are male (Gender Gap Strategy 2013). Simultaneously, the movement has been constantly battling a decline in contributors since 2006 and more recently a sharp decline in page views. While the WMF and various local chapters in different countries have taken initiatives to reduce the gender gap by increased outreach to women and soliciting research on why women don't or can't contribute to Wikipedia, the real question would be to ask what women's participation looks like. How will populating a space like Wikipedia with more women or non-male participants change the nature of participation? Do quantitative drives towards diversity on a large scale make an impact on the culture and content of a community? What does it really mean to talk about diversity beyond tokenism and to make strategic breaks within movements caught in the flows of migrating anonymous (editor) bodies organized in self-regulating collectives? How does one then begin to rewrite Wikipedia while writing on Wikipedia?

To arrive at one of the possible solutions, I will briefly discuss an intervention to illustrate the need for smaller and sustained tactical interventions, over mass drives for women and queer participation. In the aftermath of a gruesome gang rape incident in December 2012 in the capital city of New Delhi, India has seen a surge in activism around women's rights and sexual violence. Since then, various non-governmental organizations, activists, students and journalists have been organizing conferences, public seminars and other forums to contribute towards creating safe spaces. As a part of this drive, I participated in and conceptualized a "Wikipedia editing session" in a social justice hackathon led by the non-profit Breakthrough (Sarah, 2013). This idea is in line with numerous such editing sessions to "edit equality into Wikipedia." During the hackathon, participants (women and men) were not only told about how to contribute to Wikipedia but why contributing to Wikipedia matters, especially for women. Then, the editing group located articles they wanted to work on namely 'Mathura rape case,' 'Vishaka committee guidelines,' 'Bhanwari Devi rape case' and others. These articles were chosen not only because they are about gender or violence but also because legal judgments on the Mathura case and Bhanwari case both contributed to changing the legal discourse and the terminology around non-consensual sexual acts in the Indian context. In making these choices, our aim was not only to increase content on the

encyclopedia but to take stock of the immediate history and recent landmark decisions in India surrounding women's rights. After an initial editing, the session led to an important question: does Wikipedia contain information on all "noteworthy incidents" of sexual violence against Dalit women in India? The activity of editing became a back and forth journey into asking questions of Wikipedia and recognizing lacunae in histories (of women in this instance) built through Wikipedia. It is important to acknowledge that this initiative connects to an exemplary legacy across the globe in Wiki-storming by FemTechNet, #tooFEW led by HASTAC scholars, and editing sessions at various universities like Brown University and Oxford University that have all tried to insert key women scientists, artists and leaders in the encyclopedia.

To conclude, this essay tries to map some philosophical concerns that could only be gleaned from a combination of praxis and theory while working within, without, inside, outside and beside the Wikimedia movement. It demonstrates that there is an urgent need to raise similar concerns in order to mount a critique of the current ideologies (or disciplinary regimes) of 'open' and 'free' in digital culture to assess their outcomes and prevent them from turning into what Frederic Jameson called persistent master narratives of history. There is a need to increase the total number of non-male participants on such projects, but numbers may alone not resolve deeper questions of colour, gender, rights and visibility.

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—CITATION—

This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review**
(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org) .

Footnotes   (returns to text)

1. The CPOV reader can be downloaded from the INC website here:
   http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/cpov/lang/de/reader/
2. See Liang's essay titled: "A brief history of the Internet from the 15th to
   18th century" (Liang, Lawrence (Institute of Network Cultures,
   Amsterdam 2011)
3. More details on this GLAM collaboration can be found in this blogpost
   on the Wikimedia blog:
   http://blog.wikimedia.org/2012/07/24/chronicling-the-crafts-indias-first-
   glam-initiative/
4. For a list of all GLAM collaborations across the world refer to:
   http://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/GLAM/Case_studies
5. The brand Wikipedia and Wikiconference India held in 2011 came
   under attack from protestors of BJP, a right wing political party in India
   for allegedly misrepresenting disputed territories on the Indian map.
   See: http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/wikipedia-does-not-take-
   sides-jimmy-wales/article2640098.ece

◀ **PEER REVIEWED**

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2 THOUGHTS ON "THE ENCYCLOPEDIA MUST FAIL! – NOTES ON QUEERING WIKIPEDIA"

Netha

JULY 7, 2014 AT 10:33 PM

Congratulations for the article! Your perspectives are interesting, and it gave me some food for thought. You have done a great job in viewing Wikipedia from both an insider's and outsider's perspective, which I think too few people can manage to do. Great work, and keep more of them coming!

Being a peer-reviewed research, one should be careful to avoid even minor inaccuracies. I have found a couple of them:

1. The edit history of Bama (writer) : It occurs that the article was nominated for deletion not because of notability issues, but because it lacked citations. (Ref: **https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php? title=Bama_%28writer%29&diff=470061279&oldid=470061005**) The research mentions that there are multiple web links about Bama (which is true), but the author did not add any of them while creating the article. The deletion tag came within two minutes, and the author removed it in another four minutes by adding one citation. (Ref:**https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php? title=Bama_(writer)&diff=next&oldid=470061279**). There has not been any further 'argument' or discussion withing Wikipedia regarding this deletion. (Ref: Talk page of the article: **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Bama_(writer)**). If a discussion has occurred in private channels elsewhere, it would be prudent to include the links to the discussion on this paper. However, discussions happening outside of Wikipedia has no relevance on the decision on removal of the deletion tag. Considering this issue as one against the notability of a doubly oppressed woman would be a distortion of facts when the deletion tag is only because of the lack of reliable citation(s).I completely agree

that systemic bias against women's biographies exists on Wikipedia, but this example is insufficient to support this argument. Another well-researched example would have served the purpose.

2. The research mentions the editor's username as Mr.K, while it is actually Dr.K. (**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Dr.K**.). There hasn't been an instance on this editor's user page where they self-identified themselves as male. It would be offending for the user to be identified with any gender as long as they did not choose to disclose it. The research may have tried to establish that the masculine voice of the editor tried to silence a feminine perspective, but let us not make assumptions as long as we do not have any information about the gender of the said user in question.

That said, I do not mean to dilute the credibility of this research. I also deeply appreciate the hard work that went into the creation of this excellent article.

Carol Stabile

JULY 21, 2014 AT 1:44 PM

This from the author:

1) Regarding deletion due to lack of citations, it is precisely the point that I am labouring. For instance, had I created an article on Michael Jackson without adequate citations, it may not have been nominated for deletion directly because he is a "generally known" figure where generally known is constituted by who surfs the internet, reads Wikipedia and so on. So, the issue of deletion specifically arises when the topic is not obviously known and hence I say that it was personally shocking to me because Bama is a well known figure in the field of women's writing in India. Another instance, just to illustrate how recurrent this problem is, can be found here: **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geeta_Dharmarajan**. I was approached by the creator of this page when it was marked with number of maintenance tags because she did not know "how to write on Wikipedia" (which I think is the underlying literal and philosophical question in both instances. After a bunch of referencing-related edits, most ada the information on the article has been allowed to remain.

2) It is an oversight on my part. Although the other editor Tito Dutta

(who I also know in person) identifies as male on Wiki also, Dr. K does not. My apologies. And, if this can be added as a note, it must be added.