

# A QueerInk Conversation

With **Nandita**Das and **Chitra**Palekar

*In a conversation at Das's home in Worli, the two long-time friends and colleagues spoke with **Queer Ink Editor Minal Hajratwala** and **Publisher Shobhna S. Kumar** about their work and perspectives as activists, as artists, and as allies.*

**QI:** *How and when did you first become aware of LGBT issues?*

**Nandita:** For me, *Fire* was really the turning point. When I read the script, I thought, “Wow, I come from a fairly liberal family, yet we don’t talk about [LGBT issues], so it’s definitely something that I want to be a part of.” But at that time, it was just a story, a powerful story.

The real journey of understanding and sensitivity was after *Fire*, when it became a controversy. There was a whole range of opinions, from the people who hated the film because “this is not a part of Indian culture,” to the people who were more involved with these issues saying, “Why did these two women have to be in bad marriages to fall in love?”

I saw the best people, very educated, so-called progressive, urban people, who were very judgmental. I started taking up the cause almost by default, because if somebody says something that's really scandalous and very inhuman around you, then you feel like you have to defend it.

**Chitra:** A few years before *Fire* came out, my daughter came out to me. She said she was a lesbian, and I accepted it immediately, but I didn't know a thing. I knew about LGBTs, but only through some festival films or when I went abroad and saw openly gay people. When my daughter came out to me — that was also the moment when I realised how ignorant I was.

I told her that I did not want to remain ignorant. So, for me, it was a very conscious attempt to know this world. Basically, I did it through reading fiction as well as non-fiction, and also through meeting my daughter's friends, talking to them, and checking out whether I had any deep, unknown prejudices.

Nandita just said, "We were from a progressive family and yet we never talked about it." It was the same thing with us. I felt very upset that we talked about everything in the world and —

**Nandita:** And somehow this was just sidelined like garbage.

**Chitra:** Yes, you know we talked about political and social issues, censorship, everything under the sun. We were taking part in protests, fighting against the government, and this was one issue which we had never talked about, our friends had never talked about — and that's what my daughter pointed out when she came out to me.

**QI:** *How does the work you do on other activist causes in India relate to your speaking about LGBT issues? What connections do you see between forms of oppression and marginalisation?*

**Chitra:** I remember talking to a person who is very much respected in the women's movement. I asked her, "When you are talking on women's issues, do you also include lesbians?"

And she said to me, "Oh no, it is an elitist issue, you see.

I mean, I understand, but we can't really include that, at least at this stage."

**Nandita:** Women's issues in general are things that we don't talk about much. How many perpetrators of rape have actually been convicted? Unfortunately, what happens is that on December 1, people who are HIV positive have to talk about it; then on March 8, women have to take up their issue; on June 5, it's the environmentalists who have to talk. But everything is affecting all of us.

**Chitra:** It's all linked, isn't it?

**Nandita:** The society has a way of dividing everything. To some of my LGBT friends, I sometimes complain, why is it such a closed-door movement? But I also understand that there is a need. When you are being shunned or pushed to the wall, you automatically have a tendency of sticking together. But that also has a disadvantage because it keeps others away.

Then what happens is this fear of the unknown. Initially, in 1996, a lot of people would say to me, "Oh, you've seen a lesbian?" I was like, "Yes, they have got two eyes..." [Laughter.]

**Chitra:** But don't you think it is a nice thing that now, after the Delhi High Court reading down of 377, all these issues are not only coming out more openly but the connections are being seen?

**Nandita:** Absolutely. Films don't create revolution, but I have to say that *Fire*, in a small way, has created that difference. It was the first film that openly talked about the issue. Whether it was a good film or bad film, whether people like it or not is a separate matter, but the fact is, it suddenly brought this subject into the public domain.

