

## Praise for the Book

‘Ashok Alexander was a tireless champion for marginalized groups during his time leading the Gates Foundation’s work in India and tells a powerful story of hope that deserves to be widely read.’ **Bill Gates**

‘A richly detailed ethnography of sex work in India, filled with tales that are sometimes desperately sad and sometimes heart-warming, always engaging, thoroughly readable. It is a portrait of contemporary India like no other: in its pages some of the richest and most powerful people in the world cross paths with some of the poorest and most desperate . . . An unusually gifted writer.’  
**Amitav Ghosh, [www.amitavghosh.com/blog](http://www.amitavghosh.com/blog)**

‘A powerful, poignant and beautifully written book that humanizes the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens and will change the way you see them.’  
**Anand Mahindra**

‘*A Stranger Truth* is a story of an invisible India – hilarious and heart-rending, inspiring and disturbing, I couldn’t put it down.’ **Viswanathan Anand**

‘A poignant and lucid account of an astonishing journey into a world of both despair and hope that the Indian middle class prefers not to see. In the end, it is a story of success – one of the world’s great achievements in public health.’  
**Gurcharan Das**

‘Nothing beats the truth, always more powerful than fiction. Ashok Alexander takes us on a journey of truths, the struggles of ordinary people navigating extraordinary lives. In the process, he is changed, and changes us.’ **Mira Nair**

‘The fascinating story of how communities rejected by society came to control their own destinies, an inspiration for anybody working on complex societal challenges.’ **Sir Peter Piot**, Director, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and former executive director of UNAIDS

‘A gripping book that chronicles a journey of adventures and discoveries, evoking a range of emotions from anger to compassion, humour . . . and sadness.’ **Prannoy Roy**

'A chronicle both moving and memorable that captures the daunting obstacles of combating HIV, while letting us see the human faces embodied in dry statistics.' **Abraham Verghese**

'A fascinating book by a clearly talented author . . . In describing his experiences working with commercial sex workers, constantly learning about life, leadership and values from them, Ashok Alexander has written about a subject we do not think about, let alone discuss. This book has broken that taboo, and the result is a truth that he calls strange, but which feels undeniable.' **Karan Thapar**

'For an extended foray into the harsher realities of Indian life nothing can [be] better than *A Stranger Truth* by Ashok Alexander.' **Sunil Sethi**

'A book of many heartbreaks, it ultimately charts miraculous recoveries – of hope, redemption and courage that make the heart sing with pride.' *Outlook*

'Ashok Alexander has gone into impossible territory to engage with the underbelly urban India shies away from . . . Each anecdote shimmers in its retelling, with brilliant turns of phrase and the deft touches of an expert.' *New Indian Express*

'Alexander's voice – articulate, eloquent and persuasive – deserves the widest possible audience. The writing is as accessible to the specialist as to the lay reader.' *Open*

'Time and perspective have resulted in a book that is grounded in empathy, which . . . will shake the apathy out of our cushy lives.' **Firstpost**

# A Stranger Truth



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Lessons in Love, Leadership and Courage  
from India's Sex Workers

Ashok Alexander

 juggernaut

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*To the communities who made it all possible*





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# Introduction

In April 2003 I left a long career at McKinsey and Company, the venerable global management consultancy, to take up an invitation from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create a programme to stem the growth of HIV across India. HIV prevalence was high and climbing in several parts of the country, and there were fears across the world that India's epidemic could spiral out of control. The Indian government was in denial. Something had to be done.

That I knew virtually nothing about HIV or public health didn't deter me. McKinsey people, it is sometimes said, combine amazing cockiness with a certain deep insecurity. When I started out I felt self-assured, perhaps to the point of cockiness, with just that tinge of nervous excitement that comes at the start of any new venture. I thought I would quickly have HIV all figured out, just as quickly as we had figured out new client businesses. Of course, a rude awakening was to follow, a sobering experience I will describe later in the book. But to start with, at least, I did the sensible thing and set out for the field to acquaint myself with the fundamentals.

I thought I was taking up a new career. I didn't expect I would also be plunged into an adventure that was both bewildering and exhilarating. It led me to visit places and get to know people I'd never imagined existed. It was an India that fell outside the comfort

zones I had lived and worked in all my life. It went beyond the brief encounters with poverty I had seen from so many windows. It was a grinding place where women would sell themselves for fifty rupees and fourteen-year-olds injected drugs. It was the secret world of transgender people, and the agony of young gay men in a country that still criminalized same-sex love. It was the strange world of truckers, lonely journeymen along forgotten highways. It also often turned out to be a place of spectacular natural beauty. It was, above all, a place where heroic battles for a barely decent life were being fought every day.



