

## **Lambi Daud Ka Ghoda**

-Owais Khan

I have often wondered about life. Mine in particular. And never have I reached a final, decisive, complete conclusion. Every conclusion has been, if I use a charitable term, ambivalence itself. Right from the day I entered college, with a clear mandate to 'slog my balls off' in order to get a branch change to Electronics from Civil Engineering. To this day when I sit wondering whether pushing for the first LGBT Walk in India was the right thing to do.

I have often thought about whether it is better to be out in the open, and be suspected about noblest of your intentions; face difficulties with families and extended families and jobs and housing and what not. Or simply gel with the existing realities of the world, and get your 'fill' surreptitiously.

Ever since I have been open about my sexuality, I have found that my work performance has gradually improved. I have become more productive for this World. And as a business associate of mine pointed out a few days back- it is one's duty to produce Wealth. 'Wealth', with a capital 'W': not just dollars and cents and rupees, or that much worth of material production. But Wealth, as in, anything of value.

Times have changed. Plato called the same thing, 'Good'. Post Keynes and post Gates, we find 'Good' and 'Wealth' synonymous. Economists even chose to abduct the word 'good' to denote the stuff you do not need and will never use, but still buy with the money that is not your own, in the process screwing up the Earth that is not yours, leaving the crap to be cleaned up by those that you do not care about and will never know- merely in order to impress the people you do know but do not care about... ..but that is another story.

Back to my sexuality: I have found that being open about my sexuality has had a liberating effect on me. I am able to give more than what I earlier could: to my family, to my job, to my friends, to the movement, to the World at large. Perhaps, only because I have to spend less time inventing a fake life behind which I could convincingly hide my sexuality. Perhaps, also because I am much happier with myself and I can now look at battles further afield. Perhaps, I can now play more, and, yes, lose more, but on the whole, win more.

But... the ambivalence once more: My life is not everyone's life; and everyone need not find their results, the same. And therefore, I can not recommend everyone to come with her or his sexuality, or anything else, out in the open. So should I be taking a political stand on my sexuality, homo, or otherwise?

But take a stand, one must. And push for what one considers 'Good' and 'Right', one must. For if one does not do that, why does one live a life at all? For me everything

must lead to something else. Life must lead to more life; happiness in life must lead to more happiness in more lives.

Hence, the need to look for greater happiness, first closer home, then further afield. So what's my home? What's my family? My only dog has just died. And my mom has just colluded with a religious cousin of mine to get me more religious. Poor thing- she will never realize that my religion is not one with a name; with one or several prophets; or gods or God or sons of the Same; but simply a series of phrases sounding like mildly philosophic bumper stickers. One of them being, 'More happiness and more love for more people'.

And that is where my quest for more happiness for my family starts. I guess I am getting senile. I have started seeing the variegated world of queers as my family. And none, I see are happier than those who are out, in varying degrees. Well, at least, one suspects, those are the ones who are using condoms!

So what could I do to make these members of my family happier? Make them more out? Seemed to be the logical answer. Several flaws to that answer, I am sure. But being comfortable enough to get a potential partner home openly is much better than furtive sex in the loos, and the *jhaadaN pahaadaN*. You could possibly also set up home with one or more of those, but only those you can comfortably bring home.

So from first principles then, it makes sense to be out. With informed consent, of course.

Further, I believe that it is the job of every worker to make himself irrelevant; every manager must ensure that his department functions so well that they do not need him anymore. Every teacher must make sure that all his pupils eventually know more than he does. Of course, yes. How else will we regularly produce a Newton, who claims to be so tall, only because he stands on the shoulders of giants?

So also, must endeavour everyone, who is a full-time or part-time civil rights or social or whatever activist.

Being a lesbian or gay or whatever should be as simply commonplace and irrelevant as being *x*-handed: Not worth a second thought. 'Is', and not 'should be', must be the operative phrase.