**QI:** *It was the first time that we ever saw two women being intimate in India on a big screen.*

**Chitra:** It made a big difference visually.

**Nandita:** In the beginning, people were not even uttering the word lesbian. They would say, "Oh, so, have you known

people with *that kind* of a relationship?” I had English-speaking journalists from major dailies talking to me like that: “So, how did you do *that kind* of a scene?” They would not utter the word “homosexuality”! It was taboo.

**Chitra:** That makes me remember the time when my daughter came out. Only close family and friends knew. I really was keen to know what happens outside that circle. So I used to generally bring up the subject and then see what happened.

Once, when I opened the topic, some people started talking about another girl they knew. They said, “You know, she became a lesbian because she used to sleep in the same bed as her grandmother.”

**Nandita:** What?!

**Chitra:** It showed me the amount of ignorance. And this was from a very educated person. I didn’t know whether to feel happy that I was slightly less ill-informed than them, or to get shocked that even the younger generation had such misconceptions.

**Nandita:** For a while it almost became a little game for me, finding out how progressive a person really was. I would try to see whether a person was judgmental about religion, sexual orientation, race, caste, or whatever. Can you compartmentalise these things? Can you say, “Oh well, I am actually very secular but I have issues with people being lesbians,” or “I am all for LGBTs, but you know these Muslims — they need to get out of this country!” These are the kinds of contradictions I don’t understand.

If you believe that all human beings are equal, at a very basic level, if you generally believe the philosophy of more equality and sensitivity and respect for everyone, then all of this is part of it.

**Chitra:** But you know, Nandita, I had some positive experiences, too.

**Nandita:** Yes, I had positive experiences also. Once I had gone for a haircut. This girl who was Hindi-speaking, very modest background, said, “I am like that. I saw your film, and

I am like that.”

She started talking about her own story, how her parents had thrown her out of the house and she was quite distraught. Her whole household was actually running on her salary. She was so happy that now her parents had accepted her money — but not her.

I said, “You know, that’s a bit strange, why don’t you confront them? They shouldn’t be taking your money.”

She said, “No, at least they are taking my money, maybe one day they will accept me.”

So the little, little stories like this make you feel that you have a platform where you can give a little bit of hope, for all the people who don’t have that voice.

**QI:** *What advice would you give to other people who want to become allies to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people? What have you learned along the way?*

**Nandita:** *Fire* was the beginning of a journey as an actor, as a person for me. I started combining my human rights work with my film work. I didn’t see them as two different streams. *Fire* was so closely linked to my growth as a human being and my own prejudices as well.

**Chitra:** Initially I was not really telling anybody else, except my close family and friends. I told my daughter, “Well, I am giving you this space because this is basically your world, so we’ll go according to your wishes,” and I thought I was giving her a huge space.

But whenever I say something, I have the habit of thinking it over at night, and so I started questioning my own words: What do I mean by “your world”? Am I really giving her space or am I giving that as an excuse? Am I not talking to people because I am really slightly nervous?

I had to go really deep into myself to find out what it was, because I started wondering, would I be as nervous if it was a friend’s child? No! Then I would have been the first one to fight for the child.

As I was having conversations with my daughter, she said that when she came out to her friends, they were absolutely not bothered. They said, “Haan, it’s ok.” They accepted her from the first moment, whatever she was. Even when she was teaching in colleges, she had come out to all her colleagues and all.

She did not come out openly in the media at that time, in case there was discrimination for any reason. She would have had no recourse because she didn’t exist in the law. She was a criminal in those days, prior to 377 being overturned.

All these things were a huge emotional turmoil for me as a parent, and also a growth.

**Nandita:** After *Fire*, sometimes people would say, “Oh, your acting was very convincing, so are you lesbian?” And the first thing I would say was, “No! Do I have to be a lesbian to do a role of a lesbian?”

I was believing I had no issues, but the fact is that I had to prove, “No, no! I am straight.” It was like saying, “Oh, I am not prejudiced, I have many lesbian friends.”

When we say others are prejudiced, it’s not like we are without prejudice. We have contradictions in us as well.

Later that feeling changed, and I would say, “It doesn’t really matter, if I am a lesbian or not, that’s not the point.”

