

## DJ RITU

Clare (C) interviewing Ritu (R)

### Extract 1: 5.08 – 13.25

FIRST LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP. CALLING LESBIAN LINE AND FINDING OUT ABOUT DISCUSSION GROUP AT GAYS THE WORD. FINDING MY COMMUNITY.

R: You couldn't kind of google being gay, you know? Erm ... I think the feelings of being ... of certainly knowing that I was different erm ... on a lesbian and gay basis were very ... became much more prominent obviously from, you know, adolescence, sort of sixteen to eighteen, nineteen. Erm, and at times I was pretty unhappy about it, and I started going out with boys as my friends were. It was partly about trying to ... well, feel attractive, you know, know that you're wanted, flattered and just again to fit in and perhaps try and create some kind of smokescreen ... um ... As a friend pointed out to me a number of years later, a lesbian friend, she said "You know, Ritu, you never look anyone in the eyes. Why is that?" And I thought about it and I realised that actually through my secondary school years I'd gotten very used to not looking people in the eyes because I was worried that people might see through and work out I was gay! And so, um ... and after this friend did point it out I ... I changed a lot after that, in terms of making sure that I did make eye contact with people and feeling more confident to do so. But by that point I was out on the big wide lesbian and gay scene.

So what happened in that interim period was I went to Chelsea School of Arts after finishing secondary school, and that's where I met my first erm female relationship. So the boys were still kind of there on the side, you know, there was a boyfriend and you know, but somehow there was this thing that was developing between myself and another arts student and ... and I hoped beyond hope that it would really become something, become a reality, you know? Because we were spending a lot of time together and, you know, there was this ... a closeness, and just as I left Chelsea, yeah we were very much, we very much got into a relationship. It was very difficult for her, um ... I think it was difficult for both of us. We were living in Chelsea in a bedsit, well two bed sits there, just off the Kings Road, and erm, she was Irish Catholic, and with my family being Indian, you know, it was very much a secret.

We didn't go out to places, we didn't know there were places to go to. We thought we were the only ... now we were not the only one, we were the only couple in the world! Apart from Quentin Crisp and people like him, and I remember we went to go and watch *My Beautiful Launderette* when that came out, and it was shown at er, one of the special cinemas in Chelsea, and it was just amazing to have any kind of representation of self and reaffirmation at that time.

And after ... we were together for about two, two and a half years. She ... we split up. I think for her the guilt, the Catholic guilt became too much, and ... there I was left bereft and lonely and

isolated again, and that kind of forced me to go out and seek a lesbian and gay scene. So, what I did was I phoned London Lesbian Line. I think I was ... I bought Time Out or City Limits magazine. Lesbian Line was listed in there, in the lesbian and gay section and I phoned them, and a very nice woman at the other end of the phone said "You're not the only one and hey, you know, have you thought about going to any clubs?" and I was like "No! ... I'm scared ... because it will be full of lesbians ... and I'd be on my own." And she said "Look," she said "You know, a lot of people are frightened when they go, but there is also a lesbian discussion group and maybe that might be easier for you to go to." So I took down the details and ... erm ... around ... just before I went there, I did actually make a very brave trip to the Ace of Clubs in Piccadilly, and a straight friend went with me, a straight female friend, and er, it was actually a very empty night at The Ace of Clubs! Darn it! So, er, you know, but wow, it was like this underground world with a glitter ball and great music and people dancing and ... and all women ... different types of women all looking, you know, from one end of the range to the other. Suits to dresses.

And I think it was probably a few days after that, because, yeah, that would have been on a Saturday, I think then on the Wednesday I then went off to the lesbian discussion group at Gays the Word bookshop in Russell Square. Walked round the block a few times, finally forced myself to go in, pretended to look at books. Eventually somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said "Are you here for the lesbian discussion group?" And I was like "Why are you asking?" She said "Because we thought you might want to know and it's at the back of the shop, come with me." And I said "All right then" and I followed her and wow, there was just ... wow, I mean it was ... and I'm saying wow, but you know, it was maybe fifteen women, you know, but that was like fifteen more than I'd ever seen before, you know, in one space, in anywhere and not on TV, or you know?

I was kind of struck firstly by how normal they all seemed in terms of conversation. After a little while I realised that almost everybody was wearing what looked like a cross, dangling from either an ear or their necks, and I thought "Well, so they're all kind of Christians as well. Ah. Ok." And then after that we all went to a pub on the Euston Road, and that's where there was a lot more conversation and I, you know, then they were saying "Why don't you come with us to this pub that's happening on Friday? And another club on Saturday" You know?

So I started to make friends and it was amazing and at one point I plucked up the courage to ask one of them about the crosses, you know, and I said "So, is it ... are all of you Christian?" and she said "What do you mean?" And I said "You're all wearing ..." She said "Oh this is a labyris, darling." And I said "Well, what's a labyris"? You know? Of course the following week I bought one myself at Gays the Word bookshop when I went straight back to the discussion group. So this whole new world sort of opened up for me and erm, and er ... I think it was, it was, you know, just not long after that I went on my first Pride march. This would have been 1985, erm ... and how liberating it was, I mean just ... to feel like I belonged somewhere, and that I wasn't alone anymore, you know? It felt like I had friends, I had a community and I ... and they

understood me. Or they understood aspects of me that my straight friends didn't understand, and vice versa, you know? And then also there was this whole world opening up in terms of being able to perhaps ... be able to have relationships ... Yeah. So that was incredible.

## **Extract 2: 31.00 – 34.38**

### SHAKTI – THE FIRST SOUTH ASIAN LESBIAN AND GAY GROUP

R: In 1988 erm, a group was set up called Shakti, er which ... or Shakti, which was the first South Asian lesbian and gay group, and I was invited to come to the very first meeting for that group. It was held at London Friend in Kings Cross ... Caledonian Road, and again it was that, you know, Eureka moment of sitting there with nineteen other lesbian and gay Asian people, South Asian people. It was like "Oh. my God" You know, "Wow, wow, wow!" And just ... it was thrilling, absolutely thrilling 'cos now there was an understanding not just in terms of sexuality, but in terms of culture and race and colour and ... you know?

And Shakti went on to become a very, very, important organisation erm ... I became part of the management committee. It grew from the initial nineteen people to becoming you know more like 600 people, and ... fairly ... when I say fairly rapidly, over a period of years, we er ... we ended up, or we decided to be featured on certain TV programmes. At that time there was a one weekly Asian kind of entertainment magazine programme on television. It was called Network East, and erm, we went on that programme, and out of all of us at that early stage there was only myself and Sunil Gupta, the photographer, who felt out enough to be able to go on the show. And so we went on it and we flew the flag and basically sort of said "Right, we're ... we're South Asian, we're lesbian and gay, we're here, and there's others of you out here." And, you know, we talked about erm, the difficulties within our own community, within the South Asian community, around homophobia, around heterosexism, so that we could try and challenge some of those ... some of those prejudices, and erm, and also to send out a message to other people that might be gay so that they could sort of ... they wouldn't feel like *they* were the only one, you know?

And of course, yes, you know, South Asian lesbian and gay people started, you know, coming out of the closet, and out in their droves, you know, and crawling out from under woodwork and away from oppression and Shakti, then, by the end of that first year, held its first disco which was created specifically to raise funds for the organisation. Inevitably, I was asked to DJ for that ... erm and so that happened at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre upstairs, Christmas that year. Or New Years that year. New Year's Eve. I don't know. December 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, something like that. Amazing. 250 people. Mainly South Asian.