How do we get around to doing it? I am sure there are several ways. Judicial action as has been initiated by ABVA in India. Repeal of Section 377 will go a long way in legitimizing our existence. Legislative action that ensures equal rights for people of alternate sexuality could also work wonders. Hence the need of petitioning the Parliament. We are a long way from winning that, for the Nation's reps and elders are both equally innocent of our concern. But Indian society and polity, as inward looking as it is, will find it necessary to see their daughters and sons and close relatives and friends and esteemed colleagues come out as lesbians and gays before it accords them a right to their own lives.

Which to my mind leaves us only one course of solid action. Visibility for as many of us, as are willing to be seen in the paradigm of ordinary, successful and happy women and men who are clear and open about their sexuality. And that started my personal crusade of being visible as a gay person in any forum where it was warranted.

I started the crusade by testing waters. Having recently been asked to take up the responsibilities of the new baby, LGBT India, came in handy. For those who do not know about LGBT India, this is a communication collective formulated during the 1999 conference at Hyderabad, YaariaN '99. It was the mandate of LGBT India to ensure that all LGBT groups and individuals within India start talking the same language, if not the same dialect.

I saw as a major activity, an annual conference of all LGBT groups and individuals once a year. Humsafar Trust, Mumbai, had already volunteered to do that for LGBT India in the year 2000. But the next year was much too far away. We needed some more activities in the interregnum. A parade or a march seemed a very good activity to ensure visibility.

My touring as well as transferable job proved to be a major boon here. I sounded out several groups while jetting around for my company. From cautious optimism to enthusiasm, I encountered the complete range of reactions. Calcutta, Bangalore and Mumbai showed interest in hosting the event. However, in the end, Ranjan's belief in the concept won out, for he and Pawan were the only team who came up with a proper action plan.

Once the date was decided, a contact and follow up plan was put in action. I called as many people, as many times as I could on the telephone, without getting it disconnected for overuse! Several people did not like the concept. Others disagreed with the venue. Some opposed the dates. A lot of others said it is fine, but they would rather that someone else walked for them. Some could not get the tickets. Some, of course, were very willing to be a part of it, and made their arrangements in the face of all kinds of odds. A few did not have the money. I decided to sponsor those from my own funds. However, towards the end, Lesbian and Gay Solidarity and India Fund came forward to reimburse me.

The long and short of it was that we went into it, some with enthusiasm, others with trepidation and doubt. The Walk was executed as per the plan rolled out by Counsel Club and Integration. A total of fifteen persons turned up at the venue on the day of The Walk: seven from Calcutta, eight from other cities, including New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Darjeeling and Kurseong. Hats off to these people. Of these, ten were okay with being seen in the media. For the benefit of posterity, I must record their names: Ranjan, Pawan, Niloy, Aditya, Navarun, Ashok, Jasmir, Nitin, Satish, and yours truly.

A major effort was made personally by me to get some lesbians and parents of an LGBT person in. However, for a variety of reasons this did not happen. Several calls were

made to contact lesbians as also gays from smaller cities. We now await that constituency's appearance in the next year's Walk.

One of the friends offered his unoccupied house for housing the out-station folks. That however, did not work out and five of us had to move to a hotel at the last minute. Hollywood Hotel was a dirty and unkempt hotel on the third floor of a very 'Calcutta' run down building. The room rent was too high. The bath was dingy and smelly. The bed-sheets had not been changed for the last fifteen occupants, and one could easily spy some telltale stains. We did not even have running water for the first two days! The reason we chose it is still a mystery to me. But there are some pointers, though. It was very close to the venue of The Walk. It had Western commodes: some of us queens did not want stretch marks in the wrong places.

And of course, the house keeping cum room service was absolutely wonderful. Nineteen years old, friendly, slim, with an infectious smile; he had all the ingredients to bowl a queen over. Pintu was wonderfully helpful too. He got two bucketful of water every day for us. And he even changed the sheets for us. Pity he could speak only Bangla. More than one of us had eyes only for him.