But initially that fear was there, that “I hope they won’t think that I am one of them,” because there was a subtle “them” and “us.”

**Chitra:** That was always haunting me. People always ask — as they must have asked your mother, Nandita — “Oh, so Shalmalee is not yet married?” First question.

I would say no.

“Oh, so she is not going to get married?” Second question.

Then I would say, “No, no, she doesn’t want to get married.” Then I added, “Nowadays, you know how this generation is, they don’t want to get married.”

Sometimes I became bolder and then I would say, because I

am divorced, “You saw what happened to my marriage. Why would she want to get married?” Again, cracking a joke!

It was only after doing it for quite a few times that I started realising that all these are poses, and I am still hiding behind all these answers. I am not saying what I should: “No, she is not getting married because she is not allowed to get married legally.” Then they’ll say, “Why?” And I’ll say, “Because she is a lesbian.” Or the opposite, “Because she is a lesbian, she is not allowed to get married. But she has had a partner for many, many years.”

**Nandita:** Yes, and it’s a better relationship than most marriages.

**Chitra:** See how we have to keep coming out?

**Nandita:** It is not about blaming ourselves or others. We are all conditioned in that same atmosphere. I remember after *Fire*, people would say, “But all these women and young girls are going to become lesbians!” I was like, “Wow, we are going to change sexual orientation through our film?” Then I said, “Then there shouldn’t have been any lesbians in the world because all of us grow up with raja-rani stories.” You know, all our stories are very hetero.

I remember one day we were talking about this with another friend. My husband was there, and later he said: “Tell me honestly. If our son Vihaan one day grows up and he tells you, ‘Mama, I am gay,’ would you accept it? Tell me honestly.”

And I could look straight at his face and say, “Of course I would.”

**Chitra:** Beautiful!

**Nandita:** And I asked myself, did I really just say it to win an argument or to sound progressive, or do I really mean it? And I felt that, actually, I totally meant it. You are really only challenged when it’s up close, because till then you can be politically correct and you can say the right things.

**Chitra:** I am so happy that you said that. Another friend of mine, she said to me, “I saw you on the television program [talking

about Shalmalee] and I think it was very courageous.”

I asked why she thought it was courageous. I mean, where’s the courage? There is no laathi charge or something. She says, “I don’t know if I had children how I would have felt.”

**Nandita:** You have talked to the media more about this in recent times. I was curious to know why now?

**Chitra:** After my daughter came out, she was abroad, and even though I would meet her friends here, I was not part of the LGBT community. So I was feeling quite isolated. So I started coming out to my close friends, my old schoolmates. When they talked about their sons-in-law, their daughters, their grandchildren, I straightaway talked about Shalmalee. And I was so pleasantly surprised that, like Shalmalee’s friends, even my friends didn’t mind me talking openly, and as they listened, I had more and more confidence.

Then somebody came to me and said, “Will you sign this petition?” It was the parents’ petition to the High Court, asking to decriminalise homosexuality. I read the whole thing and signed. Then I was asked whether I would talk publicly and I said I didn’t mind. So that’s how I started talking.

I’ll tell you one thing, though. Once I decided to come out, all my daughter’s friends started really involving me, and I was no longer lonely or in seclusion. I could talk about my ideas as a parent, and they could give me more complete information. I am still learning from them.

**Nandita:** You are inspiring a lot of other parents and family members.

**Chitra:** For the first time, I am getting proactive, not just reacting or saying OK if someone asks me. I have come up with some projects to be available to other parents who want to talk and get support. Ultimately I hope that our society will accept LGBTs. And, I hope that when a child is born, the parents will be open with regard to sexuality.

**QI:** *What did it feel like to represent a group of people that you did not have much knowledge about, especially at the*

**beginning?**

**Nandita:** A few years ago, I was called by an organisation in Bangalore that includes transgender people and transsexuals. This person who called me said, “I am a eunuch, and we are holding this festival called Hijra Habba, and people from all over the South are going to come.”

