

AN EDITOR'S NOTE: VOICES OF EXILE

Nirav S. Desai



The act of crossing a border, leaving what one is used to, and becoming an outsider, changes a person. Similar is the case for those *born* as outsiders, the children of immigrants. These individuals live between two worlds -- the world of their past, their families, their internal thoughts, and the world that surrounds them, of their adopted home. In many ways these two worlds are in conflict, but it is *from* this conflict that visions of the future are born. Salman Rushdie once stated, "Such is the miraculous nature of the future of exiles: what is first uttered in the impotence of an overheated apartment becomes the fate of nations." Through the voices of immigrant artists, and those of artists who are the children of immigrants, these self-exiled utterers, one can see the fate of this nation.

Volume 2, Issue 2 of *The Subcontinental* focuses on Arts and Culture. Specifically, we investigate ways for South Asian Americans to resonate the voice of community artists through the institutionalization of arts practices. We have tried to highlight artists who are working to preserve culture in South Asia and to integrate it into the American landscape.

One may ask why a public affairs journal is dedicating a full issue to arts and culture. In a democracy, politics are ruled by identities. The identities of South Asian Americans are still very much in flux, and artists serve a dual purpose for a young community. They reflect the thoughts of the community back on the community to create debate and dialogue on the very nature of this identity. Secondly, they act as ambassadors to present the community to those on the outside. While artists are not unique in this service to the community, they are an inextricable part.

We find South Asian American art at a crucial phase where artists are receiving wide recognition from America at large, and are gaining support from the South Asian American community. Unlike other areas of South Asian American public life, the Arts have not seen divisions seen in politics, religion, and business. Additionally, recent successes of South Asian authors, musicians, film makers, and performers have introduced South Asian art forms and artists to America in a big way. In literature, we may think of authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Monica Ali, or V.S. Naipaul just to name a few. To build on this success, last year the Network of

South Asian Professionals (NetSAP) and WordSoundAction held the third *South Asian Literary Festival* in Washington, DC, presenting the first ever *FirstWords South Asian Literary Prize*¹ to emerging South Asian American authors. In dance clubs throughout the country, America's youth can hear Lata Mangeshkar or Daler Mehndi mixed with the latest hip-hop tunes, pioneered by musicians like Vivek Bald, Karsh Kale and DJ Rekha. Sony Metreon, working with Project Ahimsa, presented three *Global Sight & Sound* festivals. M. Night Shyamalan achieved marked success with his unique brand of thrillers, and *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Monsoon Wedding* are amongst last year's independent film favorites. Ajay Naidu (*Office Space*, *Chutney Popcorn*) and Kal Penn (*Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, *American Desi*) have been able to garner steady Hollywood work. At the Smithsonian Institution, the *Sikh Heritage Festival* and the revolving exhibits at the Freer and Sackler Galleries are among the most well-attended exhibits. Additionally, in June the National Museum of Natural History opened a new gallery on Sikh culture.

Throughout the country, South Asian Americans have built infrastructures to bring the best performers and musicians from South Asian to the civic centers, concert halls, and homes of America. We find ourselves in a benchmark time for the South Asian American artist -- so important that *Time Out New York* magazine dedicated its March 24th, 2004 issue to emerging South Asian American artists in New York City.

In this issue, *The Subcontinental* aims to provide those involved and interested in South Asian American artistic and cultural scene with the resources they need to better understand the developments and organizing techniques to help institutionalize their art forms in order to weave themselves a permanent place in the diverse fabric of American society.

The Content:

Last year the *U.S. Fulbright Scholars Program* sent nearly fifty student scholars and researchers to study in South Asia.¹ We have the privilege to feature the work of two of these scholars: **Sandhya Jain**, who calls for efforts from the South Asian American diaspora to support the ancient art of papermaking, and **Anna Sobel**, who studied the role of puppetry-arts in rural education and social change.

Shahzia Sikander, recipient of many awards and honors including the Honorary Artist Award from the Pakistan Ministry of Culture and National Council of the Arts, introduces her latest series of prints that comment on the iconography showing the "entanglement of histories of India and Pakistan."

Noted conceptual artist and theater director **Ibrahim Quraishi** explains his recent project in Mannheim, Germany, in which he dissects the colonial history of the West. *FirstWords South Asian*

Literary Prize winner **Sharbari Ahmed** comments on being a female muslim performer after 9/11 and on South Asian American Theater.

In a two part series on youth activism and music, **Falu Bakrania** studies the blending of Bhangra and Hip-hop music to develop a South Asian political identity in the U.K. Ethnomusicologist **Peter Kvetko** follows with a study of this fusion phenomenon in the United States. **Aparna Sindhoor** discusses what she has learned about America through her position as a dancer from a marginal community (South Asian American), at least in the U.S., dance tradition. Following up on the development of a South Asian American arts scene, **Divya Kumar** looks to past immigrant groups in America for ways to institutionalize and continue to foster the Arts.

Novelist **Bapsi Sidhwa** comments on the process of writing and what it means to be a multi-lingual, immigrant artist. Finally, *The Subcontinental's* **Julie Rajan** reviews the new South Asian American literary journal, *Catamaran*.

We hope you find this issue valuable. We look forward to your feedback though letter or emails:

The Subcontinental

3413 Oakwood Terrace, NW

Washington, DC 20010

info@thesubcontinental.org

www.thesubcontinental.org



1. For more on the FirstWords South Asian Literary Prize, visit the prize website at www.firstwords.org.
2. The *U.S. Fulbright Scholars Program* sent seven scholars to Bangladesh, twenty-nine to India, one to Mauritius, seven to Nepal, and five scholars to Sri Lanka.