



Vaid, Urvashi (b. 1958)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Lesbian activist Urvashi Vaid began her life as a political organizer when she was a young child. A deeply intellectual and progressive thinker, she did not outgrow her early commitment to justice and fairness, but developed it by studying political science and the law. She then devoted her energies to trying to create a queer liberation movement that would have as its core goal the liberation of all people.

In her influential 1995 book *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, Vaid stated her most basic desire for the movement, "Gay people do not fight for freedom to live in a lavender bubble, but in a more just society."

Vaid was born on October 8, 1958, in New Delhi, India. The family came to the United States in 1966, and lived in Potsdam, New York, where her father had a teaching job at the state university. Even as a child, Vaid was stimulated by the currents of political change that permeated American society during the late 1960s, and she quickly became politicized. She put up a poster of Martin Luther King in her bedroom when she was eight, attended her first anti-war protest by the age of eleven, and gave the first of many political speeches (in support of Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern) when she was twelve.

A quick and diligent student, Vaid graduated from high school in three years and attended Vassar College in New York. There she continued to develop her progressive politics, becoming involved in the women's liberation movement and coming out as a lesbian. "I feel like I've always known that I was a lesbian," Vaid told *The Progressive's* Anne-Marie Cusac. "But ... I really didn't have a name for what I felt until I met a bunch of out lesbians in college."

Vaid graduated from Vassar in 1979. In 1983, she received her law degree from Boston's Northeastern University. Even while in school, she had begun to organize around feminist, gay, and justice issues, working with the Women's Prison Project and co-founding the Allston-Brighton Greenlight Safehouse Network and the Boston Lesbian/Gay Political Alliance.

From 1983 until 1986, she worked for the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prisons Project in Washington, D. C. Then, in 1986, she began a long relationship with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. First as director of public information, then, in 1989, as executive director of the NGLTF Policy Institute, Vaid worked hard to boost media coverage of the group's agenda and increase its operating budget.

She took a break from the organization between 1992 and 1997 to work on *Virtual Equality*, her ambitious history of the gay and lesbian liberation movement and the cooptation of that movement by conservatives. She resumed her position as Executive Director of the NGLTF Policy Institute in 1997 and served until 2001. In 2000, she co-edited (with John D'Emilio and William B. Turner) a book of essays about the movement titled, *Creating Change: Public Policy, Civil Rights, and Sexuality*.

Vaid is a charismatic and outspoken speaker and writer who has been a visible presence in the struggle for

equality. For example, she was a featured speaker at the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation and for several years contributed a column to the gay newsmagazine the *Advocate*.

Perhaps her greatest contribution to the queer movement has been her tireless urging for an inclusive and multi-issue progressive activism. Never content to seek only civil rights for gay men and lesbians, Vaid consistently points out the diversity within the movement and what she calls the "politics of intersection," i.e., the interdependence of the struggles against racism, classism, and homophobia.

In a speech to the Lesbian Rights Summit of the National Organization for Women she said, "I want a movement that is not just focused on identity but that is engaged in defining what kind of society we will have in the next century."

Vaid currently serves as the Deputy Director of the Governance and Civil Society Unit of the Peace and Social Justice Program of the Ford Foundation. She was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the Gill Foundation, the largest funder of glbtq organizations in the United States.

Vaid lives in Provincetown with her long-time companion, comedian Kate Clinton.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.