

**SOUTH ASIAN CHIC • AVRIL LAVIGNE ROCKS ON**

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## Society

They've changed the way we eat, dress, work and play. South Asians come here from many places, and they succeed by blending East and West.

BY BARBARA KANTROWITZ  
AND JULIE SCELFO

**S**IX FLOORS ABOVE TIMES Square, in a bare rehearsal studio, the sun is rising on Bombay. At the center of the room, a slender middle-aged woman chants softly. She's surrounded by two dozen young performers playing beggars and peddlers who rise from slumber in the intricate ballet of an urban morning scene. Their dance moves become ever more energetic as the pianist in the corner pounds harder on the keys. The woman is Madhur Jaffrey, the actress and cookbook author who has made a career of introducing the tastes of her native India to the West. But this time she is serving up an enticing mix of Indian and Western rhythms called "Bombay Dreams," a Broadway musical that Andrew Lloyd Weber and his creative team hope will hook mainstream America when the show opens next month.

The timing couldn't be better. "Bombay Dreams," which has been playing in London since 2002, tells the story of a young man from the slums who rises to film stardom. It's an apt metaphor for the growing visibility of a new generation of South Asians in the United States—some immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, and others born here—who are making their mark everywhere from Hollywood to Wall Street. Politicians here may be in an uproar about outsourcing jobs to India, but India has also been exporting tremendous talent to this country. Young South Asians are transforming America's cultural landscape, setting the pace in business, the arts and media as well as the traditional fields favored by their parents' generation, medicine and technology. Many have spent time on several continents; they're multilingual, and comfortable mixing cultures. They're also often



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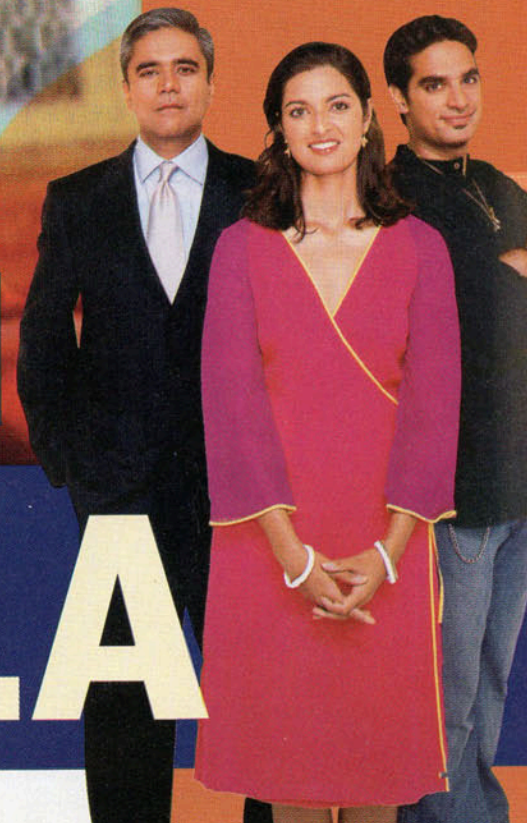
## POWER AND INFLUENCE

They are novelists, painters, scientists, athletes, inventors, chefs. They are our friends, our neighbors, our bosses, our doctors. A new generation of South Asians is transforming the cultural landscape of America. Multilingual, able to move easily between the old and new worlds, they bring together the best of the East and the best of the West. Here, in alphabetical order, are a few people you should know about.

**SABEER BHATIA**, 35. After landing in the United States as a Caltech undergrad, Bhatia co-founded Hotmail in 1996. When he sold it to Microsoft for \$400 million, he became the Indian Bill Gates.

**FLOYD CARDOZ**, 43. As executive chef at New York's Tabla, Cardoz created a culinary sensation by infusing haute cuisine with the vibrant flavors and spices of Goa, India, his family's home state.

**ACHIEVERS:** Artist Sikander, in front of one of her projections; Jain, Lahiri and Chopra (right)



# N MASALA

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**GOTHAM CHOPRA, 29.** Chopra, son of author Deepak, is a media figure and co-owner of New York hot spot K Lounge. Now he's coproducing a musical about Buddha with director Shekhar Kapur.

