

## Ferry me across the river

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The Boatman (A memoir of same-sex love)

Some books make you wonder how easy it is to slip into the past; thinking of journeys done and work accomplished. John Burbidge makes you nostalgic for one simple reason: he drags you back to those claustrophobic days when the closet was too small and the world outside too big to contain your life. I know John as an acquaintance and like many white men (I can think of DH Lawrence, Richard Burton and scores of dear friends like Prof Lawrence Cohen, for example), he 'came out' in India. By this I mean he discovered he was gay after a series of adventures that take one's breath away. And that's what this book is about.

John came to India as a 'development person' employed by an NGO that worked for rural development and empowering marginalized groups. In the process, he discovered himself and an India where sex with men was available for the asking. And he seems to have got it everywhere – from the usual Chowpatty beach in South Bombay where the maalishwallahs ply their trade to the khaanjra-dhanda (cruising in public toilets) in nearly every big city. Burbidge went through the whole gamut — while no one in his office seemed to even get a whiff. It's this side which I find a bit difficult to believe because nothing really escapes good old Mother India's sharp prying eyes.

Though the word AIDS pops up only in the middle of the memoir (page 141 to be specific), I think John is also very lucky that he discovered himself in India sometime just before the arrival of the dreaded infection in the country (in 1985); this allows us to concentrate on how he negotiates his workplace and his sex partners who seem to live in two different worlds. This was obviously on purpose because John is a cross-class cruiser (a man who doesn't have sex with anybody from his own class but has a different sexual network that doesn't intersect his

social circles). This was the hallmark of most Westerners in the pre-coming out days when LGBT were not part of the social landscape of India. The rise of LGBT on the social landscape has had its shortcomings; you'll see fewer men in close physical intimacy in public spaces than before; the homoerotic has become suspect thanks to the new morality gushing in from abroad. Thank God it is still a phenomenon restricted to the semi or mostly westernized urban spaces.

What fascinated me is how John walks a razor's edge of having his fun and risks being outed by some pretty homophobic co-workers in his office. The book is more about such hide-and-seek games and can tire gay men like me who have been out for decades now. It also gave me a good idea of how difficult it was to verbalize and recognize one's sexual orientation as something natural to one's very being and personality. That way this book is a sound manual on how to avoid the pitfalls of being outed in your workplace and brazening it out in one big sweep.

Nothing really has changed in India since John Burbidge or Richard Burton left it. Sex between men is casual, easy and available in incredibly humongous numbers of encounters; and both this moralistic government and Justice Singhvi should read such books so that they know we are anything but a 'miniscule minority'.



*Sholay was the quintessential male bonding of the 70s with homo-erotic overtones. (Photo: Express archives)*

Our dearest present Union Health Minister should know that sex within marriage is practically impossible for men who have to work in strange cities for years on end without ever seeing their spouses or for men who can never hope to marry because they do not wish to marry women at all but cannot be in respectable relationships with their own kind. There are an

estimated eight million migrants and over five million truckers who never see their wives for weeks or years on end. There are over 2.3 million homosexual men who are criminals in the eyes of the law and if granted equality and freedom will remain possibly in loving relationships with their male lover. Now, of course, they are forced to find sex — like Burbidge did in India — in parks, toilets, parking lots, on beaches, in simply any public space where it is easy to access other men after dark (or even in broad daylight given an opportunity).

The evidence? One out of every 10 gay men in urban India is HIV infected. If Mr Harshvardhan were to check from his Department of AIDS Control (DAC), this is not because they are dying (disgusted by the pun) to be infected but because there is no recourse but to have hurried and quick sex in dark spaces because of Section 377 and its implications that male-male sex is an illegal act.

Burbidge's book is immensely educative and should be compulsory reading on how a foreigner discovers his true nature (he thanks Ganesha for it) but returns home a very strong and confident man in charge of his life. In India, Justice Singhvi has given us no choice but to go back into the horrid holes of shame and sorrow we are forced to live in, and the BJP now needs to be re-educated all over again that never in our whole incredibly pluralistic history were we ever called criminals and thieves of the love that dare not speak its name.

As for my dear Dr Harshvardhan, I would recommend you visit the steps of the Jama Masjid; there midway up the broad staircase, lies Sarmad the Sufi, beheaded by Aurangzeb. Sarmad's sin was that he was clad in the sky like Naga and Jain Munis and had hordes of male admirers who upset the Mughal's sense of religious propriety.

Now you, dear sir, can look around for another stairway someplace else; there are many of us sacrificial goats for you to behead and bury for your middle class values that ring so false when you lift the carpet of your party's bogus morality.

"The Boatman" will surely take you across the Ganga. Read it.

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