



LGBT supporters participate in Pride March in Mumbai on Feb 6, 2016.

A GAY AUSTRALIAN'S Indian Love Story

BY JOHN BURBIDGE

While many South Asian gay men and women move to the West to embrace their same-sex orientation, for me it was the opposite. Growing up in a conventional, middle-class, suburban family in 1960s Australia, I never knew any gay people, nor did I experiment with my sexuality. Being gay carried such negative connotations and was so diametrically opposed to my self-image that I never connected the dots. It took India, with its immense diversity, to allow me to break free from my own cultural inhibitions and discover a part of myself I never knew existed. That homosexuality was illegal in India only complicated my journey of self-discovery.

I came to India in the late 1970s as a

volunteer with an international NGO to work in rural development. My first two years were a raw initiation into Indian culture, village life and sheer survival. I felt I accomplished little and lost a lot of weight. It was only upon my return a couple of years later, living and working as part of a Mumbai-based fundraising team, that I stumbled upon a path that led me from sexual abstinence to addiction in two short years.

It began so improbably while browsing a secondhand bookstall in Flora Fountain, Mumbai. I came upon a magazine article about one man's immersion into "the gay world" to resolve his sexual conflicts. The piece triggered something deep inside me. A short while later, looking for something to brighten a dull Sunday afternoon, I asked one of my colleagues, "Rakesh, where's all the action in this city?" He

proceeded to give me an impressive list of places to find women, but ended with, "But be careful if you go down to Chowpatty Beach. That's the San Francisco of Bombay!"

That was all I needed. I immediately took a bus to Chowpatty and began what became the most transformative few years of my life. After taking the plunge with amateur masseurs, I was catapulted into a roller-coaster ride of sexual self-discovery. In these pre-computer days when phones rarely worked, making contact with other gay men was a challenge. It came down to ferreting out likely pick-up places in parks and gardens, train stations, public toilets, and if lucky, by private referral. I soon became adept at locating such venues, even in new cities, and of discerning who might share my sexual interests. The gay network, while totally subter-



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anean, was vast and ubiquitous. Sometimes all it took was a furtive glance, the pulling of an ear lobe, or a tickle in the palm of one's hand, to establish contact.

While my encounters were mostly pleasurable, they often involved considerable risk. I experienced the brutality and agent provocateur tactics of the police, as well as those who operate outside the law. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalizes male homosexuality, was used by the police and others to threaten, beat and blackmail gay men. In my own experience, I was struck by a lathi-wielding cop on a Bombay *maidan* and entrapped late at night in a railway station toilet and threatened with extortion. But these pale in comparison to stories related by other gay men, such as one attacked by police with bicycle chains and another who was forced by his father to undergo electric shock therapy, when thugs made good on their promise to blackmail him after stealing his wallet.

Such encounters not only made me fearful for my personal safety, they also

raised the specter of how they might affect my status as an international volunteer, and even the organization itself, should I fall foul of the law. For the most part, my life became a delicate balancing act between my public relations and fundraising work on a major international exposition and my relentless search for sexual release. While the former led me to meet some of India's rich and famous in business and government, the latter drove me to situations that bordered on life-threatening. The two made for a toxic combination; sooner or later they were bound to combust.

My living in a highly regulated residential community with minimal privacy only added to the mounting tension. When a roommate threatened to expose my secret life and a doctor betrayed my confidence, all seemed lost. It was only when a trusted colleague, puzzled by my nocturnal absences, asked, "Are you working for the CIA, or are you gay?" that my fragile defenses crumbled and I began to rebuild my fractured life.

In the midst of this maelstrom, two

things happened that added to the swirl my life had become. In late 1983, my Australian mother visited India, an event that I greatly anticipated and also dreaded. Since I had never come out to her as gay, her presence constantly begged the question of whether and how I should do this during her short visit. The sight of young men showing affection for one another in public and the concern expressed by one of our hosts that I was unmarried ratcheted up the pressure for me.

The other factor was the realization towards the end of my stay in India that I was not alone in my search for sexual identity. When I received a tip about another gay staff member in the United States, I immediately wrote to him, only to learn that he and several others were working on how to present the issues faced by LGBT staff to the whole organization. More surprising, and closer to home, was an unexpected encounter with one of my young Indian co-workers at a popular gay gathering place in Bombay. It hadn't occurred to me that



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one of my own colleagues might be gay. For so long, I had tried to keep my two lives separate, but now began to see this might not be necessary. Slowly and carefully I began to come out to those I thought I could trust, but not until I'd left India did I dare broach the subject with any of our Indian staff.

