

Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla

THE BOMBAY DOST INTERVIEW

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE ALLEN

The author of *Ode to Lata* and the forthcoming *The Two Krishnas* talks of Lata Mangeshkar, religion and sexuality, in a sprawling conversation with Bombay Dost.

As a gay man of Indian origin in America, what has been the most affirming aspect of the freedom you enjoy? Have there been instances in which you've felt alienated because of your sexuality?

As a California resident, grappling with the passing of Prop 8, it's important to remember that we have a long way to go even though, as Americans, we still enjoy an unparalleled level of freedom. Being able to express my sexuality as an individual and an artist, having the opportunity to fight injustice without the fear of censure has been essential to my self-esteem and pride. Fortunately, I've seldom felt alienated because of my sexuality, perhaps because I've resisted seeing it as an issue and have always tried to focus on the positive, and to find an anchor in my spiritual practice. As a gay man, you have no choice *but* to be thick-skinned, to remind yourself that being different is not a disadvantage. You have to remember that the inability of people to relate to you and your lifestyle, because it doesn't conform to their notions of normalcy, still remains *their* shortcoming, not yours. We have to do everything possible to keep their lack of understanding from making us feel alienated, by refusing to make any excuses for who we are. I think a lot of this has to do with striking a balance between forcing your sexuality on others or being a victim.

What is your view of the gay movement in India, which has been coined as a march towards queer *azaadi*? What has been your experience of the way in which gay men in India construct their identities as queer people, as opposed to what prevails in the west?

The most astonishing thing about coming to India was that although I came as a tourist, I felt immediately at home. The sights, sounds, smells, were the markers of home. In any other country, Indians continue to feel like guests or mere occupants even if they were born there or have fought for its freedom. In India at least, nobody can tell me to 'go back where you come from.' My new novel, *The Two Krishnas*, delves into this dislocation and the upheavals Indians have had to suffer in adopted homelands, starting from the first Indian settlers who came to Kenya in the 1800's to build railways for the British.

The queer struggle in India is a source of pride and inspiration for LGBT communities around the world. Something like India overthrowing outdated Victorian laws, and challenging the status quo, can inspire American gays to take the cause even further and

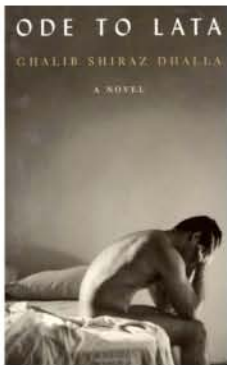
aspire for much more. However, I think that as queer people accomplish more, there is the tendency to splinter into sub-cultures that can fragment the community as a whole. My impression is that the queer movement in India is precious and more united whereas in the U.S., there are now varied perspectives and lifestyles with only the love for the same gender as a common denominator. So, for example, the leather community may not mingle or feel much commonality with the circuit bunch or the transsexuals and so on and so forth. Ironically, I think the LGBT community may be at its most cohesive and mutually supportive of its segments when the struggle for self-expression is still in its infancy; which is why, it's important to remember, even as we carve out more space for ourselves and make larger strides, that ultimately, we're still part of the same family and have to continue being as unconditionally accepting of one another as we want the outside world to be of us.

About Satrang, the support organization you co-founded — tell us some of your experiences with the people you've met as part of your activism. Do you feel a lot of South Asian men still live on the down-low (so to say) rather than embrace a more mainstream and open queer identity?

Satrang started out as an intimate support group for 'out and questioning' men and women who met at private homes, it was just a handful of people then. Today, I'm so proud to see that it has grown into a dynamic social platform that not only provides educational and fortifying programs to those struggling with their sexuality, but also celebrates our sexuality and South Asian culture through social events. What makes Satrang and organizations like it truly special is that the sub-cultures I mentioned earlier are assimilated effortlessly and a typical Satrang gathering becomes a celebratory ground for lesbians, gays, transsexuals, Hindus, Muslims, even non-Indians. In the gay community, 'families' are often not blood relatives but people with whom we have forged an unconditional bond, a space of non-judgment. Satrang, as its name implies, is one such colorful, inclusive family for all of us.

While I think it must compromise his quality of life, I don't feel that every gay man may be able to live life as openly queer. While this is important to the queer movement and more essentially, to his relationship to himself, it remains a personal and private matter that cannot abide by external pressure. Individual circumstances dictate when a person is ready to make that commitment and sometimes it *is* genuinely tough for people to come out, especially when they are young and financially dependent on their families. But when a person is no longer a minor, and is financially independent, excuses like 'my profession is too conservative' or 'my family won't be able to handle it' sound absurd and are often used to mask an inner insecurity and disdain for his sexuality. It's always tough for your family to digest you're homosexual — but isn't that what we owe those we love — the truth? Ultimately, we all have the responsibility of helping people understand us better, but the timing — that can be different for all of us.

