

Afterword

Ever since the British introduced a law in 1861 to criminalize homosexuality, the practice had been illegal in India and was punishable by hefty fines and stiff prison terms, with accompanying bribery and blackmail, as well as physical and sexual abuse. Then, in July 2009, after strenuous efforts by gay and lesbian activists and their allies, the Delhi High Court ruled that the law—Section 377 of the Indian Penal code—was unconstitutional, because it infringed on a citizen’s fundamental right to nondiscrimination. Finally, after nearly 150 years this colonial anachronism had been banished.

But like many social changes this one was fragile and short lived. In December 2013, the Supreme Court overturned the Delhi High Court decision, with near-unanimous support of conservative religious leaders. A public outcry against this about-face was equally vociferous. Among the many voices decrying it was that of 83-year old Leila Seth, a former Delhi High Court judge and 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 judgement 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 proportion of the total population.

In January 2014, I returned to India to participate in the launch of the Indian edition of this book. It was 19 years since my last visit and 30 years since I had lived there. I had been in Delhi barely 24 hours when I was contacted about a rally that would take place in two days’ time on India's Republic Day. It would focus on the repeal of Section 377 and a large turnout was anticipated. Would my partner and I like to attend? It sounded like a good way to ground ourselves in the reality of India today and to learn firsthand of the efforts being made by gay men and women in India to secure their basic human rights.

When we showed up at the rally's starting point, police seemed to outnumber participants but we were assured that people would appear. And they did. A mix of men and women, young and not-so-young, bright, articulate and passionate about their cause. But we soon discovered this was much more than a demonstration against Section 377. It pulled together a broad coalition of groups representing all those marginalized by Indian society — the disabled, women against sexual violence, those who dare to marry across religion or caste, and many more. They had all 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 splendour down Delhi's grand boulevard, Rajpath.

As the crowd of several hundred wound its way through the city's streets to the rally stage, my mind cast back to the story you have just read. The only gay men I knew I met in parks and gardens, on trains or buses, or through personal referrals secretly passed on from one to another. It was inconceivable to me then that such a public demonstration for gay rights could take place, that gay men and women would risk outing themselves in such a public way, and that they would join forces with others similarly

oppressed. India had changed, or so it seemed. The passionate speeches made by civil society activists, writers and others exuded courage and conviction and inspired those present to fight for their rights as members of 'the world's largest democracy'. But democracies require constant vigilance and outspoken critics if they are to serve all their citizens. India's LGBT community knows this only too well, as the events this day testified.

My own story now assumed a new relevance.

Growing up in a predominantly homophobic Australia, I had never identified as a gay man. Family, societal and cultural factors militated against it. It took India, with its bewildering complexity and unique way of embracing 'the guest as a god'—not to mention its abundance of extremely good-looking young men—to open this shuttered window in my life. When it did, I discovered a whole new world, albeit a largely subterranean one. I also uncovered a part of my psyche that had lain dormant for years.

In writing *The Boatman*, I have been pushed to articulate what this story is really about and why I feel compelled to share it with others. Was it about sexual addiction? Was it about an adolescence I'd missed growing up in Australia? Was it about living a double life? Was it about immersion in another culture and the awakening that can bring? These were all elements of my story but none could claim to be paramount. *The Boatman* is, as one person noted, a multi-layered love story—my love for another culture, my passion for its young men, and my immersion in the work I did. It describes an internal journey of discovering, exploring and integrating homosexuality into my life, while I literally journey through the teeming landscape of India. The two happen simultaneously, but the latter made the former possible.

Memoirs can take a long time to write. Often an extensive gestation period is required before the author is ready to tell his or her story. In my case, this was 30 years, during which time I have been in a single relationship for more than 25 years and helped raise two children. As fate would have it, I have also become the grandparent of a child who is part Indian. These experiences and the maturation they have brought have allowed me to write about my time in India from a different vantage point.

Seated before a largely young, and perhaps gay, audience at the Delhi book launch, I felt challenged to connect with them. What did they think about this middle-aged foreigner who sat talking about how India had so dramatically changed his life? How did his story relate to them and their ongoing struggle to achieve equality before the law and acceptance by society? I have no doubt that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code will be repealed one day, but it will take a massive and persistent effort to sway public opinion sufficiently for India's lawmakers to take the political risk needed. Telling our stories, individually and collectively, is a key step in this process. If my story can provide the impetus for others to tell theirs, publicly and proudly, then it will have been worthwhile.