**DINESH D'SOUZA, 42.** A former policy analyst in the Reagan White House, D'Souza, author of the best seller "What's So Great About America," is a leading neocon thinker.

**ATUL GAWANDE, 38.** Despite a brilliant career as a surgeon (specializing in the removal of endocrine tumors), wunderkind Gawande is better known for his writings on the fallibility of doctors.

**AAMER HALEEM, 36.** The host of VH1's "Top 20 Video Countdown" and the wildly popular "Bands Reunited," Haleem's cheerful humor and heart-melting smile have turned him into a *desi* Carson Daly.

**KAMALA HARRIS, 39.** Upon being elected San Francisco's district attorney in December, Kamala became that city's first female D.A. and the first South Asian D.A. anywhere in the United States.

**ANSHU JAIN, 41.** As head of Deutsche Bank's powerhouse division of global markets, Jain oversees \$400 billion worth of trades a day for many of the world's biggest corporations.



Surgeon  
Gawande, a  
writer as well

children of affluence; the 2 million South Asians here are wealthier and better educated than almost any other immigrant group.

The stars of this breakout generation include directors like M. Night Shyamalan, 33 ("The Sixth Sense," "Signs"), and artists like the critically acclaimed Pakistani-born painter Shahzia Sikander, 34. Or writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, 36, the Pulitzer Prize winner whose recent novel about a second-generation Indian-American, "The Namesake," shared the best-seller lists with "The Da Vin-

ci Code." Or bankers like Anshu Jain, 41, raised in India but now head of global markets and a member of Deutsche Bank's group executive committee in New York. Or politicians like 32-year-old Bobby Jindal, who last fall narrowly missed election as governor of Louisiana and is now running for Congress.

These high achievers are only part of a much larger phenomenon. "Since I've been here, I've never seen so much attention to my culture," says Sreenath Sreenivasan, 33, an associate professor at Columbia Journalism School and co-founder of the South Asian Journalists Association. From Los Angeles to Miami, partygoers of all ethnicities are shaking their hips to the beat of *bhangra*, which is based on Punjabi folk music. (In the season premiere of "The Sopranos," Meadow jammed to Indian rhythms as she cruised in her car.) Video stores across America stock selections like "Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India" from Bollywood, India's prolific film industry, along with hits by South Asian filmmakers working in the West like "Monsoon Wedding" and "Bend It Like Beckham." Designers like Donatella Versace are crafting saris. And in a true test of acceptance, suburban supermarkets are stocking frozen *saag panir* (spinach and cheese) next to pizza and chili.

It's a shift that surprises even some members of the South Asian community who have been waiting years to get more visibility. A decade ago, when casting director Sonia Nikore held an open



Bhatia, a tech  
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Hotmail

call for South Asian actors for the Disney feature "Jungle Book," only about 50 people tried out, recalls Nikore, now an NBC vice president in charge of casting prime-time shows. But just recently, Nikore, 35, held an open call for "Nevermind Nirvana," a sitcom about an Indian-American family, and more than 250 South Asian actors showed up. The changes are also clear to Ajay Sahgal, the 39-year-old writer who created "Nevermind Nirvana" and pitched it successfully to the network. "You can get a chai at Starbucks," says Sahgal, a novelist who's starting a new career in TV. "People are wearing kurta pajama tops at Barney's in Beverly Hills, and they have yoga studios on every corner. You know you're going to have a hard time selling a show about Tibetans or an Inuit family, but for Indians, the time is right."

It's the most visible ethnic breakout since Ricky Martin let Americans know that Latinos were living *la vida loca*. In this case, having money has helped. According to the Census Bureau, the median income in Indian-American families is more than \$60,000, compared with the national average of \$38,885, and experts estimate that more than half of the 2 million South Asians in this country are college graduates. South Asians are highly visible on all of the nation's most elite campuses and are garnering an impressive share of the top academic prizes. They were critical to the Silicon Valley boom, and now many are resettling in cities like Bangalore as entrepreneurs in the booming outsourcing industry. Parmatma Saran, a sociologist at New York's Baruch College who studies South Asian immigrants, says they succeed because they balance modernity with old-world values. "South Asians are following in the footsteps of Jews," says Saran, who came from India in 1967 at 24. "They're following the Jewish model of penetrating the structural arrangement of society—economics, politics—without losing their cultural identity," he says.

