



DJ Zahra: Creating space for Asian culture

**D**J ZAHRA is a lawyer by day, and a spinner of 'bhangra' and Bollywood beats by night. She's a fierce, flamboyant, stylish and sexy lesbian, whose passions include fighting for social justice and finding the right shade of red lipstick!

### A Bitter Childhood

But her story began way back in 1976 when she arrived in Canada at the tender age of three with her family that included a brother and two sisters. She remembers living in extreme poverty with a violently abusive father. In fact, he was so abusive that he came close to killing her mother on several occasions. In her words, Zahra spent her childhood being sexually, physically, verbally and emotionally abused.

"I have gone through so much trauma that I can understand the pain of others in similar situations. I'd love to see a world with no violence in it," she says passionately.

When she was 10, her father finally moved out, but he would still call to

# FIERCE, FLAMBOYANT AND LESBIAN

Flamboyant DJ Zahra set up Funkasia, a place without prejudice, for some hip, swinging music. Renu Mehta meets the intrepid survivor

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harass them. One evening, she got on the phone and told him very clearly, "Don't ever call here again". And that was the beginning of her journey of speaking out against violence.

### A Hand In Every Pie

By the time Zahra was 12, she was volunteering at different charity organisations and for two years she was also the President of the Scarborough Red Cross Youth. Her extra curricular activities included Leaders in Action, being vice-president at her high school, organising youth fund raisers, and teaching religious classes.

"When I look back at my life, I'm quite proud of where I am. As a child of so much violence, racism, sexism and homophobia, for a long time, I just hated myself. Now after 12 years of healing myself, I feel like I am at a place where I can be really effective, and I look forward to the challenges that life will bring," she says.

At University, Zahra enrolled in Political Science and Women's Studies, as her passion for justice was quite clear. She also worked at the Women's Center and began advocating against racism and violence against women.

### An Open Space For All

The idea of Funkasia also germinated because Zahra felt there was a gap that needed to be filled. "There was nothing like Funkasia, and it needed to exist. Funkasia is my way of creating space for South Asian music, art and culture. More essentially, it's also about creating a space where everyone feels welcome regardless of race, religion or orientation. I have suffered the pain of exclusion, and being an outsider and that makes me really committed to creating spaces where all people feel equal. Funkasia has been just another method for me to spread my message in the world. It's about saving pride in being yourself and having a positive, fun attitude to life." Funkasia moved from the Red Spot to the B-side (Richmond and Peter Streets) to its present place of pride — the Fly Nightclub on Gloucester Street. On the first Friday of every month, you can head down to Funkasia where if DJ Zahra starts to play audience favourites, there's barely any room to stand, leave alone jive. The first Funkasia fete had 60 youngsters, but today there are roughly a 1,000, dressed in funky, outrageous attire, having a ball! The best part about Funkasia is that it caters to the community and also gives back something to it. Proceeds from Funkasia have gone to over 30 organisations across Toronto, including the South Asian Women's Centre, Alliance for South Asian Aids Prevention, The Campaign to Defend Immigrants and Refugees and the Art of Non Violence Programme at the Women's College Campus of Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre in Toronto.

### Whole And Healed

Since July 1999, Zahra has her own practice mostly in Immigration and Refugee Law. "I love doing Immigration and Refugee Law. It allows me to deal with problems of other immigrant people. It also offers me the opportunity to constantly be involved with world conditions on a macro level while practising it in a micro way," she says.

Zahra also has advanced training in meditation and has gone through many creativity workshops and art therapy classes. She is a trained Shiatsu therapist, and a practitioner of Psychodramatic Bodywork, two methods of deep emotional, physical and spiritual healing. "I know I am only here for a short period of time. I have the force of life running through me, and I want to use that energy to be part of the forces that choose to spread positivity, equality and acceptance. I choose to be a part of the solution, and not the problem," she says firmly.

### FUNKASIA ROCKS!

You'll find a motley bunch of professionals, heterosexuals and drag queens converging on the first Friday of every month at Funkasia, the monthly fete for South Asians in Toronto.

Began in 1998 by DJ Zahra

It's a cool joint with great bhangra music. It's popular because it's different, and a few people of all sarrings and cultural backgrounds equal space to let down their hair.

The fete also showcases talent every month — resident percussionist the 'Tabla' Guy, Jugular — the Human Beat Boxes, performances by Sari Queens, Bollywood film and ghazal vocalists Shak I and Salim, as well as various guest Djs, MCs and musicians.

So, if you're in Toronto on the first Friday of any month, be sure to shake a leg at Funkasia, and experience an unforgettable evening.

— R.M.