

# Representing India: Desis in America

by Roshni Mulchandani

**T**here is a misconception that Desis who are born and raised abroad, especially in America, tend to forget their roots and heritage. This was further strengthened by a large number of American Desi flicks that displayed the American Desi life in all its grandeur: dating, college, independence and even sex. However, this delusion couldn't be further from the truth. Granted that young American Desis have developed a meshed way of life, blending the western lifestyle along with the traditional eastern ways, but they are determined to make a mark for themselves in America while simultaneously holding up the Indian flag. Whether it is in politics, television, cinema or sport, American Desis have made their mark in every arena possible. CityMasala takes a look and salutes these talented American Desis.

## Vijay Amritraj

The ex-tennis player has represented India at various tennis events in the seventies. Vijay Amritraj went on to make the country proud as he became the first Indian to represent India on an international platform. Post his tennis stint, Amritraj tried his hand at acting in a number of films while also hosting a number of shows and as a sports commentator. His biggest achievement, however, came when he decided to start up his own foundation, "The Vijay Amritraj Foundation." The organization in itself is made up of a number of renowned leaders including George H. W. Bush and Shashi Tharoor. The goal of the mission is to help the destitute and ill-stricken in India. His charitable foundation has gone on to do immense work from Los Angeles helping many in India.

## Kal Penn

Not many know that Kal Penn is really a stage name and his passport reads Kalpen Suresh Modi. Penn is perhaps one of the most popular Indians in Hollywood today. Born in New Jersey to parents of Gujarati and Tamil heritage, Penn has firsthand experience of typecasting and breaking stereotypes. His filmography comprises of movies such as *American Desi*, *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, *The Namesake* and the recent *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*. He has also been seen in various television shows but is most well known for his role as Kumar from his *Harold and Kumar* sequel. In his initial days of auditioning, Penn was often asked why he was not wearing a turban, to which he would simply glare at the ignorant question. It took him a few years to stand firm and work with directors who were willing to take a chance on him and cast him in roles they saw fitting. Now, with several movies under his belt, Kal Penn knows he's officially made it in Hollywood. Ask him "How?" He replies, "My movies are being pirated in Indian stores." The actor is now taking a break from acting only to take on a position under the Obama Administration. He is now Associate Director of the White House of Public Engagement.

## Anoop Desai

Anoop Desai became a household name after he was seen crooning on American Idol. Born and raised in North Carolina,

this singer knew he was headed for stardom after he quickly became a singing sensation even after being called out by Simon Cowell. However, he went from strength to strength as he impressed the judges with consecutive performances. Desai didn't go on to win the competition but did manage to create an impeccable fan base for himself and till date still a loyal following. Post Idol, the singer has been seen on many shows and touring around the country representing himself. He will also be releasing his own album in the near future.

## Raj Mathai

Raj Mathai is known for his unique style and being the most outstanding Desi personality in the U.S. on television. Mathai is not only the sports director on the acclaimed NBC Channel but has also won two Emmy Awards for his work. The vivacious television anchor is not only close to his Indian roots, but is also incredibly modest. The sports reporter also avidly works with various charities and as an interesting fun-fact, he was voted as one of the top 50 Coolest Desi's in America, which also provided readers with this fascinating tidbit, "Raj entertained a group of journalists that watched him eat a Dosa with a full suit on, minutes before going on-air and never spilling a drop on himself!" He has also been chosen to run the Olympic Torch on numerous occasions.

## Sunkrish Bala

Sunkrish Bala realized at a very tender age that he was going to indulge in the glitz and glam that the acting world provided. Straight out of college, UCLA, he landed an integral part on ABC's *Notes from the Underbelly*, and guest starred on a number of Emmy Winning shows. Staying close to his roots, the Bombay born Indian-American actor has also starred alongside veteran actor Anupam Kher in *American Blend*. Google him and the actor is gushed and lushed over by the ladies for his good looks, charm and incredible quick wit. The actor is now getting ready to appear on a number of television shows and films.

And just when you thought, we left the ladies out, rest assured they too are doing much to represent India. Check back next month as we highlight the women who are representing American Desis in all their pomp. In the meantime, much kudos to these gentlemen who are doing a fine job of standing up for Indians in America.