The appointed day, Friday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1999, dawned to find my stomach full of fluttering butterflies. How many walkers will turn up? Will *any* walkers turn up? Will the T-shirts be ready in time? Will we have a hassle with the police? Will we get arrested? What will the media's reaction be? I was to deliver a presentation on the following Monday to some key business associates. Will they see the reports and refuse to take me seriously? Will I still keep the job on Monday to even get to the stage of addressing them?

One scared fairy I was, that morning. We were to have assembled at the venue at 8:30 am. It was 8:30 am and we were still at the hotel. Neither Pawan nor Ranjan had landed up to escort us there. I called Pawan's place. He said *he* was not supposed to pick us up anyway. So what do we do? How do we reach the place? Some meticulous directions and a few minutes later, we managed to reach the venue.

Nobody. Nobody turned up till about 8:55 AM. And then one after another walkers started trickling in. Even Ranjan arrived with the T-shirts. Then came the Times of India photographer. The journalist was still awaited. She had promised that she would also walk a short distance with us. Whether in the line of duty, or out of solidarity I know not. She did come, more importantly, she did allow me to persuade her into wearing the identifying T-shirt and she did walk with us for the first lap. Kudos to her spirit. Irrespective of the reason she walked with us, she did the right thing. Of course, she got my name wrong in her report, but that's okay; most people anyway do.

We walked the first lap on the perimeter of the Park Circus maidan. We took a short cut somewhere along the road, but that was okay, it was the spirit and the symbolism that mattered. We finished that part in about half an hour and got together under the same pavilion where we had first met that morning. From there we split up in two groups.

One went to North Calcutta, the other to South Cal. We were to meet back under the same pavilion between 2 and 2:30 PM.

The group to which I was assigned walked down to a lady's apartment that runs a feminist organization, and contrary to several other feminist activists is an empathizer of lesbian and gay causes. Since there were eight of us, we thought it right to distribute the visits amongst us, and at no one place should we all crowd in at the same time. So while some waited in the parking lot below, three of us went up. The lady was quite upset that we came in late. She had some other appointment in a short while. And then she proceeded to tell us things we knew, and those we did not care to know, for most part of an hour. With a very keen perception, she never noticed that we were getting increasingly ill at ease, wanting to get back to our work: walking.

Mercifully, the person at the next stop was not at home and we left our leaflets and decided to go to the next stop. That one was pretty far, so we took a couple of taxis. On the way, enjoying the spectacle of young men bathing in frilly loincloths and frillier towels, we reached our destination. From then on, my memory is rather hazy. My walking shoes, which I bought from Redmond, Washington, were proving what they were- *sasta maal*, and I could barely walk. What with the extra 30 kgs. that I had packed in and around my midriff, during the last several months.

It was sultry as only Cal can be, and not until 1:30 did it occur to us that we could stop somewhere and buy a few bottles of water. Many of us had our kerchiefs so overloaded with sweat, that *unke nichodna pad raha tha!* Finally, somewhere along the line, we stopped, grabbed a quick bite and a lot of water, and kept going.

We were to have visited some thirteen places. We decided to drop two. But not before we had managed to visit the West Bengal Human Rights Commission office. That was a learning in itself. It was just like any other Indian Government office, only cleaner. Keep in mind though, that almost as a rule, the more an Indian Government office is used, the dirtier it is.

We wanted to meet the Commissioner, and when he was not available, we tried the Deputy Commissioner, who was also not available. We then gunned for the Commissioner's personal assistant, who was also not available. Ultimately, we were asked to meet the PRO, Public Relations Officer, who, surprise surprise, *was* available. Though, of course, he was also in a meeting, and we had to wait for almost half an hour till we could meet him.

The meeting was interesting. If he caught on who we were, and what we represented, he did not let us in on that secret. But the moment we mentioned that we were doing a press conference that evening at 4:30 PM, he caught hold of the thread he understood well. He said, "Oh we are also doing a press conference at the same time today. What a pity." What exactly he meant, probably only a person with IQ and EQ much higher than that of mine can fathom. Perhaps, he meant that they wanted to come and join us in addressing

the press, and were interested in supporting our cause while sharing the podium with us. Perhaps...