When I was really small, I remember eunuchs coming to our house when my brother was born, and I remember my mother crying, and somehow that imagery was there. I used to always be very scared of them.

**Chitra:** Same here.

**Nandita:** After I did *Fire*, I got to know more, and I thought I mustn't shy away, but it was still an intellectual thing. Emotionally that shift hadn't really happened.

So when they called me for this, I tried to get out of it. I said, “Look, I really don't know enough about the issues.” I was scared that my own prejudices would be evident on my face, because I have been told that I am extremely transparent.

But this person just kept writing to me, emailing me, and I would think, “Oh, mostly these people are not very affluent or not so educated, is she really writing to me?” So I decided to speak to her again. I don't know, just the way she spoke to me — something happened. I said that I would come. I thought, if nothing else, at least I'll get to know more. I felt a little vulnerable with my own fears.

When I went there, I was staying at a friend's place. They came to receive me, and it was really quite an experience. About six to seven of them came, and I told them, “Look, I am very ignorant. There are lots of things I don't understand, there are lots of myths that have been put in my mind.” I told them about this whole incident, why I was so scared of hijras, and then I asked them tons of silly questions like how does it happen, are you forced by the community, etcetera — and they were so wonderful. They completely treated me like this little child who is asking all these questions, and without any hesitation, they told me everything.

When we went to the Hijra Habba, there were thousands of people. The whole ground was full, and everybody had come out in their splendour. There were lots of men who said they actually have families and they were married with kids and this was the one day of coming out, and I was almost in tears. I was like, “My god, do we really live in a society where people can’t just be themselves?”

I actually got goosebumps because I was seeing how little I knew, and this was ten years after *Fire*. I had no excuse not to know about it, and here I was — somebody who was talking about this issue, who was reasonably nonjudgmental, who was sensitive, and yet I didn’t know.

They had this fashion show, and I went through hundreds of emotions while watching it. I questioned myself and my own judgments, my subjectivity, my arrogance of my class, my ethics, and really how much space do I give to things that are different. And the way they showered me with their love, I mean, I can’t tell you.

The police commissioner in Bangalore was very against the community. He was actually catching these people and putting them in jail on the pretext of being petty thieves. So he did his talk, and I was there to talk to make him understand.

He spoke first, and he started with, “Friends and eunuchs” — you know, things like that. The first sentence was, “We want to help you out, but you should not indulge in all sort of wrong activities and criminal activities and blah blah blah.” The minute he finished, he wanted to go.

So I said, “See, I have listened to you, and it’s only fair that you listen to me.” Then I spoke, and I suddenly became the darling of these thousands of people, and they all wanted to hug me and shower me with blessings, and that was the day I think I was loved the most ever in my life. Seriously.

They were so genuine because suddenly they felt, here is this woman from this “other world” that looks down on us in so many ways, and she has come and defended us. I came with my hesitation and all my prejudices, and I was embraced just

because I gave that little warmth, and I got ten times more in return.

For me that was the second major turning point. Now whenever I see eunuchs on the street, my relationship is different. It's not that I would give money now while earlier I wouldn't; it's not as simplistic as that. You suddenly relate to another person as a person.

**QI:** *It's interesting how becoming an ally to the queer community seems somehow to expand your own humanity.*

**Chitra:** My experience with hijras was only on the streets. When I came to the suburbs in a rickshaw, I would almost start shivering. I was very scared; it was a very traumatic thing for me. Intellectually, I tried to get over it. My real breakthrough came when I went to an LGBT consultation meeting and I was put in a small group discussion with Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the hijra activist.

She suddenly came in and was very flamboyantly dressed. We were in the same group for discussion, and I suddenly realised that I was not at all bothered by her. When she was being loud, I would say, "Oh Laxmi, shut up yaar!" I could actually argue with her and I suddenly realised, Wow! She is like me!

