

LIVE, LOVE, CELEBRATE

By Zofeen Maqsood

His authorized biography on Dalai Lama has been published in 24 languages around the world. He has written and reported on every significant South Asian development since the 80's and has also made a documentary highlighting Gujarati poet Narsinh Mehta. Yet despite his many contributions, the South Asian diaspora knows little about Naperville based writer and artist Mayank Chhaya

Prolific writer, author, documentary filmmaker and artist Mayank Chhaya is a man of many talents. He has been an eminent journalist reporting and commenting on global affairs for more than three decades now. He has variously written on South Asian issues and has been an expert on Sino-Tibetan affairs.

The writer who is based in Chicago now, is known for his successful book – Man, Monk and Mystic, which not only has won critical acclaim but is also translated in 24 languages around the world, including in America.

He also wrote a biography on Sam Pitroda, the Chicago based entrepreneur known for his contribution to telecom industry in India. The book titled, Sam Pitroda – A Biography climbed the bestseller charts when it was published back in 1992.

Chhaya has also just finished a documentary titled Gandhi's Song, which is ready for international distribution. When Chhaya is not writing or researching (he is currently working on three more books, a TV show and a feature film!) he also dabbles into art. A San Francisco based fashion label has incorporated his paintings to create a range of products. Clearly Chhaya has his plate full with projects and is brimming with newer ideas.

CELEBRATING HIS GUJARATI ROOTS

Amongst his recent works, the documentary titled Gandhi's Song is of extreme importance because Chhaya picked up the subject to celebrate the immense contribution of the 15th century great poet philosopher Narsinh Mehta. While we all may have heard of the song chosen by Gandhiji, Vaishnav Jan To, which became a defining ballad

THE MAN WHO MET THE MONK

Hidden heroes: MAYANK CHHAYA

Gujarati poet-philosopher Narsinh Mehta is regarded as a poet laureate of my home state of Gujarat. We grew up reading listening to his songs and ballads. 'Gandhi's Song' is a feature-length documentary about the life and times of Mehta."

during India's struggle for freedom. Sadly, hardly anyone knows about the poet who wrote that song. Chhaya's documentary aims to bring the laurels to the poet whose verses continue to live. Talking about his documentary, Chhaya says, "This was 20-year-long passion of my life. The great Gujarati poet-philosopher Narsinh Mehta (1414-1480) is regarded as a poet laureate of my home state of Gujarat. 'Gandhi's Song' is a feature-length documentary about the life and times of Mehta."

'Vaishnav Jan To'. Over four centuries after he wrote it, the song became Mohandas Gandhi's lifelong moral compass and directly influenced India's great freedom campaign against the British imperial rule.

"By most scholarly accounts, Gandhi first incorporated the song in his daily spiritual routine sometime in 1907. In a rare case of the Bhakti movement poets, Mehta, an obsessive lifelong Krishna devotee, excelled both at "Saguna" and Nirguna" forms of poetry. Widely believed

he says, "I was born in Ahmedabad and for as long as I remember I wanted to be a journalist in order to tell stories. Although I went to a journalism school in Mumbai after my bachelor in science from Ahmedabad I was turned off by the idea of learning reporting sitting in a class. I promptly failed the course and joined the Free Press Journal newspaper in 1982. That is where I cut my teeth."

He adds, "Over the last three and half decades I have worked and reported for a variety of media outlets from Mumbai, New Delhi, Islamabad, Lahore, Colombo, San Francisco, New York and Chicago. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were part of my professional domain. In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s I reported extensively on all major stories emanating from India, including the insurgencies in Kashmir and Punjab from their inception."

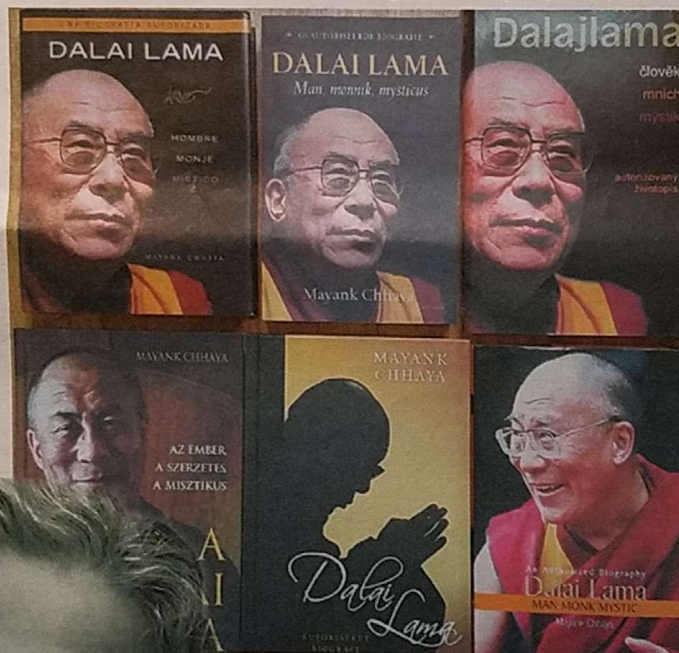
INDIANS IN CHICAGO

Chhaya has been in the windy city for 12 years. He says this has been the longest he has lived in a place ever since he left Ahmedabad back in 1981. Talking about the diaspora in Chicago and its achievements over the years, Chhaya says, "Indians have a greatly vibrant presence in Chicago. The Indian Diaspora is an important cultural, economic and, to some extent, political force. Indian Americans in Chicago pursue a diverse set of professional careers and interests and make a significant contribution to life in America. It is heartening to know that many members of the community are getting involved in public affairs at various levels starting from village and town. It is crucial that the community does that to ensure that its voice is heard and cultural checks and balances stay in place."

KNOWING DALAI LAMA

Talking about his illustrious book on Dalai Lama, Chhaya says, "During my research, I conducted several hours of personal interviews with the Dalai Lama in his home at McLeod Ganj in Himachal Pradesh, India. Over the years I have met him several times both in India and here in America." He adds, "Tibet and Dalai Lama were my childhood fascinations. A book about both seemed like a necessary endeavor. It took shape in 1997 when I was doing a cover story on Tibetan refugees in India and as part of that had an interview with the Dalai Lama. It is such an obvious story to tell—a single stateless monk taking on the might of a powerful ancient civilization that is now a global economic powerhouse. I pitched the book to the Dalai Lama during

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Chhaya adds, "Although he wrote hundreds of songs, verses and ballads, he remains forever defined by a single song to be unlettered, his language was of a very order and set in a way that whatever he wrote could be sung. What is remarkable about 'Vaishnav Jan', something that Gandhi understood and imbibed, is that the song is a remarkably secular and non-denominational benchmark for righteous human conduct." He further adds, "'Gandhi's Song' is a 74-minute documentary that I wrote, directed, filmed and edited."

ROAD TO AMERICA

Chhaya had an illustrious career back in India but he chose to come to the US to take up newer challenges. He first came to the San Francisco Bay Area; in 1998 edit a local newspaper. He then moved to New York and eventually to Chicago. Talking about his career spanning decades,