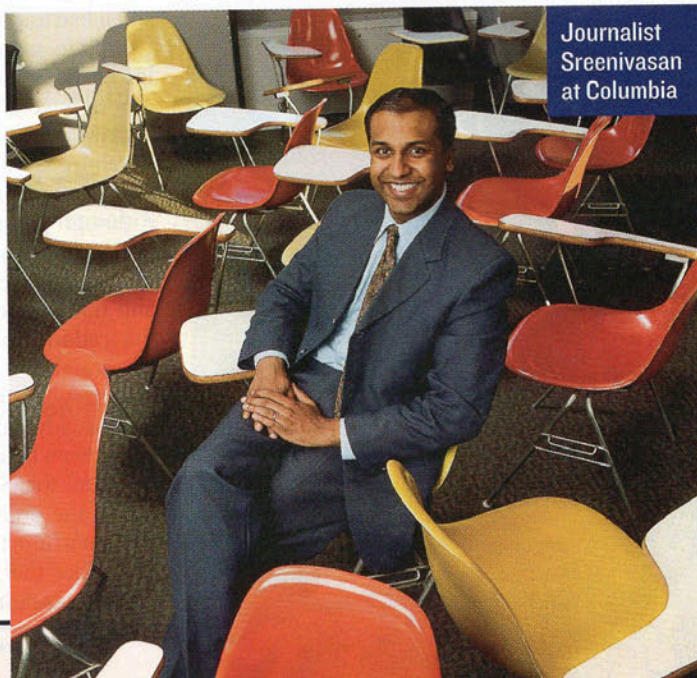
Indeed, many young South Asians in this country—who casually refer to each other as *desi*, a Hindi term that's roughly the equivalent of *paesano*—often feel like they're straddling two cultures. At 27, Alpina Singh presides over the wine cellar at Chicago's Everest restaurant. Her



Cardoz spices up the menu at Tabla

accomplishment is remarkable considering that she grew up in a Hindu home where wine was not consumed. Although her parents stressed academics, Singh wanted to work in the restaurant industry because it seemed glamorous. Her immigrant parents, who ran an Indian grocery in California, weren't onboard until, at 21, Singh became the youngest person ever to pass the Court of Master Sommeliers' advanced exam. Singh, in turn, is proud of her heritage and the fact that she speaks Hindi, English and Spanish. "We have this amazing ability to adapt to the surroundings," Singh says of her fellow South Asians. "We become doctors and golfers, but we never forget where we came from."

The first major influx of South Asian immigrants to this country arrived in the 1960s, after a change in the law made it easier for non-Europeans to enter as long as they were well educated. As a result, many in this first wave were physicians or scientists. "These people came



Journalist Sreenivasan at Columbia

### BOBBY JINDAL, 32.

A Republican political prodigy and former assistant secretary of health, Jindal lost a close race last year for governor of Louisiana. Now he's running for Congress.

**ANAND JON, 28.** Known for partying with celebs as much as for dressing them in luxurious fabrics, designer Jon's client list includes Paris and Nicky Hilton, rapper Eve and Nadja Swarovski.

### NORAH JONES, 24.

An eight-time Grammy-winning singer-songwriter, Jones, daughter of sitarist Ravi Shankar, single-handedly rejuvenated pop CD sales with her mesmerizing style.

### JHUMPA LAHIRI, 36.

A Pulitzer Prize winner for her debut short-story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies," Lahiri attracted a broad audience for her 2003 best-selling novel, "The Namesake."

### PARMINDER NAGRA, 28.

After costarring as the soccer-playing heroine of "Bend It Like Beckham," this London-reared actress became a regular cast member on NBC's hit drama "ER."

**DJ REKHA, 31.** Few Americans had heard of *bhangra* when this pioneering New York DJ began weekly "basement bhangra" parties in 1996. Now, her exhilarating blowouts are replicated nationwide.