In India AIDS-related outreach efforts can become particularly challenging because gay men who engage in high-risk behaviors have been pushed underground. We need to reclaim the openness of our sexual culture. After all, India had given the world the ultimate treatise on sex!



Elsewhere in the magazine, we're carrying a feature on the manner in which the Mangeshkar sisters have influenced generations of gay men in India. Tell us how you've used Lata's music as a backdrop in your book *Ode to Lata*.

While Lata is not a character in the novel or the film, she is an influence on the lives of the characters in *Ode to Lata*. Little Ali and his parents are marinated in Bollywood. And the timeless music of Mangeshkar — particularly her collaborations with Madan Mohan, which are my personal favorites — have become the soundtrack to their lives; so it's only natural that when they start looking for their own love stories, to manifest the romantic notions that have been grafted onto their psyches by years of watching Indian cinema, they should hear the voice of Lata goading them on. The novel demonstrates how art is the ultimate director of our pathos, how music draws us to the ecstatic and the painful because often, your pain and your pleasure walk hand in hand. The tragedy in life, I think, is not that there are tragedies, but that there is no soundtrack to go with it. So what better music to score your love story than Lata's?

Now of course, the book has been made into a film that's doing the rounds at festivals. The film is titled simply, *The Ode*. It has been some time since the book first came out, so did you approach the screenplay as a faithful adaptation, or did you instead embrace the new medium as a chance to re-tell the same story afresh? Has the Lata element been down-played?

A film is governed by very different rules compared to a novel, it's usually very difficult for anyone to translate a novel into film. At best, a film should be an interpretation of the source



MIKE ALLEN

material. As someone once said, 'An adaptation is like a beautiful woman (or man). If it's beautiful, it's never faithful. If it's faithful, it's almost never beautiful.' With *Ode to Lata*, I had to basically throw the book out and rewrite the story without losing its essence. This is essentially what every writer tries to do — to take an audience to the essence of the story so that ultimately, we are able to see that the gravity of pain is the same no matter who feels it, joy is just as elating, and sacrifice just as exacting, to anyone, whether straight or gay. But while the narrative in the film makes a departure from the novel, the film is still essentially a dark coming out journey and does not squirm away from depicting gay sexuality in its most erotic and disturbing aspects. In my very biased opinion, you will never have seen a film that unleashes the gay Indian experience so unapologetically.

“Your pain and your pleasure often walk hand in hand. The tragedy in life, I think, is not that there are tragedies, but that there is no soundtrack to go with it. So what better music to score your love story than that of Lata Mangeshkar?”

While the title change was necessary to make the film more accessible to the Western audiences and shift the tribute to the actual characters in the film, the regrettable decision not to use much more of Lata's music was the decision of the Indian investors. But this sort of compromise is sometimes essential if you are to get your first project made.

Your role as an author was expanded into a producer, screenwriter and finally, even handling key directorial functions for *The Ode*. Can you tell us more about how you handled this kind of auteurship?

I started writing and producing *The Ode* almost 10 years ago and as is endemic to the industry, many people have come and gone but I've had the opportunity to meet some truly gifted individuals. Due to logistical reasons during pre-production, the most important part of any film — the casting — was left to me since the official director and production staff were out of the country, securing locations in Kenya. This included the key characters of Ali and his parents. As principal photography commenced, the cast members welcomed more involvement and direction from me in order to deliver the required gravitas so I found myself conducting rehearsals, readings and essentially co-directing.

Not many in India have read *Ode to Lata*. The immigrant experience of Indians overseas is something that has traditionally been looked upon with suspicion in India; did you think that and

the gay angle would have stymied the chances for your book to succeed in a market which must have been of particular interest to you?

Unfortunately, we never attempted to sell the foreign rights for *Ode to Lata* in India partly because we weren't sure publishers had an appetite for such a stark novel on Indian gay sexuality. And there was no way that I was going to change a single word of it, to censor it in any way. But this is something we are eagerly trying to secure now and obviously, the timing couldn't be better. My agent, Deborah Ritchken is working on some possibilities of releasing *Ode to Lata* in India. So let's hope some passionate, groundbreaking editors are reading this.

Does being cast in the 'South Asian gay writer' mould, define you or limit you?

Ode to Lata broke many milestones including being the first South Asian gay novel to be reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* and to be excerpted in a national American gay magazine (*Genre*). I embrace these achievements proudly and am happy to be identified as a South Asian gay writer. The only time I feel the categorization may be limiting is when gay books are segregated from mainstream titles. The rave reviews and fans of the book now include both gay and straight demographics which reinforces its universal themes so my second novel, *The Two Krishnas*, is being marketed very differently without compromising on its strong themes of sexuality.

