

In India I felt I had the permission to experiment: John Burbidge

An Australian writer's memoir on what it was like to be gay in India 30 years ago



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John Burbidge. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Australian author [John Burbidge](#) first came to India 30 years ago as a development professional to work in rural areas. Mostly based out of Bombay (now Mumbai), he was struck by the paradoxes in

this nation of a myriad inequalities. Among his adventures while travelling across the country came a momentous self-discovery. On a sultry evening on Bombay's Chowpatty beach, he had his first gay encounter when a local *maalishwala* gave him a massage. In the months that followed Burbidge led a promiscuous existence, making contacts with men who have sex with men wherever he travelled. He also cruised for sex in parks and public toilets, which landed him in trouble once in a while. But beyond the immediate pleasures, Burbidge found out, much to his surprise, that unlike Western nations (three decades back) India was remarkably homosocial and permissive about homoerotic bonds, even though the law did not recognize same-sex love.

The Boatman: A Memoir of Same-Sex Love, published by Yoda Press this week, is Burbidge's memoir of those years of his life. The book could not have appeared at a more opportune, and ironic, moment, days after the Supreme Court (SC) sent back a petition to review an order by one of its benches that reinstated Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that makes consensual homosexual relations a criminal offence. In its order last December, the SC had called India's LGBT community a "miniscule fraction". *The Boatman* provides a much-needed reality check of that view.

In New Delhi for the launch, Burbidge met us for an interview at Max Mueller Bhavan. Edited excerpts:

Although I enjoyed reading your book in general, I feel it is especially valuable, and relevant, at the moment in India when the LGBT community is faced with a tough challenge.

I did not write the book for any political motivation. It was just my story that I had to get it off my chest. I actually did it twice—the first time as a magazine article, which ended up being some 18,000 words long. That was shortly after I had moved to Brussels (Belgium) from India. I sent it off to an Australian magazine and never heard anything about it. Then a couple of years later, I was in a book store in London and as I was walking out of the door I noticed one copy of this magazine. And I realized they had published the whole thing in two parts but could not get in touch with me because they had no address for me in Brussels.

The piece was mostly factual, with a little bit of reflection thrown in. That was in 1987. In 2000, I was taking a memoir-writing class in Seattle (US) and I decided to revisit it. I had done a few vignettes that are now parts of the various chapters. By that time, I have had 13 years to reflect on the material and I decided to really embark on it as a full memoir with much more introspection. How had I really been changed by the experience rather than this is the experience—which is what the article was about. I was only into that for a year or two when I came across *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts, another Australian who had written about an underground life in India in the 1980s. I was inspired by it because I could relate to it so strongly, but I was also a bit deflated because he seemed to have the great story. I almost gave up until friends got me back on track.

Your sexual awakening happened in a country that criminalizes homosexuality. How did it strike you at the time?

It's really very odd for a foreigner to come out in India. Someone pointed it out to me that it is usually the reverse. South Asians, when they go to the West, probably feel more liberated and less entangled with family, so they often feel they that can risk coming out. It is the same for me too. It took India with all its craziness and diversity to undo the shackles of moralism of my middle-class Christian family background. I was the top student at school and many people had visions of me going into the diplomatic corps. But I went off in a very different direction.

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Australia, homosexuality had the connotation of being a "poofter", "homo" and so on. I was a decent, hard-working, morally upright guy. I felt I could never risk being anything else in Australia. In India I felt I had the permission to experiment which my own country never gave me. To be also very frank, there is an astonishing number of good-looking men in this country. I couldn't deny my feelings. I had inklings about what I wanted but until I picked up a funny little magazine one day in Bombay and read an article about testing one's gay potential, I had not thought about giving this a serious try.

What was the level of homophobia at that time? You do describe some incidents of violence in the book.

The official line was, homosexuality is completely off limits. But in reality, it was more like if you don't talk about it it's just fine. If you manage to marry, have your children and take care of your parents, you can have little flings on the side with other men. The moment you bring it out in the open all hell will break loose. I had sexual contacts with 200-300 gay men in two-three years. I think only less than a handful of them were out to their families. That was in the 1980s.

Legally, the risk was whether you wanted to have sex in public—which, as you will read in the book, I did a lot. The strange part of my story was that I did not have much money as I was a volunteer with an organization that was run on Gandhian principles. Being a poor person in a poor country where no one believed you were poor had challenges of its own. I couldn't get out of difficult situations with the police. Other people would just hand over a couple of hundred rupees and get away with it.

What was Australia like around that time?

Australia didn't turn a corner until much later. I think its first Mardi Gras was back in 1979. It took a long while after that for Australia to open up. It still hasn't recognized gay marriage whereas so many other countries have. It was one of the first nations to recognize immigration rights where a foreigner could bring in a partner. In terms of general attitudes it has taken Australia a while to catch up. Now things have changed a great deal. There are openly gay politicians at the state and federal levels.

You are now married to your partner of more than 20 years. Was it hard to give up the promiscuous life and settle into domesticity?

It didn't happen overnight. I left India in July 1984, and was in Brussels till about 1988. During that time, I had a relationship with another guy who happened to be American which did not work out. Then I met Bruce (his current partner). He was married with two children at the time. Once the marriage was dissolved, amicably thankfully, I moved to the US to be with him. But frankly, I did not want to leave India because I was having such a good time. The idea of settling down and having a relationship with one person felt odd. When Bruce showed up, I felt I was ready for the other part of the journey. In a sense, *The Boatman* was about phase 1 of my life; Bruce was phase 2 of it. Now that we have a grandchild, I believe a phase 3 has started.

What are you working on now?

I have a new book coming up next week which is a biography of [Gerald Glaskin](#), Australia's first openly gay writer. He wrote a gay novel based in Perth, set in the 1960s, published in London and banned immediately. I grew up in Perth but never heard of him at the time. My biography is about why he is still such a nonentity in Australia even after he published 20 books in his lifetime.



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