

# Jamali and Kamali join the celebration

By Karen Chase  
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**B**ecause I love what marriage brings to my husband and me, I rejoice, along with two long ago and faraway men -- Jamali and Kamali -- in New York state's victory.

Since ancient times, same-sex love has been viewed differently in different cultures, sometimes somewhat accepted under certain conditions, more often, not. Same-sex love has even been punished with the death penalty through the legal system and by rogues, outside of it. Nearly everywhere, it has been a thorny matter. When New York state was added to the growing list of states where same-sex couples can marry, it doubled the percentage of people eligible to marry in the United States. A cause for great celebration.

So why would Jamali and Kamali, two men from Mughal India, have cause for celebration? Who are they?

Jamali was a popular 16th century Sufi court poet who lived in India and no one knows who Kamali was. But according to Delhi's long-standing oral tradition, Kamali was Jamali's male lover.

When "Jamali-Kamali: A Tale of Passion in Mughal India" came out in India this past January, I traveled there to speak at the Jaipur Literary Festival. Hordes of people from all over the world listened to the writers in the grand rooms of the Diggil Palace and outside under multicolored tents. Colorful banners and flags flew everywhere, plus abundant food, music, and drink -- an electric scene.

But a quiet hour in the Lodi Gardens, talking with a reporter from Time Out Delhi, was the most stirring moment. Parvati Sharma was writing a story about Jamali, Kamali and my book for Time Out's Gay and Lesbian Page, the only mainstream magazine in India, which has a page devoted to LGBT issues. She told me that most everyone

in Delhi knows the story of the lovers, Jamali and Kamali, but no one had ever written about them.

"Why did you write this book?" so many have asked.

I'm not a man. I'm not gay. I'm not Indian. I'm not Muslim. I'm not a Mughal scholar. I'm not an art historian. I'm a straight white American Jewish 21st century woman. I've crossed so many boundaries here -- gender, sexual orientation, religion, time, hemisphere. Why did I, of all people, write a story about these two men?

Here's what happened. I was in Delhi in 2004 with a writing residency at The Sanskriti Foundation. One morning, the resident artists were told that later that day, we would have a chance to visit the newly restored Jamali Kamali Mosque and Tomb. The conservator of the archeological restoration would guide us at the site, which was about to open to the public.

Our bus arrived at an overgrown park entrance in the middle of the city. We traipsed alongside a river full of plastic garbage, climbed up hills of brush, climbed over unrestored ruins and finally arrived on top of a hill, a plateau, where the Jamali Kamali Mosque and Tomb stood. A newly erected sign at its entrance informed visitors that the Tomb held the remains of Jamali, a 16th century Sufi court poet and advertisement Kamali, whose identity, the sign said, was "unknown."

When I entered the tomb, I was taken aback by its beauty. Looking at the two white marble graves, the conservator explained who Jamali was, then said, "It is believed, through oral tradition, that Kamali was his homosexual lover." "What?" I blurted out, "But, the new sign out front says his identity was unknown."

Deeply jarred by the disjuncture of that moment, when I returned to my Delhi desk, I began to write as if I were

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Jamali speaking to Kamali. Planless and goalless, I had nothing in mind. By the end of three weeks in Delhi, there was a draft of the first section of a poem. By the end of two years, the poem was a book.

Some folks who have read Jamali-Kamali believe I was inhabited by Jamali as the poem was getting written. I seriously doubt this, but you never know. All I know is that I had to write it. It was like breathing.

The book is a pure fiction about love, sex, separation and death. From the time I began writing it until I was done, I was compelled to let Jamali and Kamali have their say, on the page. Today I can hear Jamali saying out loud, Cause for celebration, yes! And Kamali adding -- but, until all are free to choose to marry or not, we still have mountains to climb.

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Local author Karen Chase will offer a reading of her book "Jamali-Kamali: A Tale of Passion in Mughal India" at The Bookstore in Lenox on Monday, August 15 at 5 p.m. She will also be at the Dream Away Lodge in Becket on Sunday, Sept. 18 at 6 p.m. for a "Jamali Kamali Evening" featuring dinner, a reading and music.