

Representing India: Desi Women in America

By: Roshni Mulchandani

Last month, we took a deep look at Desi men who were creating waves in America. And now it is time for the ladies. No more are Desi women playing the role of the sacrificial goat; no sree! While they have claimed name and fame in practically all arenas of vocation, they haven't forgotten their roots or heritage. Granted they have shed the sari for more modern attire, they will still pass on the customs they have learnt to their own daughters who will do the same. The American Desi Girl is more than happy to celebrate her independence and successes. These women have gone on to make Indian women proud and demonstrate great freedom with traditions intact. CityMasala showcases these very American Desi women who make being Indian look amazing!

Mira Nair

Mira Nair was born to break all stereotypes that have been created towards Indians. Born and educated in India, she moved to the U.S. at age of 19 and headed to Harvard with a scholarship in her hand. Her first release was cult classic *Salaam Bombay*, which is considered a controversial, yet moving film and is still recommended to film-major students. After that, she continuously spurted out hit movies such as the notorious *Kama Sutra*, *Monsoon Wedding* and her most recent book-turned-movie *The Namesake*. Her mission is simple, yet complex: to ensure local Indians don't lose their identity and to bring the East to the West. Her movies have all been individually unique but each of them has told a different story about India. If the *Kama Sutra* was a historic tale about love and sex, then *Monsoon Wedding* told the story of an arranged marriage and family secrets that unfold. *The Namesake* was about a young boy who tries to assimilate between a being American while holding on to Indian roots. Nair, however, refuses to let go of the Bollywood touch and regularly includes the sing and dance shindig, which is a necessity of Indian cinema. Nair has no qualms of being deemed an NRI (Non-Resident Indian) filmmaker and actually takes pride in her status, calling New York her home just as much as Mumbai. She furthermore believes she is the link between Indian Americans, India and the culture they should never forget.

Sarita Chaudhary

Mira Nair's cross-cultural *Mississippi Masala* was one of the first movies in the eighties that started to cater to Indians. The movie also marked the debut of the talented Sarita Choudhary. Daughter of a British mother and Bengali father, Choudhary is anything but your typical average Indian girl. Known for her sexy pout and big deep eyes, she has worked in all facets of the media: television, cinema and theater. Proudly carrying her unconventional look, her stint with cinema started with Nair's flick *Mississippi Masala*, where she played the role of a young Indian girl who falls in love with a black man played by Denzel Washington. Although the movie was not a mainstream hit, it was named an "international art house hit" and received

much critical acclaim. She continued to work with her mentor Nair as she played a princess who is unable to seduce her husband in the notorious *Kama Sutra*. However, her career in acting came with its share of struggles too. While she gained recognition and fame, she was not receiving many offers for roles in upcoming movies. It was easier to be white or black during the nineties when most actors were cast depending on the color of their skin. She refused to be typecast and decided to break the mold by taking on challenging roles which were different from the usual Indian roles for which she was normally being cast. She was last seen in M. Night Shyamalan's *Lady in the Water*, where both the actress and director came together to showcase their talents. After being in the industry for over 10 years, she believes that her time has just begun and as more directors are casting actors irrespective of their ethnicity, talented Indians will emerge to demonstrate their flair for acting.

Indra Nooyi

Indra Nooyi stands tall as one of the Most Powerful Women in Business for four years running from 2006 to 2009. The CEO of PepsiCo was born and raised in Chennai only to move to the U.S. ready to take it over in the pop industry – soda pop that is - making her the "Pop Queen." Her list of achievements is endless with a number of awards to her name. However, there is a side to Indra that is virtually unknown. Besides being one of the most accomplished women CEOs in the United States, Nooyi was a lead guitar player in an all ladies band back home in India, played cricket and loves to karaoke. And not much has changed; Nooyi still makes no bones about getting on stage and crooning to her favorite songs at corporate events. Her adaptation to the American culture was gradual. She may know cricket well, but can jut out incredible statistics in New Yankee's Baseball and is an avid Chicago Bulls fan. Perhaps one of the most balanced women in the American corporate world, Indra Nooyi makes Indian women proud and how!

Tina Sugandh

The Tabla Girl better known as Tina

Sugandh, is perhaps one of the few American Desi girls to have jammed with Ringo Starr. The singer-dancer moved to the U.S. at the tender age of five months and over time realized that while she loved to dance and sing, she had developed a special relationship with the tabla. Not only does Tina sing in a number of languages, the artist is determined to make it to the top in hopes to earn a Grammy or two. In the meantime, however, she has accredited herself with a Billboard Dance Hit and a number of title tracks to various television shows in the U.S. Interestingly, her music continually represents her heritage and love for the Indian culture. Whether it's the use of her faithful table or merely the presence of mehndi on her hands, she never fails to show off the fact that she is indeed a proud Desi girl.

Jhumpa Lahiri

While she has been a writer for many years now, Jhumpa Lahiri only truly came to fame when her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Namesake* was made into a full-fledged film and won immense critical acclaim. However, the author, who was born in London only to move to the United States at the age of three, considers herself as American as they get. Most of the stories and plots are revolved around the idea of confused Indian immigrants, a situation she too is familiar with. This is one of the ways the writer has managed to stay true and connected to her own Bengali roots. As an American-Indian author, she has managed to relate to immigrant wives that come with great hopes only to face a serious culture shock and disconnect. Lahiri is now a part of the Arts and Humanities Committee of US government which has been hand-picked by President Barack Obama himself.

Power - and more power to these lovely Desi ladies who prove to be a great inspiration to women all over! Not only can they handle households, but entire corporations if they have to. Priyanka Chopra may have danced and lip-synced to the famous Desi Girl number, however the ladies above clearly prove that they too are no less; they will rock now and even more, in the future.