At the end of it, we hugged and we laughed, and I said: "I bullied you, or you bullied me? I think both of us bullied each other." It was fantastic.

**QI:** *What changes do you see in the mainstream understanding of LGBT issues now, compared with when you first became aware of these issues?*

**Nandita:** I think people are much more relaxed talking about it. India is a complex country. There is no one India; many Indias exist within it. There are even many Mumbais, for that matter, so one can't really generalise too much, but definitely it is much more in the public domain. Now you read about it, you see films.

I wish there would be more genuine and deeper conversation, whether it's in our media or in public spaces or in debates or whatever, but the change has definitely happened and the change will happen, whether you and I do anything or not. It's just whether we can hasten that change, because while we say all of this, there are lots of men and women whose family is not accepting, who still cannot come out in their workplaces, who are still wondering whether to tell their friends. So it's about these individual stories of human beings who are still struggling.

Much needs to be done, but on an optimistic note, I think that's the change.

**Chitra:** Of course there is a generational change, people are now used to these things, you know. People are in touch with various cultures, various types of life —

**Nandita:** The good part of globalisation —

**Chitra:** Yes, but at the same time the Delhi High Court's reading down of Section 377 has made a lot of difference. Whether it is considered illegal or legal makes a difference in whether you talk openly or not. Before, your prejudice was justified because homosexuality was considered illegal; now it is not justified, so you have to start thinking about it.

I do agree with everybody that we have to go mainstream. Obviously everything has to be mainstream. However, I would like to give a small warning: This subject is sensitive. So, just as the issue is coming out everywhere, the *manner* in which it comes out is also important. I am especially talking about mainstream cinema. I would be happy if somebody has the courage — or maybe we should together do it — to apply the formulas: the songs, the dance, but with LGBT people as protagonists.

**Nandita:** Where they are just there, you don't have to make a big deal about it. I haven't seen any of these films actually, *Dostana*, and couple of others —

**Chitra:** I've seen, I've seen. I am not taking any names, but I have seen that the mainstream cinema takes issues and then

trivialises and uses them for commercial purposes instead of actually probing that issue. It has happened about many, many issues in the past, about rape, about women's issues.

**Nandita:** I am thinking more broadly about the dilemma of mainstreaming. If it is a minority issue, you tend to cling within the community. At the same time, how does one not keep it their issue? Why doesn't this become part of the women's issue? Why is this sidelined?

A lot of people are trying to be sensitive but don't know the right word to use. Sometimes even I get confused, like is it transsexual, transgendered, queer? How could more people just get involved? Yes, there is a safe place within the community, but how do you involve other people up close and personal? Because finally you want the society at large to be more understanding, more empathetic, more aware, more sensitive. But half the problem is they don't even know.

In Bombay, there are a lot of gay and lesbian activities, they have their own parties; they have gay and lesbian nights and this and that. I understand why there is a need for that community, and I think that must carry on, but...

**Chitra:** The Kashish Film Festival [an annual festival of LGBT films screened in Mumbai] is a good example of reaching both. I saw a lot of my heterosexual friends there, and they said, "Oh, we read about it." They had not come on the first day, but then they read some news report and they came. These are the sorts of things where people can be drawn in, film lovers from various age groups.

**Nandita:** And also to know that, at the end of the day, this is just one of many identities. If I am a doctor and I am treating you well and understanding your problem and giving you the right medicine, that is more important than what religion or sexual orientation or caste or whatever. All of us have multiple identities. There are some identities that you identify more with, maybe because it's being threatened, but actually it is just an identity. That would be the ideal day when all of us see all of our different identities and accept the many identities.

**Chitra:** Nandita, you are saying exactly what Shalmalee said to me. She said, “Amma, when I came out and even when I realised all the legal and other problems, my self-esteem was absolutely not affected. I was full of self-esteem for the simple reason that this is just one aspect of me. I am an academic, I am my parents’ daughter, I am a singer — and I am also a lesbian, that’s all.”