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**MITESH SHAH, 34.** The youngest member of the American Hotel and Lodging Association's board of trustees, Shah heads an Atlanta group that operates 62 hotels nationwide with nearly 9,000 rooms.

**M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN, 33.** Already earning comparisons to Alfred Hitchcock, Shyamalan, who grew up in suburban Philadelphia, is best known for his blockbuster flick "The Sixth Sense."

**SHAHZIA SIKANDER, 35.** Sikander's one-of-a-kind miniature paintings and multimedia installations have spiced up the transatlantic art scene by exploring issues of cultural identity.

**VIJAY SINGH, 41.** The No. 2 golfer in the world behind Tiger Woods, he topped last season's PGA Tour money list. Singh worked his way up from Fiji's Indian underclass to 37 worldwide wins.

**SREE SREENIVASAN, 33.** By day he reports for New York's WABC-TV and teaches journalism at Columbia Univ. At night "Sree Sree" is a media power broker, publicizing the work of leading South Asians.

**SRINIJA SRINIVASAN, 32.** As Yahoo's fifth employee, Srinivasan was instrumental in building the start-up into a \$30 billion company with 2.1 billion page views a day.



Celebrity designer Jon in his studio

from a middle-class and educated section of Indian society, so life in America was not entirely new to them," says Madhulika Khandelwal, 46, director of the Asian American Center at Queens College in New York. "They're operating with people in the same class and income level." They also spoke English, a result of years of British rule.

By quickly fitting into white-collar America, the children of this first wave of South Asians earned "model minority" status, which could be a mixed blessing. "People said, 'We think of you as

white,'" recalls New York filmmaker Nisha Ganatra, 29, of her suburban high-school years in Pasadena, Calif. "It was meant as a compliment." Now, she says, "when I walk down the street, people assume I'm a doctor or lawyer, that I'm exceedingly nice, that I'm either a virgin or an expert on the Kama Sutra. They're not stereotypes that will prevent me from getting jobs." Since 9/11, however, the image has become more complex. "For every person who thinks I'm smarter and better," she says, "there's someone who thinks I smell bad and I'm about to blow up a building."

While many young South Asians have followed their parents into science and medicine, others have chosen the nonprofit world or the arts. Manu Narayan's father was an engineer in Pittsburgh, but Narayan, now in his early 30s, says, "I was someone who had different dreams." Although he says he was admitted to the engineering program at Carnegie Mellon, he majored in theater instead. His parents backed his choice, and that support paid off this fall when he won the lead in "Bombay Dreams." His costar, Anisha Nagarajan, 20, a New York University student, also grew up in Pittsburgh—a coincidence that has already earned them headlines in the local paper even before their Broadway debut.

Even for South Asians who embrace new paths, the pull of tradition is strong—especially when it's time to get married. In Indian shopping areas like the New York City neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, young women buy