Assuming An Auteurship A light moment as Dhalla directs Sachin Bhatt (Ali) for a pivotal scene on the sets of *The Ode*.



“If you explore Sufi Islam, which has come under much attack from fundamentalists, you will find Rumi’s breathtaking poetry for Shams, which many have tried to disguise simply as a metaphor for the love of God. While Rumi eventually surrendered himself to God, we cannot deny that what Rumi felt for Shams was essentially the love of one man for another.”



Your new book seems like such an interesting title, and Krishna is almost the *de facto* deity of choice for so many Hindu gay men; the mischievous cowherd and eternal lover persona makes him a gay icon *extraordinaire* almost, it would be interesting to know how you have woven the Krishna mythology into your book.

The Two Krishnas is a novel about infidelity in modern day Los Angeles, narrated from the perspective of the wife — a beautiful Indian woman named Pooja. Her husband, Rahul takes a Muslim lover, Atif, an illegal immigrant who is old enough to be their son. This turns her world upside-down and compels her to question not just her marriage to a man she has followed to the ends of the earth and considers a god-incarnate, but also her faith. Ultimately, we are able to know each of them intimately and realize that they are all looking for the same thing — love, acceptance and truth. The novel uses Sufism and Hindu mythology as a backdrop to explore the pitfalls of blind faith and the duality in the people we love and the gods we worship (hence the title). So, yes, there is definitely a powerful gay element in this novel but it's also about universal truths. This book demanded years of research into sacred yet obscure texts, including Sufi poetry and the *Puranas*, texts in which gay sexuality was celebrated.

Coming from a family of converted Hindus, I wasn't ever orthodox. We speak Kutchi and Gujarati at home. Many of our religious hymns reference Hindu deities like Krishna and refer to the *avatars*. My own spiritual practice observes all schools of thought including Hinduism and Buddhism; which is why it was very important to me to treat this novel as a celebration of the lesser known but more progressive aspects of both Hinduism and Islam. Krishna, I think is appealing not just to gay Hindus, but also to people in general because he is the most accessible and least sanctimonious of the deities. The *makhan chor*, the philandering herdsman, the supportive friend on any battlefield — Krishna represents human aspects that are recognizable within us.

As a Muslim man, did you have to go through some struggle to reconcile being gay with your religion?

I was very fortunate to have learnt early on, that equilibrium in life was crucial to both material and spiritual development. My mother who had much difficulty accepting my sexuality, was also the parent who was able to demonstrate that there doesn't need to be a conflict between the secular and spiritual as long as one lives honestly and shirks any kind of deception that compromises morality. An individual's relationship with God hinges upon their relationship with themselves. If you believe in a God that has a sense of humor (How can He *not*? He created us!), a God who's all about unconditional love, then I have to believe He doesn't really care who I'm screwing. Ultimately, all religious texts are malleable and one should not feel oppressed by somebody else's interpretation of his faith, and instead try and carve a practice that is more intuitive, less dogmatic. Did you know, for example, that nowhere in the Quran is homosexuality expressly condemned? Much of oppressive Islam comes not from the Quran but from the *hadiths* of the Prophet, basically hear-say that



Sakina Jaffrey plays mother to Sachin Bhatt (Ali) in *The Ode*.

wasn't even recorded during the life of the Prophet. And if you explore Sufi Islam, which has come under much attack from fundamentalists, you will find Rumi's breathtaking poetry for Shams, which many have tried to disguise simply as a metaphor for the love of God. While Rumi eventually surrendered himself to God, we cannot deny that what Rumi felt for Shams was essentially the love of one man for another.

You've rubbed shoulders with contemporary Bollywood celebrities in the recent Engendered film festival. Have you watched the Indian films showcased in the festival, like *Dostana* for instance?

I do realize that many in the community may have reservations about *Dostana* but I have tremendous respect for Tarun because he's done something different. While many within the community are eager and ready for something progressive (and for them, we have my film), it's important to remember that the masses must be fed in tiny morsels otherwise we run the risk of alienating them altogether. What we have to ensure is that independent filmmakers push the envelope further and gay sexuality is not always mined for just comedy or clichéd AIDS dramas. Even in Hollywood, when you look back, with the exception of films like *Making Love* (progressive but still a box office flop) and *Cruising* (that vilified gays as serial killers), most mainstream gay movies were at first comedies or offered camp value. So, as a first step, Tarun and leading actors like John and Abhishek deserve kudos for at least opening the door for other filmmakers in Bollywood to take the issue further. ⇨INTERVIEWED BY VIKRAM PHUKAN

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Dhalla with Anil Bhardwaj and Sachin Bhatt at the Engendered festival.