**QI:** *Could you talk about the importance of sharing these stories, of doing a book like this one? Sometimes, as LGBT people, we are told, “OK, that’s how you are, but why do you have to talk about it?”*

**Nandita:** In the ideal world, I don’t think all of us need to scream out loud and say those things. I understand why some people would say, why does a person have to go around saying, “I am a lesbian, I am a lesbian”? I don’t go around saying, “I am a heterosexual.”

But when the world is judgmental, when there are these double standards, when there isn’t that much sensitivity because there is lack of awareness, when people fear the unknown in the atmosphere, then we do need to scream out loud. And some of us who have the opportunity, or the platform, or the privilege of speaking out must speak.

Actually all of us have that choice. It’s all relative. I have a little area of influence; you will have another area of influence. All of us have one — if nobody else, our immediate families and friends. I do believe that there is a power of that rippling effect that happens. There is a shift in that collective consciousness, as they say. They say for something to change, we only need seven percent of people to believe in something and speak out, so I am sure those dots are there. We just have to connect those dots.

If I don’t speak out, I wouldn’t know that you think the same way. Even if you can somewhere touch one person’s life and make that one person feel more confident, it’s good.

I get email from young women who say, “I am really dark,

and I used to feel so terrible about myself, and then I read your article about Fair and Lovely”— this is something that I wrote about why I refuse to put on [skin-bleaching] makeup and have my little battle about this whole thing about dark skin and how self-conscious we are about it and how we are made to feel small. So, I didn't really reach out to these particular women, but if they got something from me, well, that's how all of us have grown. Somebody has inspired us.

It's a journey, and I can't say that I have reached where I want to. There are people who have opened doors for me, and because they said something, that has given me the courage. I hope I can give that confidence and courage to somebody else. I am a big champion of speaking out, so I think more books, more films, more talks, more conversations, more agreements, disagreements — all of this is healthy and is part of the growth.

**Chitra:** Once, a parent mentioned that her son was gay, and she said, “You know, I am scared about my son's well-being. If he marries a girl, she will look after him; she will take care of him. If he marries or lives with a boy, then who will look after him?”

It goes to show the majority of the world is heterosexually dominated. All around us there are heterosexual signifiers. Whether it's an ad, big hoardings, I mean everything. We just take that for granted.

Though we all agree that sexuality is only one aspect of the personality and identity, it is an important aspect. Because it is an important aspect and because our system is basically patriarchal, it expects men to marry women, women to reproduce, men to earn, etc., no matter how progressive we are — this is still going on. Of course we need to tell alternative stories.

**QI:** *Nandita, this is a question for you, since you work closely with the Children's Film Society. Do you think India is ready for a film for children about LGBT issues?*

**Nandita:** That's a good question. Let me think...

In the Children's Film Society, there is a lot of safe playing. It's a government organisation, so often the projects that we have been getting — I would say nine out of ten projects — are very moralistic, extremely preachy. I am already struggling and saying, "Listen, we want fun films. We want hopeful films! We want to expose diverse cultural ideas which are less about right and wrong, where adults are not always telling children what to do."

We did get a script, in fact, a synopsis from somebody who did challenge this whole gender stereotyping of little girls and boys, these roles that they have to adopt, and I tried to push it. But I have also made the process very democratic, where even though I am the chairperson, I only have one vote! But at least somebody is coming and giving this synopsis, and this is one step. Everything is one step towards sensitising people.

**QI:** *It's amazing that this conversation is actually starting in a government program.*

**Nandita:** As a mother of a son, everything is blue. Anything that is pink or glittery, forget about it — I mean, not even yellow or orange or green. All the gifts that I have received for him have been blue, and I am sort of tired of that, you know?

**Chitra:** Yesterday, I was buying him a quilt and it was pink and I thought you would love it, but ultimately I wasn't sure.

**Nandita:** But the thing is, even I go through that dilemma. Pink is not even my favourite colour. You know, it's not just to prove that a boy can also have pink. I don't want to thrust that pink on him because would I like pink as a colour? I mean, OK, I don't really care much for it, but I would love a yellow or an orange.