DJ Rekha's style broke new ground

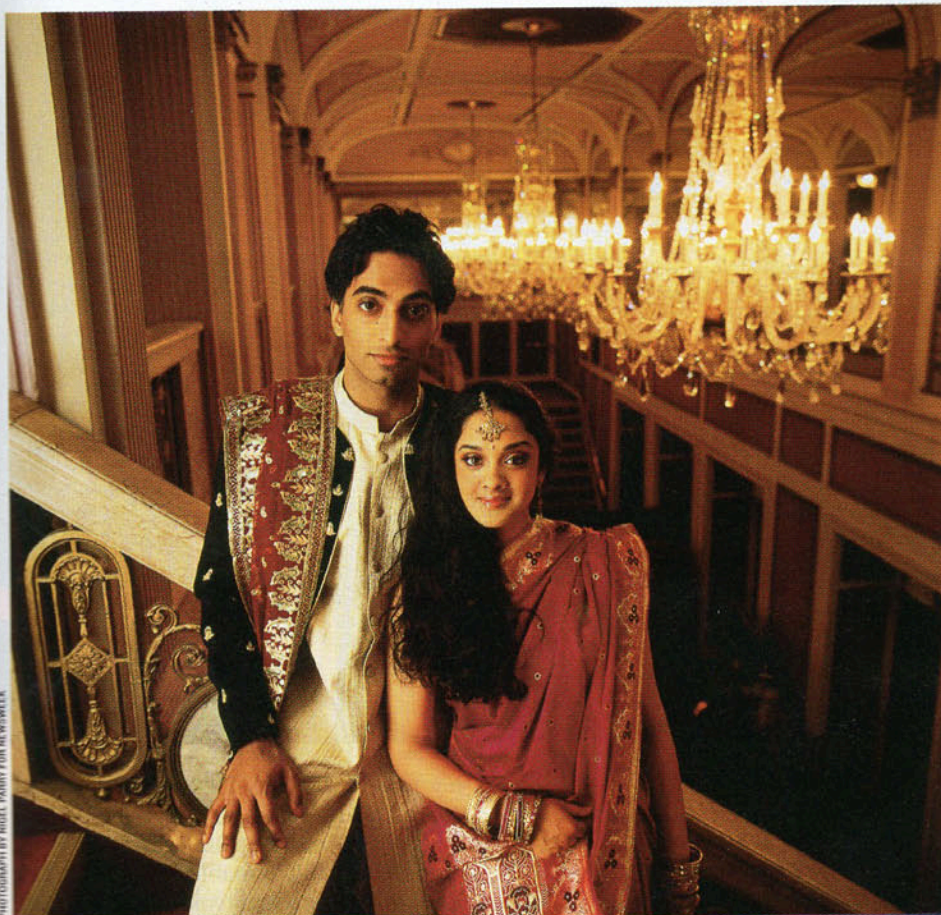
elaborate red saris and go to special salons to get their hands decorated with henna. Some wealthier couples choose to have two weddings, one in India for the relatives there and one here. While the ceremony may be traditional, the reception often mixes new and old: curry for dinner, American wedding cake and bhangra mixed with hip-hop on the dance floor.

Although the first wave of immigrants tended to settle in just a few communities, particularly the New York area, there are now vibrant South Asian communities all over the country, and the demographics are increasingly diverse, encompassing everyone from ABCDs (for American-born confused desis) to FOBs (those fresh off the boat). In Houston, new immigrants typically settle in the southwest portion of the city, where there are dozens of Indian grocers and clothing stores. The goal for many is to ultimately move to the upscale suburb of Sugar Land, where Sunil Thakkar, 36, and his wife, Sandhya, 34, run their entertainment company, Music Masala. The enterprise includes a weekly radio show featuring fast-paced Indian and Western beats, a moderately successful independent

film about a recent Indian immigrant in Houston called "Where's the Party Yaar?" and cruises with a South Asian flair. "This truly is the American dream for me," says Sunil, who quit his job as a Shell Oil engineer in 2001 to work on the business.

As success stories like these become more common, some South Asians worry that those who haven't made it will be overlooked. "Not everybody who came over early was a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer or an accountant," says comedian Aladdin Ullah, whose Bangladeshi father started his American journey as a dishwasher. Ullah, 29, grew up as one of the few South Asians in New York's Spanish Harlem, where he still lives. More recent changes in immigration law have allowed a wider range of South Asians to come here, including many who are less educated and take lower-paying jobs. But their chances for achieving the American dream should improve as the overall South Asian community continues to gain visibility. The stage is set for a long-running hit.

With VANESSA JUAREZ, LORRAINE ALI, JEN BARRETT, MARY CARMICHAEL, JOAN RAYMOND and VIBHUTI PATEL; KAREN SPRINGEN in Chicago; ANNE BELLI GESALMAN in Houston, and SUDIP MAZUMDAR in New Delhi



PHOTOGRAPH BY INGLE PARRY FOR NEWSWEEK

**BROADWAY BOUND:** Narayan (above, left) and Nagarajan won the leads in 'Bombay Dreams.' Both grew up in Pittsburgh, where their parents supported their theatrical ambitions. Like many in their generation, they didn't feel the need to pursue the traditional role of doctor or engineer.