



# Desi women - a class of their own.

By Shahnee Zaver

Unmistakable and most certainly definable, innately mysterious, exotic and regal, Indian women are a class all of their own. Whether it be their lustrous, thick black hair, almond shaped eyes, big, deep and soulful, their lovely brown skin in all various shades, or their bejeweled wrists, hands, feet and faces. There is an unparalleled uniqueness about women from the sub-continent. The physical attributes, however, are only one part of what makes up their whole sum. For it is impossible to look only at an Indian woman's external beauty without acknowledging her inner strength, her fortitude and her journey throughout history, within India and abroad. March 8th is International Women's Day and a perfect time to pay tribute and reflect on where the women of India are today.

For centuries Indian women have steered their course on a narrow path defined by a conservative and patriarchal mechanism and yet still managed to bring forth reforms and dissolve some of the barriers that once existed. This gives even more reason to highlight and honor their achievements.

Consider that India is one of the first countries to have a female Prime Minister. Today the president of the Congress Party is a woman and arguably the country's most powerful politician. The country's President is also a woman and a handful of other women throughout the country are highly ranked Ministers. It is this perseverance that got Ms. Vijayalakshmi Pandit the position as the first female President of the United Nations General Assembly. And then there's the arrival of Indian women professionals in the public sphere, from Barkha Dutt, India's well known journalist to Booker Prize and Pulitzer Prize winners respectively Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri to Kiran Mazumdar who became the wealthiest Indian woman after the initial public offering of her company Biocon.

What is it about Indian women that sets them apart? The most exalted Goddesses; Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati, Sita and Ma Durga are endowed with a set of virtues that define them as deities and it is easy to transfer these spiritual qualities to the women, who continue to play a pivotal role in helping to guide their society and their counterparts – men. Like the warrior Rani of Jhansi she is able to rise to the occasion if and when need be.

The women of India are the subject of American writer and photographer Stephen Huyler's book "Daughter of India: Art and Identity" for which he spent eight years writing and researching. A cultural anthropologist and art historian, he describes the women of India as "strong, resilient and self-reliant." In an interview conducted by Madhur Tankha he is

passionate as he discusses his desire for the Western world to "reassess its opinion of Indian women" His goal in writing this book was to "break the stereotypical image of Indian women. Statistics tell us that one in every six women in the world lives here. Yet most people outside this vast country know little about them and they receive inaccurate press. I agree that inequalities and injustices towards women are widespread in India but they are also in most parts of the world. Indian women" he says "are capable of addressing their problems. India should not be seen only through one lens. That would be disservice to this great country that is one of the three greatest powers in the world."

"Huyler's book" Tankha writes "shows how Indian women have been overcoming their adversity with profound spirit and self-empowerment." "In 'Daughters of India' I have represented 20 women — the traditional and contemporary, the repressed and the highly innovative, the outcast and the entrepreneur and from Hindu to Christian to Muslim. I felt compelled to tell stories of Pushpa battling to live in the slums of Mumbai; Minhazz struggling with her own identity as she tries to help women folk artistes get appropriate representation. Then there is Achamma rising as a leading software developer in a ruthless male business world; Shyamali marching in protests against deforestation; and Swayam who is unable to get a job in America despite her medical degrees. I chose these women as my subjects because they gave a broad picture of the Indian women."

Empowered, constantly striving, and a rooted strength of spirit that defines the culture itself. This is the true essence of an Indian woman and what she stands for.

Here in the United States, March has been designated as "Women's History Month." So go ahead and take the opportunity to think globally and act locally. Make everyday International Women's Day and do your part to ensure that the future is bright, equal, safe and rewarding for the girls and women in your community

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