**QI:** *Do you have any advice for the LGBT community itself? Sometimes it may feel like we are begging the straight world to accept us. What do you want from us? What would help you*

**to be better allies?**

**Nandita:** What I really want from the community is to also be less prejudiced. One has to understand that it's not that people out there are bad people. It's just that there isn't that awareness, there isn't that sensitivity. I think the more open we are, the more embracing we are, the less inhibited people will also feel.

After *Fire*, people within the community said, "Why has Deepa Mehta shown two women in bad marriages falling in love?" It was a completely valid question. But when I really thought about it, I felt that the film was a nice, slow way of entering a domain that otherwise was so closed to these issues. So let there be more stories, instead of shunning things and saying it has to be perfect or nothing.

I remember once I used a politically incorrect word and I was pushed down by my lesbian friends: "Come on, you can't be saying that!" I can't remember the exact thing, but it made me more limited. For instance, "queer" isn't part of my vocabulary, so I may not be using that as much. Does that make me an insensitive person?

I worked with somebody who was working on issues of disability, and I know he came from a very different background and he was totally devoted, but he never used to say "mentally challenged" — sometimes he would say "retarded." It was because English is really not his language and I had to explain to others, "Look, he has done more than probably what I and you have done."

Words are important, I am not undermining them — words are needed to create imagery, thinking, attitudes — but words are part of an overall journey. We need to have more communication and interaction, not just keep separate communities.

**Chitra:** I feel very nervous if people from the LGBT community suddenly close doors, if they start behaving like a gated community. I personally think they must start opening up for others to come in. Unless they open the door, how will

we enter?

I am talking as a heterosexual person, but what about as a parent? I have heard boys and girls saying: “Oh, my parents are so homophobic.” It has always hurt me — the tone, the attitude. I understand that the child is saying this because he or she is feeling hurt. I understand, absolutely, but the question remains whether they have prepared their parents to accept? Whether they can also understand their parents — the way *they* have been brought up?

I am not saying anything is right or wrong. I am not passing judgments. All I am saying is that the parents have been brought up in a different way. After all, we are all human beings, and if we are human beings, we will all have our feelings. So, the parents can also have feelings. They are not perfect human beings, they are not supermen and superwomen.

If the LGBT community realises this, they can be a little more compassionate towards heterosexual people. I know it’s difficult when they are the ones who have been hurt. But another thing is not to think of themselves as victims, because when you don’t think of yourself as victim, you don’t get into an attacking mode. The more positive you are about yourself, you will not feel anger or enmity towards somebody who is different from you.

The LGBT community is generous, I know that. They should extend that generosity, and when the others see that love and compassion, they will start transforming. I am not saying everybody, but at least the family, friends, parents — they will start transforming, and they will be the captains for the entire community.

**QI: *Thank you so much for your time, and for your work with our community.***

As activist-allies, actor **Nandita Das** and filmmaker **Chitra Palekar** have both stepped up to the role of speaking out publicly on behalf of marginalised communities. They have been family friends for many years, and more recently, they worked together when Palekar cast Das as the lead actor in her respected Marathi film, *Maati Maay*.

Both found themselves drawn into the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement in India at specific moments. Das was thrust into the spotlight in 1996 when Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, a film in which Das co-starred, became the centre of a storm of controversy for its depiction of two women in a romantic and sexual relationship. She vigorously defended the film against right-wing homophobia and censorship efforts, and became an outspoken public figure. Here, she speaks for the first time in detail of her own intimate journey as a catalyst and ever-stronger ally of the LGBT movement in India.

For Palekar, the moment arrived when her daughter Shalmalee came out to her as a lesbian. In the years since, Palekar has become an activist parent, signing onto the parents' petition in support of decriminalising homosexuality, making numerous national television appearances to bring publicity to the cause, and founding an Internet-based group for parents and family members of LGBT people.

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