Thirty years after these events I was able to revisit them in the form of a memoir, *The Boatman*. It has been described as a multi-layered love story — my love of India, my passion for its young men, and my commitment to the work I was doing. When the book was launched in New Delhi in February 2014, its timing couldn't have been more opportune. A month before, the Indian Supreme Court had overruled the Delhi High Court's 2009 decision to strike down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The Court's ruling came with the backing of conservative religious and political leaders, some of whose arguments ranged from the ignorant to the absurd.

A public outcry against this about-face was equally vociferous. Among many voices decrying it was that of

83-year-old Leila Seth, a former Delhi High Court judge, state Chief Justice, and the mother of one of India's best-known authors, Vikram Seth, who is gay. Not only did she condemn the judgment because it failed to appreciate the stigma it attached to gay people and their families, but also because it claimed, erroneously, that it would only affect a minuscule portion of the total population.

My return to India after 30 years coincided with the annual Republic Day celebrations in Delhi. I was invited to participate in a rally that was held that afternoon, focusing on the repeal of Section 377. But I soon discovered it was much more. It pulled together a broad coalition of groups representing the marginalized in Indian society — the disabled, women against sexual violence, those who dare to marry across religion or caste, and more. They had come to protest their exclusion from the protection of the Indian constitution, which had been celebrated that very morning with a massive parade of military might and cultural splendor down Rajpath.

As the crowd wound its way through the city streets to the rally stage, my mind drifted back to my experience of India a generation before. It was inconceivable to me then that such a public demonstration for gay rights could take place and that gay men and women would join forces with others similarly oppressed. The passionate speeches by civil society activists and others exuded courage and conviction and inspired those present to fight for their rights.

India had changed, or so it seemed.

My own story now assumed a new relevance. I had written it to share one of my most life-changing experiences. The playwright Mahesh Dattani referred to it as my coming out to India. I often think it as my way of thanking India for allowing me to come to terms with something I had denied so long. *The Boatman* is now steering its own course as readers engage with the book. I hope it will encourage South Asian LGBT men and women to tell their stories, since this is key to changing attitudes and removing prejudices, which in turn paves the way for political change. The more their stories are heard and understood,



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the more difficult it is to perpetuate myths about homosexuality, such as it being a disease or a Western import.

Leading the charge in this effort are the urban, educated elite of the South Asian LGBT community. But they are only a fraction of the total LGBT population. When the Delhi High Court ruled in 2009, gay activist and journalist Ashok Row Kavi called it “a minor victory for poorer or working class gay men...who really bore the brunt of the law, which was used against them as a tool for extortion and blackmail.” He also reiterated the need to focus on the plight of women, the more forgotten and restricted members of the LGBT community and society at large.

In similar vein, British actor Stephen Fry, in a BBC documentary on gays around the world, called on a gathering of young gay men and women in Mumbai to reach out to those beyond their immediate world. “India is one of the most comfortable countries in which to be gay,” he said, “especially of course if you are educated, English-speaking, middle class.” He exhorted them to use

their talents and influence to venture out into the suburbs and rural areas to make LGBT rights really count.

A young Indian woman in the UK recently asked me whether I thought homosexuality would ever be accepted in India. I am optimistic it will, given that Indian society is one of the most inclusive in the world, with its variety of religions, languages, beliefs and customs. Before the British administration made homosexuality a crime in India in 1861, it wasn't. Indeed, there is historical evidence that a wide range of sexualities were accepted and embraced as part of India's pluriformity.

But for such acceptance to occur, effort is required. Others need to get to know LGBT people as individuals, not as stereotypes. LGBT people have to come out — to friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and hardest of all, families. These have been essential steps in LGBT people gaining acceptance anywhere; there is no reason to think it would be any different in South Asia. Indeed, it may even be more critical there.

The pivotal issue with homosexu-

ality in India seems to revolve around the centrality and sanctity of the family in Indian society. Since most faiths place a high value on families, producing heirs, and caring for elders, there is enormous pressure on gay people to follow suit. Because homosexuality is often perceived as not doing this, many view it as a threat. If LGBT people can show they too have families of their own and would like nothing more than to be embraced by their blood families, broad acceptance of homosexuality might be more forthcoming in India. Until this happens, India's lawmakers are unlikely to take the political risk needed to



overturn Section 377 and rid the country of this colonial anachronism. 2

John Burridge is author of The Boatman: An Indian Love Story