

CULTURAL



Photograph by Ojas Kolhekar

THE SAMARKAND AT THE TAJ SERVED AS THE PERFECT RENDEZVOUS POINT FOR MAYA RAAJ AND CULTURE AFICIONADO PARMESH SHAHANI

Six feet tall and fashionably clad, Parmesh Shahani saunters in for tea at the Samarkand. We have both just finished visiting the Elle Carnival for Cancer that happens every year at the Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai. Bang on time and ready to talk is the Culture Ambassador that works tirelessly for Godrej at Vikhroli, and it's not just that he is a dear friend of that progressive family, but a true patron of the arts.

Early Years

On a train from Pakistan in 1947, Subhash Shahani and his family had an immigrant's story. Not having much, living in the camps that the Sindhi's used as makeshift homes, they grew and prospered. Hyderabad, Pakistan was originally their home; Colaba, Mumbai did just as well. Working in India for a while, the Shahani's moved to the Middle East for a more lucrative working lifestyle.

While his upbringing took him to Oman, Muscat, Dubai and Bahrain, Parmesh completed his schooling at St Josephs,

GURU



LIVING A PURPOSEFUL LIFE, DOING MEANINGFUL WORK, NOT FOR JUST FOR ONESELF BUT TO BUILD A GAY FRIENDLY BETTER INDIA HAS BEEN PARMESH'S GOAL

Colaba. Now, at 39, he is very much the dapper guy, so I quiz him on his marital status. We both laugh albeit a little nervously at his answer, "One can't really be gay and married in India now can they?" Candor and humor writ all over this thinking individual's face. "I really would like to have a commitment ceremony with a partner that I love," he continues. I like his honesty.

Career Chart

Parmesh got his BCOM degree from Sydenham out of the way due to parental pressure, though he wanted to dabble in the arts. He had always known that he wanted to be involved in the media one way or the other. One day, he walked into Bachi Karkaria's office, who at the time was editing Metropolis (the Saturday edition).

Always big on honesty he whined whimsically to her about her editing that week and knocked her socks off. She immediately offered him a job (the Youth Section) thinking he had an attitude. Becoming an Editor at 18, he used the newspaper at the time (in 1997) to build an online/offline community of readers. It became a live newspaper section that created workshops and events.

Understanding the power of internet related media, Parmesh founded the first Indian youth website - Fresh Lime Soda in 1999. An interesting time, since he was only



20, and also part of the business development for Sony's Indian Television Channel Operations. But does the bubble really last that long? It burst, putting a whole lot of people out of business; India was not ready for it as yet.

In the meantime, he graduated, helped put Elle magazine out there, and worked on a feature film with director Nagesh Kukunoor (Rockford). "I was practically the slave on set," he laughs. But through all that, over 3 years, he agrees he grew from a boy to a man, hiring and firing as the youngest CEO.

And with this growth came the decision to reinvent himself by taking a break from his career and going

back to school (MIT) to do a Masters in Comparative Media Studies (a rare programme that takes only 12 people every year). Having been a complete nerd and a high achiever all his life, Parmesh felt he owed himself that (2 years). He succeeded in getting himself a full scholarship and a teaching assistantship.

Completely happy in his surroundings, Parmesh was on the Presidential search committee and organized the first ever South Asian LGBT Gay Lesbian Film Festival (2004). His Master's thesis was one of the few that came out of the programme and actually became a book. A huge achievement! Knowing full well that he believed in excelling, no matter what he did in life, I prodded about his

book - Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India. It was released in 2008 all over the world and is an academic book featured under Anthropology.

Soon after, he set up a Think Tank with his mentor, thesis advisor, and media guru Henry Jenkins as a research manager. Another feather in his cap! But always one to shake things up, Parmesh, over dinner one night in Boston with Anand Mahindra, agreed to join him at Mahindra and Mahindra. Anand had a vision of transporting the company from an inward looking company to an outward looking conglomerate. Parmesh helped the Mahindra's set up a venture fund that invested in other companies and ideas.



At the Godrej headquarters - Godrej One

Photograph by Ojas Koini

Post 2009, life took off in a bunch of directions for Parmesh. But for this young gentleman, living a purposeful life meant doing meaningful work, not just for oneself, but to build a gay friendly better India. And all this comes from a deep sense of nationalism. Since the release of his book, a lot of places invited him to come in and complete his PhD in Communications. He decided, finally, to go to U Penn. He was chosen to be a TED Fellow the same year.

But, the death of a close friend made him change a few of his decisions. He decided that all he wanted to do was to build connections with people and things. Very sure, he came right back because he felt India was his *karmabhoomi*. Though he was interested in academics he wanted to use it in the larger picture. And Parmesh is doing exactly that with his time for the last five years at Godrej.

With the Godrej India Culture Lab coming into existence, the word culture took on a new meaning. Its premise is that a new type of global institution was needed to study India, not in a university per se but at an intersection of business, art and the creative worlds. Here, they attract the world's greatest challengers who come from different fields. It is known all over the world.

Nisa Godrej absolutely got his idea and the next thing he knew, she helped him realize his dream even with the first conference they organized on "Urbanization" where they showed it through various different lenses. Now, they have regular performances, book readings, conferences, film shows, art pop-ups, talks, lectures, and plays. Everything is done online and they have a major following. All this happens at the Godrej campus in Vikhroli, where auditoriums and other spaces are allotted accordingly. The Lab actually serves as a catalyst for



GAY BOMBAY WAS RELEASED IN 2008 ALL OVER THE WORLD AND IT TURNED INTO AN ACADEMIC BOOK FEATURING UNDER ANTHROPOLOGY

many different things, majorly an archive of sorts for India.

So, Vice President - Godrej Industries reads his personal card. But what does Parmesh have in mind for the future? Well, he works on all kinds of innovations and future oriented things for the group, be it in HR, design, products, digital or going global. He actually just works with the family in redesigning the future for the group, anything with a long time orientation - like where they are going to be in 15 years from now and how they are going to get there.

Parmesh also does a lot of recruiting for the company, scouring the MBA schools all over India. A lot of personal recognition has been coming his way as he was chosen last year as

a Yale World fellow and spent 5 months on the campus as part of the Leadership Development Programme. This year, he has been selected for the World Economic Forum. Additionally, he works with the government, NGOs, and global institutions like the World Bank, the UN, and Carnegie Endowment. He wears so many hats that he can leave one confused. "I pretty much change the way companies think of themselves," he retorts.

There's a side to Parmesh I discover, that is not surprising, as he goes on to tell me how he is one of India's foremost avant-garde collectors of art. He spoke at the Sothebys Panel on how we can widen the eco system while collecting art, creating new models for how art can be sold etc. He collects the works of artists like Sudharshan Shetty, Aditi Singh, Venkana, Aradhana Sait, Shilpa Gupta, and Anita Dubey. Edgy and contemporary is his choice. And yes, they are planning art residencies and spaces that blur the boundaries between science and art at the Culture Lab.

He has so many roles and so many reasons to fulfill each of them that one can only laud this 'Change Agent' as he appropriately labels himself. He reads, he writes, he curates, he organizes leadership programmes, he is a visiting professor, and an affiliated scholar at MIT. But he does see himself in the government in the next 10 years, maybe the UN even, leading a more policy driven public life!

And his perspective on being Sindhi? "It's really not a physical Sindhi state that we miss. Being Sindhi today is a prime example of how we can be global successfully, and we have done exactly that for so many years and so well!"