

# AB But No LONGER CD



IT'S TIME TO DROP THE 'CD' IN ABCD (AMERICAN BORN CONFUSED DESI), SAYS THE INDOPHILE WHO WITNESSED THEM CREATING A NICHE FOR THEMSELVES ABROAD

■ By Maura Moynihan

**W**hen I was 15, my father, the late Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, informed us that President Richard Nixon had appointed him the US ambassador to India, and so the family had to move to Delhi. This journey changed my life forever. India became my home. I learned Hindi, wore saris, worshipped at masjids, mandirs, gompas and gurudwaras. I became a spokesperson for reverse immigration—an American who yearned to become an Indian. I investigated various means of obtaining Indian citizenship, short of a green card *shaadi*. What had I done in a past life to be born in the sterile wasteland of the New World? Surely there had been some karmic miscarriage. For 30 years my life revolved around a singular mission—to go back to India. Which I did, but it wasn't always easy.

After graduating from the American International School in Delhi, I studied at Harvard. In the mid-1970s, Indian immigration to the US was in its infancy, not the still swelling 1.7 million figure it has become. There was one desi restaurant in all of Boston. I was ridiculed for wearing bindis, practicing yoga, studying Urdu and for defending democratic India over Communist China. I bonded with the few fellow American and Asian desis on campus. We formed a secret society, meeting each week to smoke precious bidis, chew *paan* and alternately sing and weep to the soundtracks of *Bobby*, *Julie* and *Kabhi Kabhie*. We didn't know that we were pioneers—we felt bitterly misunderstood and unwanted, the experience of all new immigrant groups.

And so it's a profound vindication to see the multitudes line up, and pay, for Basement Bhangra, Bikram Yoga, SoSari fashions and even Sanskrit class. Desi culture is now mainstream and avant garde—the best new ideas in American art,

music, food, film, fashion are getting a Vedic twist. It's the million-plus second-generation Indians, American-born but not confused desis or overseas-born Indians (OBIS), who are making it happen. When I hear Laxmikant Pyarelal in a hip-hop mix while eating a fast-food samosa on Canal Street, I can finally relinquish my 30-year identity crisis. The paramount identity for the 21st century—with its potential for both a fusion and clash of civilisations—is that of the Global Nomad, at home in East/West, north/south tangents.

The 20th century Indian immigration experience picks up where the 19th century European immigration settled, with white collar, skilled workers who entered the professional classes, and who did not feel the same pressure to anglicise as did the Europeans who passed through Ellis Island; India had already seen the Raj. I admire the desi appreciation for what's best in America. Here they have engendered a new desi culture that transcends caste, arranged marriage, the Muslim-Hindu divide. At New York parties I often meet people from the subcontinent, feverishly bonding with their Calvin Klein jeans and filmi geet. But I also meet many who need to go back to the homeland. They often say that they wish their parents would let them spend a year or two as volunteers in a village. I know exactly how they feel. India is the source—ancient, wise, teeming, and there is no substitute for it. You have to go back to it for your life to make sense. And now I've also discovered that you can go West, and India will come with you. Nowadays your American friends want to know the auspicious date for the Diwali party.

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