I began to build a team, and we gave our programme the name Avahan, meaning ‘clarion call’. It seemed apt, given the prevailing environment of denial. Our game plan was to concentrate on the six states where HIV levels were the highest in India. These were Nagaland and Manipur in the North-East; Andhra Pradesh (as it was then called),<sup>1</sup> Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu in the South; and Maharashtra in the west. We chose these states because they accounted for the bulk of new HIV infections and because HIV prevention measures there were inadequate. Within these states we would focus on eighty-three (virtually all) districts and establish operations in hundreds of towns.

The central theme of Avahan therefore was achieving very large scale in a very short period, for maximum impact. But the essence of Avahan, and the purpose of this book, is the power of communities. It is the story of the strength inherent in even the most marginalized of people, if they are enabled to come together in common cause. Sex workers across Avahan’s six states, with adequate initial support, developed and implemented sophisticated solutions to generate data, deliver services based on that data, and reduce their vulnerability.

The word community will come up throughout this narrative. It refers to the people who belong to different population groups most at risk of getting infected by the HIV virus. The largest such group was that of female sex workers. There were also men who have sex

with men ('MSM', which is different from 'gay', and we will see why later in the book); transgender people; truckers – who often are clients of sex workers; and injecting drug users. There are subcategories within these groups – especially with the female sex workers. These risk groups were often widely dispersed and moving around in a way that made them invisible. That was one of the biggest challenges in expanding our programme to reach the population groups most vulnerable to HIV.

As this strange adventure unfolded, I would at the end of the day often ask myself – did that really happen today? I decided to keep a daily record of my travels, thinking that otherwise no one, including myself, would believe that this was truth, not fiction. These regular writings grew into two thick, handwritten diaries that chronicle most of the ten years I spent on Avahan. As I look through this journal today I am struck by the detail – people, places, and conversations – put down literally, and without embellishment. Without these diaries this book would not have been possible.

In many instances, the names of people, and sometimes the places or the dates, have been changed. I use the first-person style through most of this narrative because it is my personal story, and I cannot speak for the thoughts and emotions of my colleagues as we made the journey together. I had the added good fortune, by being the captain of the ship, to be the only person who worked right across Avahan and could visit every state and locale and engage with each of the diverse communities I met. The first-person device should never disguise the fact that Avahan was entirely a team game – the core Avahan team, the teams of the NGOs that implemented the programme, and the communities involved.

This is not a technical book which gets into the details of the methods we followed in rapidly expanding Avahan. It doesn't get into areas such as how we went about monitoring and evaluating our progress, fascinating though they are. It doesn't discuss what it took to build a high-performing team. Avahan is a well-documented programme, with case studies and hundreds of peer-reviewed articles.

This is essentially a narrative about a personal journey, engaging only lightly with technicalities.

The book is in two sections. In part 1, 'Far, Far Away', I try to depict the many settings in which HIV is transmitted, based on my field travels across India. I describe the various communities and introduce some of the characters I met during my travels. It provides the canvas, describes the challenges, and touches on the elements of the solution we developed.

Part 2, 'Learning to Fly', is set in Mysore, focusing on the part of the Avahan programme that was set up there, called Ashodaya, built by sex workers. It is a deep dive into how Avahan worked at the grass roots. If part 1 lays out the nature of the problem, part 2 tries to convey the character of the solution.

The appendix contains some background on HIV globally and in India, and is worth skimming through after reading this Introduction, especially by those new to the HIV world.



Today, with the advent of treatment, a person with HIV can expect to live a long and normal life. This was not the case for most of the period in which we worked on Avahan. Treatment was barely available then in India, and contracting the virus was tantamount to a cruel death sentence. Over a period of about ten years the victim would progress into the AIDS stage, when his immune system collapsed, and death would come, slowly and painfully.

Working on Avahan, seeing this tragedy happen up-close, changed me fundamentally. I found I was able to feel, rather than intellectualize or turn away when faced with suffering. I became better able to face my fears, and to understand what made me happy. I discovered a self that had long been buried within. Perhaps this book may provoke a few readers to reflect on the forces that bind them to one place or to one attitude, or to wonder whether they may be staying on a little

too long, without intending to do so, in their zones of comfort. In so reflecting they may, like me, discover some emotions, long suppressed, well concealed, worthy of expression.

I hope this book may also, for those who sense a restlessness deep within, stoke the fires of the adventures waiting to be had, the quiet clarion call, the call to make a difference.