Perhaps, that is only my dream. Perhaps, that is only *our* dream. Perhaps, that is our *only* dream.

We visited the office of Prajaak, an NGO, which does some work in LGBT arena also. We visited other NGOs and CBOs such as CINI ASHA and Thought shop Foundation. On the way, we got separated and subsequently, re-united. Finally, the heavens decided to give our Walk a last dramatic flourish, it started pouring. We managed to devise a strategy by which we could visit the remaining places and yet reach back to the pavilion in the Park Circus maidan in time.

The other group managed to visit the Family Welfare and Health department and other distinguished supporters before they too came back in the pouring rain. We decided to regroup at Hotel Hollywood instead of the pavilion. I stayed back at the pavilion to inform the remaining guys and had a fun time with them, during the wade back to the hotel, all through the knee-deep filth of river Park Circus.

Soon after lunch, Ashok and I worked on the press release, which through my shortsightedness was not done earlier. Pawan rushed with it to the printers and got copies done on the way to the press conference venue. The rains had thrown everything out of gear and Ashok and I reached the venue late. The reporters were already restless. They requested for a fake walk just outside the venue for the photo-op. We decided to oblige.

The actual press conference did not go quite as per script, but in the end quite a few of us faced the cameras, the reporters and answered their questions. Most of the reporters also did one-on-one sessions with us. We ended up finishing with the last reporter by about 8 PM or so. After a small chat session we returned back to the hotel for a little bit of celebration.

Unfortunately, that part of the day did not go well at all. We could not find a booze shop open by the time we reached the hotel. Personally, I was much too drained to worry about that, and amidst nightmares of pink-slips woke up the next day to find some good coverage in the Times of India and the Asian Age.

We did manage to do what looked impossible just a week earlier. In the final analysis though, whether The Walk will matter or not, one can never say. But again, in the final analysis, will *anything* at all matter? Life goes on without individuals, without whole classes of people, without species, even. And in fact, the World and Universe at large will go on without life itself. But if one were to look at the World from the standpoint of the lookers, the human beings, specifically our types from this part of the World, then yes, I guess, history *was* made in the muddy environs of the Park Circus maidan.

Things will not change overnight. But little by little, we can keep chipping away at the huge mountain that is our society, and at some point in time, we *will* find that we have

shaped our niche, a little like the way we wanted it. Some said fifteen is too little a number to begin with. But consider this: before The Walk, the gay people who were publicly open about their (homo)sexuality within India were countable on the fingers of one hand. Now at least one needs two hands to count them.

The next year, I am aiming for a three-figure presence during the Walk. And then, I am sure, we will have lesbians and transgender folks and parents of LGBT people and friends and small towners and empathizers who are themselves neither L nor G nor B nor T. The key here is consistency. In this world, only that individual or community succeeds, which can keep playing, despite failures. Consider these 'successful' people:

- Albert Einstein: Flunked Maths.
- Thomas Edison: Teacher called him a dunce. Failed over 10,000 times in trying to invent the light bulb
- Henry Ford: Bankrupt at age 40
- R N Macy: Failed seven times before his store succeeded
- Bill Gates: His college adviser told him that if he drops out he would never get a job.

Well, in that last case, the adviser was factually correct! Be that as it may, success comes only to that person and only that community, which is consistent, which is a *Lambi Daud Ka Ghoda...*

So folks, start planning, the next Walk will have at least a hundred people. If you missed the first chance to be a part of history in the making, do not lose the next. The second Walk is the last Walk I shall be calling people to. I am sure I will not need to call people to the third Walk. It will happen on its own. Consider this-

MaiN akela hi chala tha jaanibe manzil magar  
Log saath aate gaye aur karvaaN banta gaya

I embarked alone on my journey - People kept joining me and we became a caravan.

Pictures:

