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FROM THE OFFICE OF THE ISA BOARD 2000-01

As we come to the close of yet another academic year, the members of the India Student Association (ISA) board for the year 2000-2001 can't help but reminiscence of the year that has gone by, the wonderful times we've had together, and the lessons we learnt about working hand-in-hand. It was a first-timer for the members on the board and while a few had been around a couple of years, others had just completed their first year in Iowa City. Being a member of the board gave us an excellent opportunity to meet new people from all walks of life. It was truly a privilege, and a wonderful experience that each of us will cherish for years to come.

The ISA board elections were held on May 5th 2000. The elections were held for the offices of the president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, graduate student coordinator, editor, special events coordinator and public relations, and a few undergraduates joined us on the board at the beginning of classes in the fall. We were a team of eleven dedicated and capable leaders and together we drafted an agenda and planed forthcoming events and those that would follow at a later date.

Our first event on hand was organizing airport-pickups and temporary accommodation for students entering the University of Iowa (UI). Initially we did encounter a few misses and mix-ups but eventually we managed to house everyone. We would like to thank every member of the ISA who participated and others; we tremendously appreciate their efforts in opening their homes and hearts. It was our first adventure in dealing with the community as a whole and it took a while to hone our skills at managing large groups of volunteers.

The next event was the fall picnic at the Iowa City Park on August 26th. Although it is customary that new incoming students attend, we were very happy to see a few old-timers and volunteers too. The big turnout was a premonition of even bigger events to come and the support that we, the board, would receive from our members in organizing a celebration of mammoth proportions. The huge turnout was a boost to our spirits and set the tone for future events.

The Halloween party called "bhago bhoot aaya" (Run! The ghost is coming!) at the Latino American Center on the October 14th was a fun-filled evening and gave an opportunity for the members of the ISA to unwind, relax, and even dance to a few tunes. Those who attended really enjoyed the evening and got a glimpse of the preparation for the Diwali, the festival of lights, which was already underway for a few months now.

Our biggest and most important event of the year, Diwali, was held on November 18th in the Main lounge at the Iowa Memorial Union. After hours of deliberations and miles of running around, for the first time Diwali 2000 was a sell-out days before the event. We had initially planned to sell 845 tickets due to fire regulations, but extended it to 950 by reducing the stage size to accommodate the demand for our prestigious event. In all we had an attendance of about 1000 people and everything went according to plan and it was a big success. Dinner started at 5:30pm and the food was catered from Taj Mahal Restaurant in Cedar Rapids. We wish to offer our special thanks to the caterer for the exquisite ensemble of Indian cuisine, for a very nominal rate and for providing sufficient food. The cultural program began promptly on time at 8:00pm, which had a unique blend of classical, folk, Indian pop and dances. After the program we had an open hour dance from 10:00-11:00pm where the latest dance music was played so that everyone could loosen up and enjoy. Board members and members of the ISA had worked equally hard to organize a show that will surely be remembered for years to come. We would like to thank all the dedicated volunteers and the participants for their immeasurable contribution. The board organized an appreciation party for the volunteers and the participants on December 1st.

In the spring of 2001, undergraduate members of the board organized a semi-formal dance called "Reflections". This was a collaboration between the ISA, Asian American Coalition, the Vietnamese Student Association and the Chinese Student Association. This was the first time that we had this event and though it did not have a big turnout, it was a good learning and enjoyable experience. Hopefully this event will get more prominence and draw more participants in the coming years. Our last cultural event for this past year was a Spring Dance held at the Latino American Center on March 24th. Though it started out slow, by the end of the evening it was a big success. We had Indian food and a lot of Indian music. We hope to have many of these in the months and years to come.

The ISA website also went through major changes this year; both cultural and administrative. In 1998, the ISA created its first web site on the UI server, but not much was done since and it was in dire need of refurbishing and a new look. Our team set out goals and guidelines for the new site with provisions to expand it in the future. The board decided to cut the number of emails sent out every week to only the nominal ones and all advertisements were to be exclusively advertised on the web site. All emails from the ISA were to be sent from the ISA email account and one had to subscribe in order to receive ISA emails by registering on the web site. The web site became an excellent forum that provided us with the opportunity to catalog our events. This information and much more has also helped new incoming students as well as outsiders who wanted to know more about the ISA at the University of Iowa.

Movies and entertainment are a large part of our modern cultural heritage, and we decided to improve upon the previous foundation of video movie screenings to screening recent DVD movies so that the Iowa City community did not have to wait months before they could avail the opportunity to see these movie releases. We screened these movies, both Hindi and in regional languages, twice a month on Fridays at 6pm in spacious and comfortable auditoriums in the UI campus buildings. These events were possible largely due to efforts of a few very energetic and enthusiastic students and we want to thank those individuals for going the extra mile in procuring the latest DVD's, sometimes paying out of their pockets to do so.

Although this ISA board overturned many milestones during its glorious one-year tenure, the board was unable to achieve all its goals. Being a solely volunteer organization we have come to realize the limits of resources, specifically time. Daunting academic schedules and the pursuit of career goals left precious little time for anything else. We have gathered a new found respect for the duties of the ISA board members and it is sad to see that not often do people step ahead to lead their student organizations; we hope as the years go by that more and more students realize that the best way to change is by stepping up and leading the way. As the new board takes over the reins, we wish them very best of luck and we have complete faith that the new board will build upon the performance and extend the limits and horizons set by their predecessors.

Tuhin Diptiman, *President*
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Shenoy Adige, *Finance*
Preeti Deshpande, *Communications*
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Karunya Kandimalla, *Public Relations*
Neha Mehta, *Undergrad Coordinator*
Jyoti Randhawa, *Undergrad Public Relations*
Neekesh Dharia, *Technology, Web Site*

Is Love Enough?

by Neha Mehta

The sun set in the almost dark sky with a golden pink glow. Whish! Whash! The waves crashed against the shore. A gentle breeze threw grains of sand all over Maya's bare feet. She laughed as she felt the sudden tickle of the sand. Her brown hair blew softly in the wind. "Hmm. I love you so much." Maya whispered in her boyfriend Sameer's ears. "Happy Anniversary, and many more to come." Maya took her little fingers and joined them with Sameer's big bear paws. She lay her head on his strong sturdy shoulders and fell asleep.

* * *

"Where were you last night?"

"What do you mean Mommy? I told you I was sleeping over at Dara's house."

"You are lying! I called all your friends and they said they had not seen you all day. Now tell me where you were." Maya's father walked in to the room, his nose flared with anger. He stuck the cordless phone into Maya's face.

"Call Dara right now."

"Why are you two acting like this? I'm going upstairs. I don't have to deal with your craziness."

"Pack your bags." Her dad ordered.

"What?" Maya turned her head in confusion.

"We are taking you to India. I booked us three tickets."

"Is this some kind of joke? Why do I have to go to India? This is the middle of my second year in college. You never give me freedom. I'm nineteen years old. All I did was sleep over at Dara's. Do you need to know what I ate, too?"

"Enough! Stop with the lies and pack your bags."

"Forget it. I'm not going."

"Maya! I know you weren't at Dara's. We went to her house."

"You what? Mom I can't believe you have no trust in me. How could you? Why do you always butt into my business?"

"Maya! Control your voice. Don't talk to your mother that way!" Her father was red in the face. He got angrier by the minute. His big black eyes widened.

Maya felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks. "Why don't you just say it? You think I was with a guy! Well I was!"

"Maya!" Her dad raised his hand to slap her but stopped himself.

"Why don't you just do it Dad? I love Sameer and he loves me. There I said it—now what are you going to do?" Before she knew it, he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her upstairs to her room. He threw her on the bed and left her there to cry all day. She stuffed her face in the pillow and didn't get up until late that evening.

* * *

Maya awoke to complete darkness. She almost forgot what had happened until she heard her mom's voice in the kitchen.

"Hello, Krupa. Hi this is Auntie Nancy from America. How are you? Since you are Maya's oldest cousin and already

married, I think you will understand the most. I am bringing Maya to India in two days. I want you to start looking for a husband for her. I think she is ready for marriage. She is very excited to come..."

Maya's heart stopped beating. She ran back to her room.

* * *

"Sameer, hi. Listen I need you to pick me up right now from the corner of my street, in front of the gas station." Maya held on to the phone, her mouth practically swallowing the phone.

"What? Maya, it's two o'clock in the morning. You're talking in your sleep."

"No. Please...I'll explain later but if you don't come now, I'll never see you again."



“Okay I’ll be there in a half hour. This had better be good.”

Maya hung up the phone and hurried to her closet. She packed all her makeup, her clothes, her money, her pictures, and her favorite teddy bear into two big suitcases. Her dad gave her the bear when she was in the 4th grade. She had fallen while skating and to make her feel better he bought it for her. She grabbed her coat and tiptoed slowly down the stairs in the dark, careful not to wake her parents. Maya stepped outside into the brisk night.

“Goodbye, I’m sorry it has to end this way.” She whispered, the same words she wrote on the note to her parents. She waited at the corner for her knight in shining armor to pick her up. Two big headlights flashed in her face.

“Hurry up, whoa—what are those suitcases for?” Sameer wiped his brown eyes as if he was dreaming.

“I’m running away to your apartment. I promise I’ll help pay rent and I’ll sleep on the couch,” she hopped in the car.

“Isn’t this a bit sudden? Why are you? When did you decide this?”

Maya told Sameer the whole story and by the end of it, she was crying her eyes out.

* * *

They entered the messy apartment. “Ouch!” Maya bumped into the couch. “Turn on the light, I can’t see where I’m going.”

“Sorry this place is a mess. I wasn’t expecting company. Listen to me,” he held her shoulders looking at her in the eyes, “What you are doing is wrong. Your parents probably weren’t even serious.”

“Yes they were. I heard my mom call India. Weren’t you listening? I love you Sameer, I don’t want to be with anyone else.” She ran her fingers through his hair as she pulled him closer. She kissed him hard and long as if to prove her words.

“Maya stop,” Sameer pulled away, “I don’t want you to go either. How about tomorrow I go and ask for your hand in marriage.”

“Oh yeah, that’ll really work. Can we just talk about this tomorrow? I’ve been through enough already. Good night.” She walked toward the bedroom.

“Um Maya, the couch is that way.”

* * *

“Good morning!” Sameer ran a hand through his black, silky hair and turned on the radio.

He walked into the kitchen to the smell of tea with ginger and toast.

“Yum...I think I’m going to like you living here.” He smiled and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

“Don’t get too comfortable with this breakfast idea. I just wanted to thank you.”

“I knew there was a reason. So did you call your parents?”

“Why would I do that?”

“They’ll be worried sick about you, then call the police, and pretty soon the whole world will be looking for you.”

“I wrote a note, they’ll get it. Besides why are you taking their side?”

“I’m not, oh forget it. What do you want to do today?”

“We can’t go anywhere because my parents will be searching for me.”

The phone rang and Maya jumped. Sameer ran to answer it. He motioned for Maya to be quiet.

“Hello. Hi mom. No I just woke up. You’re coming over? You want to drop some clean laundry off? How about I come over and pick it up? Okay I’ll see you in a bit. Bye.” He hung up the phone and cracked his knuckles. “Quick, help me clean up and hide your stuff. Freshen up and act like you just got here.”

“Oh no, what are we going to do?”

“Relax, my parents know we’re friends but just don’t leave any trails of you anywhere.” She stuffed one suitcase under the bed and the other in the closet knocking down some hangers. She ran to the bedroom and changed to jeans and a clean white T-shirt. She combed her hair into a messy braid and put on her most welcome smile. Sameer grabbed the dishes, placed them randomly in shelves, threw the pillows on the couch, and at the same time Maya vacuumed the living room. Sameer tripped over the cord and fell on his knees. They both laughed in spite of the tension. He picked himself up and ran for the shower. “Remember, just act normal.”

“Got it.” She put the vacuum away right in time. “Hi Auntie.” Maya answered the door and greeted his mom politely.

* * *

“Maya? Hi...” She looked at Maya with a puzzled look. “Is Sameer in the bedroom? It’s only ten in the morning. What are you doing here?”

“Umm...no Sameer is in the bathroom. Here I’ll take the laundry. He said you were stopping by. I just got here. I needed help with uh...homework.”

“This early?”

“Yeah I have plans later on....hey would you like something to eat or drink?”

“Why does it smell like ginger tea? Since when did Sameer know how to make that?”

“Oh come on Auntie, it’s not that hard. I’m sure he learned from friends.”

“Well Maya, tell Sameer I have to go. That boy takes too long in the shower. Enjoy...studying.” She closed the door behind her.

“Phew. Sameer, can you please hurry out of the bathroom? I need to use it.”

“Did my mom just leave?”

“Yes, you just missed her. Hurry!” She pounded on the door.

“Maya, why didn’t you tell me? Now she’ll be wondering what you were doing here and what I was doing in the shower with you in the apartment.”

“She was in a hurry. Jeez, don’t get so frustrated.” She hurried into the bathroom.

* * *

“Knock. Knock.”

“Who is it?” Sameer went over to the door buttoning up his shirt. He looked at the couple in front of him. The lady’s red eyes were puffed and the man’s black eyes were staring at him cold. It took him a second but he realized who they were. He recognized them from Maya’s pictures. “Hi...um...what can I do for you?” He noticed the sound of his own voice crack.

“Where is she? Where is our daughter Maya?” Maya’s dad pushed past Sameer and knocked him into the door. “Maya! Maya!”

Maya, about to turn the knob of the bathroom door stopped.

“Sir, you must be mistaken. Maya-.”

“Shut up! I don’t want that name to come out of your mouth. Nancy, get in here and look for her stuff. Take it to the car. Maya, get out wherever you are!” Her mom hurried about searching the closet. Her hands trembled. She located Maya’s suitcase and pulled it out. “I knew she was here.” He pulled the bathroom door open. Sameer closed his eyes and felt weaker than a sick man.

“Auntie, please let’s work something out. Maya will be miserable, do you want to see her unhappy?”

“Daddy, no!” a shattered scream came from the bathroom. Maya looked straight at Sameer. Sameer froze as Maya was dragged out by her father. She was on her knees, her hair loose, tears flooding down her face, and her dad pulling her by her hands against the wooden floor. “Stop... Sameer, I love you. I love him, Daddy!” The more she said the words, the harder her dad pulled.

“Please stop. You are hurting her. I love her!” Sameer let his tears roll down one by one. He got up and headed toward her. He grabbed her from behind and kissed her hair.

She turned her head and kissed his lips. Her dad pulled her up, breaking the kiss. She grabbed Sameer’s hand and held on tight.

“Maya, we did not raise you to go against us.” Her mom said, waiting by the door.

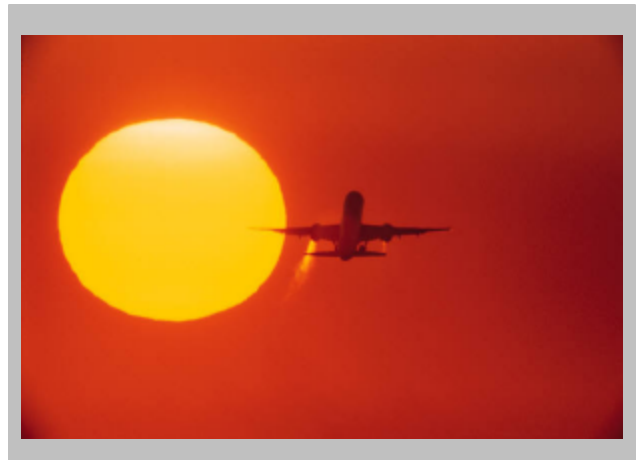
“Let go of me! Dad you are hurting me!”

“Then get up and walk with me! Do you think I enjoy this? You are my daughter. I know what is best for you.”

“You don’t know anything! Sameer is such a good person, but your cold heart doesn’t even want to try to see that. I hate you both!”

“Maya let’s go. The flight leaves in two hours,” her mother commanded.

Sameer sighed. “Good bye Maya.” Slowly she raised her eyes. She was shocked by his words but to her surprise she could only agree with him. Without saying a word, she let her fingers loose and let go of his hand. ■



An Omelet with Anjali

by Manisha Gadia

The light on the water heater shut off and I resolved to take my bath later. Anjali groaned, and I looked at her. With a toothbrush in her mouth, she gritted her teeth and rolled her eyes at me. The electricity had gone out.

“Roshan, how can you deal with this?” Anjali asked me as we sat down for breakfast.

“I barely noticed,” I chuckled. As long as I could remember, the electricity had come and gone several times a day.

We got up early so we could go to the temple for the morning service. Anjali would pass the opportunity to go to an ancient, extravagant mandir with mosaic floors and marble sculptures in Delhi just so she could sleep in, but she was up at seven to go to the one-room mandir made of rough, unfinished concrete across the street. We walked up the mandir stairs and heard the Pandit banging upon a gong, signaling the start of the morning service. Anjali and I were the only ones there other than the Pandit. The mandir seemed like a bare cave, except for a small window and the modest altar. Panditji chanted a prayer, facing pictures and small sculptures of Hanuman, Krishna, and several other gods. Then he turned around and blessed us, painting red tikas on our foreheads and splashing us with holy water. We held out our right hands for the blessed offerings of holy water and prasad.

After the service, we went back home and climbed up to the flat rooftop. A light wind ruffled Anjali’s long black hair. I showed her how to fly one of my ten-rupee tissue-paper kites. The kite billowed in the clear Rajasthani sky. After a while, she gave the kite string back to me. Anjali wandered around the rooftop, watching people on the street and gazing out toward the mountains, while I talked to people on the other rooftops.

When another kite appeared in the sky, I yelled out “Now this is war!” Anjali walked over toward me and I explained the game to her. “I have to try and cut his string while he tries to cut mine.”

“Didn’t you pay extra for that kite? Why would you risk sacrificing it?” she asked.

“That’s the game,” I replied. “It’s a favorite Indian time pass.” She smiled when I said “time pass”.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I don’t intend on losing my kite. I am going to win.”

Anjali and I shared a large thali for lunch. I savored the opportunity to eat out of the same plate as she. As my mother poured us each some more aam-ras and replenished the thali with more roti, she informed us that we would be going to the Chauhan’s house for chai in the afternoon. “Chauhan Baba has not been feeling well,” she said. “We ought to pay the family a visit.”

We took a family-sized three-wheeler to their house. The unpaved, narrow road was full of potholes and litter. I felt unusually irritated every time we had to stop to let a cow or motorcycle get by.

A servant greeted us at the Chauhan’s door. We stepped into a large courtyard. The Chauhans were fairly well off, yet their house had remained unchanged for several decades. The house was a shell for rooms – its courtyard and corridors were open to the weather. They would turn to mud in the rain and would create a dust storm on a dry, windy day. This particular day was dry and breezy. Chickens and naked children ran around. The servant guided us into one of the dimly lit rooms. Chauhan Baba was lying inside. The smell of kerosene from the lamp next to his bedside permeated the air. Everyone said “*namaste*” to the old man as he attempted to sit up. I glanced over at Anjali. My cousin looked uncomfortable and out of place. Dadaji, our grandfather, asked Chauhan Baba, the eldest member of the household, how he was feeling.

Babaji coughed, “Not too great. The damn medicine they are giving me is making my bones ache more. It seems to be causing more problems than it is fixing.”

“Yes, sometimes medicine does that, or at least it seems to,” Dadaji nodded.

“No, it doesn’t just *seem* to, it *is* making me worse. The doctor is so foolish, he won’t listen. Just like people these days, they don’t listen to anything. Did you see the newspaper today? I can’t believe...” Chauhan Baba went on a long tirade about how corrupt the world had become. While attempting to tune him out, I noticed Anjali tugging at her jeans with her left hand and staring fixedly at the foot of the bed.

Babaji suddenly paused, coughed some more, and looked at Anjali. “She has come from Bombay?” he asked.

Dadaji said, "Oh... I forgot to introduce you, this is my dear granddaughter, Anjali. She has come here from America." Anjali bowed her head toward Babaji, pressed her hands together, and quietly murmured, "namaste."

"She doesn't wear *salwar kameez*?" Babaji looked at Dadaji inquisitively. He muttered, smugly, "Kids these days have no respect." Anjali continued to tug at her jeans. Her eyes momentarily peered at the old man's face and then drifted back to the foot of the bed. He continued, "Since she grew up away from the motherland, perhaps she does not even know what respect is."

A woman timidly entered the room, her head covered in a sari and slightly bent downward. She looked to be only a few years older than Anjali or me, probably in her early twenties. By her age and her mannerisms, I guessed that she was the wife of Babaji's grandson. Raising her eyes only to shoulder-level, she announced quietly that chai was ready. My family followed her into the room next door to sit down and have some tea, snacks, and small talk. The rest of the Chauhan family joined us. Anjali and I ended up sitting on opposite ends of the room. I sipped my chai and politely attempted to engage in the pointless conversation. Chauhan Aunty, the old man's daughter-in-law, tried to offer Anjali more food.

Anjali put her hand over her plate, imitating common Indian gestures by smiling and shaking her head, saying "nai, nai". Aunty was relentless though, and Anjali gave in. I wished I were sitting next to Anjali so we could talk to each other about more important things than the weather or local gossip.

I've had to listen to the aches of old men and engage in small talk over chai all my life. It never bothered me very much before. Sometimes I've even enjoyed it. Yet that day, I got irritated with the mundane conversation and the ridiculous house. I became upset that I was still in the village and felt that life elsewhere would be much different. I kept picturing Anjali tugging at her jeans, thinking about

how uncomfortable she was. A desire to get away from the stagnant village consumed me.

On the way back to our fully enclosed home, the deluxe three-wheeler stopped abruptly. Anjali and I, sitting alone in the rear with our backs to the driver, turned around. A wrinkled man wearing a loincloth was squatting in the middle of the narrow road, and the three-wheeler could not get by. When we realized that he taking a shit, we looked at each other and then down at the floor. We tried not to laugh.

Later that night, I snuck out of the house and bought an omelet from a street vendor. I snuck back in and motioned for Anjali to follow me up to my room. She gave me a puzzled look but followed me anyway.

When we were in my room, I shut the door and locked it. I whispered to Anjali "I bought an omelet, see?" Anjali's mouth dropped open and her eyes lit up. She knew that eggs were not allowed in the house. The two of us quietly devoured the delicious omelet.

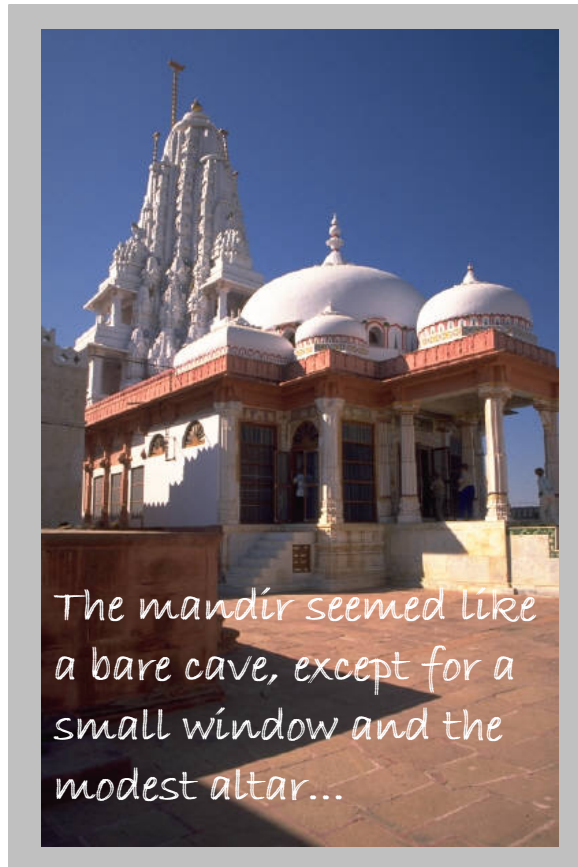
"Roshan, that was the best omelet I've ever had," Anjali exclaimed. I grinned. I knew that eating omelets was no big deal to her; she probably even prepared them in her own kitchen. "Good boys don't sneak out and buy omelets, Roshan," Anjali teased me as we crumpled up the wax

paper that the omelet was wrapped in.

After all the evidence had been cleared away, Anjali watched me as I got up and pulled a small box out of the dresser drawer. I sat down and looked at her. She looked radiant. "What's in the box?" she asked me.

I carefully opened the box and took out the envelopes inside. Her eyes beamed in recognition. "These are the rakhis and letters you have sent me. I have kept them all," I said.

"I wish you could be here on Raksha Bandan," I told her, "I miss you always, but especially then. This year, since I knew you were coming, I waited so you could tie my rakhi." I



opened the newest of the envelopes and took out the letter, rakhis, and a small packet kum kum mixed with grains of rice. Anjali left the room for a moment and came back holding a small plate with a couple of drops of water on it. She took the packet of kum kum and rice and mixed it with the water. She painted a tika on my forehead with the kum kum, then placed the rice on the tika and on top of my head. I painted a tika on her forehead and held out my wrist.

"Which one do you want me to tie?" she asked.

"I like the big one." She tied the biggest of the rakhis around my wrist. Once she had finished, I looked at my wrist and told her "It looks nice." She smiled. I reached into my pocket and tried to give her fifty rupees.

"What are you doing?" she asked me.

"It's for Rakhi. I know it's not very much, but I wanted to give you at least something."

"Roshan, don't give me any money. I tied the rakhi because I knew it was important to you, but I don't want any money." She had become upset.

"Isn't Rakhi important to you?" I asked her, feeling disenchanted.

"Well...yes... I mean...I don't know..." she struggled to explain.

"Anjali, if you're just being polite... there's no need to be polite with me. I'm your cousin. Please take the money. It's not even that much."

"Roshan. It's not about being polite. I don't want the money. I don't need money from you." She looked around the room, as if searching for words to explain what she meant. She seemed angry, her face tense with frustration.

"I had hoped that this would never come up. At least, not like this," Anjali said softly. Tears welled up in her eyes. "I feel insulted, but I know you weren't trying to insult me. I feel bad because I know you meant well," she sighed. "Rakhi is so outdated to me. A girl ties a rakhi around her brother's wrist, he gives her money in return. Why am I going to school, why am I preparing for college, for a job, for all these things if I am not expected to provide the same support to you as you do to me?" She struggled to explain, and I struggled to understand. Anjali's features were so Indian, yet her mannerisms and attitude were so foreign.

"Anjali... it's my duty to give you money. Not only that, I want to give it to you."

"Roshan, all my life I've been told that women are just as good as men. I've been encouraged to study hard so I can become a doctor or engineer, or anything that was traditionally a male profession. For some reason, I feel this ritual defies all that."

"Anjali, I'm not giving you this money because I think you need it. I'm giving it because I want to give it to you," I pleaded with her.

"Roshan, if you want to give me something, buy me a gift. Actually, you already did. You bought me an omelet. Sharing an omelet with you meant more to me than any amount of money. Don't give me money... it doesn't feel right to me."

I put the fifty rupees back into my pocket. I was happy she enjoyed the omelet, but I still felt upset. "Roshan," she said, "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry. I just want you to understand that... your companionship is so important to me."

"Roshan," she suggested, "Maybe we could make a new tradition. Maybe you could tie a rakhi around my wrist..." She looked at me hopefully.

"Well... that would go against everything I've been brought up to believe," I sighed.

We sat, examining the dust that had accumulated on the floor. A few moments later, Anjali suddenly exclaimed, "I know! You could make me a friendship bracelet." I looked at her questioningly. "I'll show you how. We can make it together." She wiped away her tears, and gave me a hug. "Come on, let's go see if we can find some string."

We found some embroidery string and scissors in our grandmother's sewing supply drawer. "Which colors should we use?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I shrugged, "You'll be the one wearing it."

"I know. That's why I want you to choose," she exclaimed.

I chose orange, green, white, and blue. "These colors will remind you of India," I said. I watched her slender fingers as she took the colors and began to weave them together. We sat close together and she patiently showed me how to braid the friendship bracelet. She touched my hair as I tied the completed bracelet around her wrist.

"It's beautiful. It will remind me of you always," she said quietly.

Later, while watching a movie with the family, I saw Anjali looking at the bracelet and touching it with her other hand. She caught me watching her and smiled.

I couldn't sleep that night. Anjali and I had had so much fun during her short visit. I felt as though I had entered her world – though really, she had entered mine. Anjali would be boarding a train to Delhi the next day, and would board a plane back to the United States the day after that. I would be forced to re-enter my own world as she went back to hers. I thought about how boring meals were going to be, having the thali all to myself. The charpai bed poked

Surrounded by my sleeping village, I thought of all that was familiar to me, all that I would miss if I were to leave.



at my skin. I tried scratching my back. I couldn't get comfortable.

Finally, I got out of bed and went upstairs to the rooftop. The chilly night air soothed me. Surrounded by my sleeping village, I thought of all that was familiar to me, all that I would miss if I were to leave. I inhaled the desert air, then rubbed my hands together to keep warm. While looking down at the pothole-filled street below me, I thought of all the things Anjali had made me notice. I imagined a world with no mandirs within walking distance. No wonder she was enchanted by the one across the street. I marveled at how many things she had learned from textbooks about India that I didn't know. I imagined a world where I couldn't come home and play the kite game after a long day at school. A voice startled me – "Hey, what's going on?"

I turned around to see Anjali. "So, I guess you couldn't sleep, either," she observed.

"I just wanted to come up here one last time before I leave," she said. "I think it is my favorite part about visiting. Besides seeing you, of course." She laughed.

Not quite out of my melancholy, I replied "I will miss hearing your laugh. I will miss having you around, Anjali."

She walked toward the edge of the rooftop and looked down at the street. "Let's stay up here until the sun rises. I would love to watch the sun rise over the mountains," she said.

Anjali and I sat close together to keep warm, enjoying the early morning air. As we sat and talked, I watched her touch the friendship bracelet we made together. "Maybe we'll do a better job of keeping in touch this time," Anjali said quietly.

"Maybe," I said somewhat incredulously. We laughed softly, knowing that we probably wouldn't.

"We *will* have Rakhi. Then at least *I'll* be forced to write a letter to *you*," she said. I smiled back at her. The sounds of morning enveloped us. In the distance, we could hear vendors calling out their merchandise, catering to the early risers. ■

Infinity

...I open the door. Steve is there. Where's Gina? Keyur is going to be late. I sit next to Steve. He smiles at me. The professor is explaining cosmology and the relativity theory. I am staring at his face. Why don't I ever pay attention? "The Galaxies expand like raisins in a bread loaf that is getting bigger..." I hate raisins! I never eat bread or any pastry containing raisins. How can people stand them? Gina is here. Steve raises his hand, "Does this theory explain what happened at the time of the Big Bang?" The Big Bang...a huge explosion; deafening or mute? I am at a great distance from it, I can't hear it, only see it. It is electrifying. Look at her, Abercrombie!

Does she ever repeat a dress? I think I am the only soul in the world without a Denim jacket! "...The Universe has no edges; it is boundless, spreading to infinity." So they have these Miss Universe contests and India won in '94. Sushmita Sen did us the honors. "You may think we (the Milky Way Galaxy) is at the center, a special location since we see everything receding from us. But that isn't true. We are not special. Every galaxy sees the same thing." Why are we so egotistical? Miss Universe—the most beautiful, talented, accomplished mass of atoms among infinite other masses.

We haven't seen the others yet. Only five more minutes to go. Then I'll be free, although I have tons of things to do. "Hey guys, I am a champion. Saw how I held up the lecturer with one question? I'm a genius." We all laugh. "Do it again the next time." "Hey I have a joke for you." "Go ahead. Tell it." I start smiling even before it begins. I know it is going to be funny. Steve finishes the joke. Well, it was funny but I over-expected the humor factor. We part ways. I walk on. There are so many colors on the streets. People in America are colorful, each one different from the next. How do they live under a single flag? And in peace and democracy too! That is something no nation has been able to achieve as yet. Summer is here. Clothes are shrinking. I walk past the bus

stop. Few guys look at me. How do people see me? Do they see my skin—brown, smooth? Or do they see my face? My eyes? They would know me if they looked in my eyes. If only I could see myself as others do, if everybody could do that. And yet, I know myself the best of all. Every little detail, every little secret is hidden in my heart. My face is a window, sometimes with curtains that are opaque. Who cares? I walk down the road. I need some coffee. It is so refreshing, in any weather. But tea is even better. Hey, I know that guy on the bike. He was hovering around me at the bus stop, as if he wanted say something. I wonder if my intuition is always right. Well, from past experiences it has seemed so. But I always mistrust it. Reena says one should believe it. I don't know. Oh my god! I have to look for an apartment soon. I hate that incorrigible drunkard! I bought some coffee...this



How do people see me? Do they see my skin—brown smooth? Or do they see my face? My eyes? They would know me if they looked in my eyes.

should help me get through the proofreading. Literature is so vast. It spreads to infinity. Every line, every word gives birth to uncountable more. There's a nice song...Kiss me, down by the milky twilight...hmm...la la la la...Oh, it's over. This tastes great!! That woman in class is very smart. She really understands all this heavy stuff. And that other idiot, she is not even sure what her questions mean! Hey, I need to buy sunglasses, the very best ones this time. Let's check the mail...wow! Nim's coming down in summer!! I am ecstatic! The guy on the next computer is looking at me. I

must be smiling too wide...i can't believe this...I actually jumped??!! I'm getting out of here! Oh, it is raining...beautiful. I would love to get drenched; maybe some other time. I shouldn't put off so many things. I have to write mails, call friends; learn new things in summer; tell her that funny thing that happened yesterday; discuss the future; travel the world...an ear-piercing screech!! What is it? The poor animal! Will someone sue them for this? Did it ever think, like I do constantly? Now it must be feeling peaceful; peace is when thinking ceases. I see its soul going to infinity. That is probably what death does. Life brings us here, to zero, death takes us back. Do we reach the edge of the Universe then?... ■

• tara •

विरह-वार्ता

- लतिका भटनागर

लहर लहरती आज मचलती,
बाहों को फैलाए।
दूर है गगन, मिलन है कठिन;
कौन उसे समझाए।

लहर के मनमे अमृत की
अरसे से थी ईक आस।
चंद्र सुधा रस पीने की थी
मन मे प्णार की प्णस
सागर सारा खारा खारा
बुझे न प्णस बुझाए
दूर है गगन, मिलन है कठिन;
कौन उसे समझाए।

दूर क्षितिज के मधुर अधर पर
फैली है मुसकान
मस्त हवा है छेड़ रही
मीठी मुरली सी तान
चंद्र सुहाना हो मस्ताना
मन्द मन्द मुसकाए
दूर है गगन, मिलन है कठिन;
कौन उसे समझाए।



Separation by Latika Bhatnagar

The wave ebbs and flows stirred up
Raising her arms towards the moon
But the sky is much too far away
Who can tell her how unattainable is this union.

All these ages the wave has longed for his ambrosia
She had a heart-felt thirst for his nectar
The ocean's salty water failed to quench her thirst.

A faint smile spreads along the horizon's lip
A carefree wind plays flute-like strains
The enchanting moon is thrilled
And smiles ever so gently.





Hide and Seek
by Kanchana Iyer

One-Two-Three
She hides underneath the covers.

Four-Five-Six
Feigning sickness.

Seven-Eight-Nine
Calling for her medicine.

Ten-Eleven-Twelve
Escaping from her family's problem--husband, children...a bottle for a
bottle.

Hide, that's the easiest way out.
Don't expect them to seek you--
For they won't have your bottle to end all problems.



Ganpati

by Chiraag Dharia

Winter's Call
by Neha Mehta

Hearing winter's call
The last of the birds
Fly away
In the dark silent night.

Driving home
My headlights turned on
No more sun above me
No more grass below me

Cold crisp air
Bites my skin
My fingers tucked
In the warmth of my gloves.

Warm woolen sweaters,
Hot chocolate burns my tongue.
I turn to look outside
Snowflakes falling from the sky
Have heard winter's call.



Untitled
by Dawn George

Do you think of me when it is late,
wondering...is this fate?
Do you think of me at night
when you shut out the lights?
Do you think of me as you awake
does your heart begin to break?
Do you think of me when you walk
or even when you talk?
Do you think of me when you are alone
or when you hear the phone?
Do you think of me while sitting in your car
wishing I wasn't so far?
Do you think of me while looking at the moon
or listening to that special tune?
Do you think of me when you cry
or do you just *sigh*?
Do you think of me when you are blue :(
hoping this love will someday come true?
Do you think of me, too
The way I think of you?

Sweatshops in India and Worldwide: Why Should We Care?



by Sara Siebert

The discussion about sweatshop conditions worldwide has become louder in the past year. Sweatshops are marked by long hours, forced overtime, unsafe working conditions, mass firings for union organizing and other human rights abuses. They are defined as any factory that violates two of the internationally recognized labor laws. Many people speak to the fact that 80-90% of sweatshop workers are women.

Most people associate sweatshops with the Majority world (developing countries). While there are certainly sweatshops within the United States, which deserve attention, there is some truth to the association between poor working conditions and the Majority world. Due to factors like the success of labor unions in the U.S. and the desperate poverty stemming from years of colonialism and exploitation in the Majority world, multinational corporations have taken advantage of the cheaper labor pool and built factories abroad.

Economists argue that this, in itself, is not a bad thing. Many people in the Majority world will agree with them because unemployment is high across the world. Of course, other people in the Majority world argue that multinational corporate domination is a form of exploitation in and of itself. Many nations have had neither the time nor the infrastructure to build up their own industries or follow their own ideas of what "development" means. Both groups

agree that a problem arises when international involvement leads to international exploitation and when free trade becomes a race to the bottom.

The trouble comes when multinational corporate interest means finding the cheapest labor possible. When that labor pool tries to organize a union or asks for higher wages on which they could feed their children the corporation moves to another country. For this reason, the slogan of one women's labor rights group I visited in Nicaragua was "Employment, yes... but with dignity" (translation by author).

India does not have the vast number of internationally-run sweatshops at this time. According to Students Against Sweatshops member Ned Bertz (who has done some research on the subject) this is due mostly to the reality that no foreign businesses were allowed into India for many years until the mid 1980s. If we speak about sweatshops as factories where workers do not receive a living wage for their work, regardless of who owns the company, the sweatshop conditions are pervasive in India currently. And in the years to come, India will likely become more of a target for multinational business. President Clinton was accompanied with several business leaders on his recent visit to India. Thus improvement of U.S./Indian relations and the relaxing of trade regulations will likely lead to greater interest in India by multinational corporations.

We have seen that sweatshops affect women and that they affect India's future. In reality, they also affect us all as consumers. We are connected with workers throughout the world by the products we buy. If we want to encourage the just treatment of workers throughout the world, we must use our power as consumers to do so. ■

How Do You Explain Being Indian To Anybody?

by Mary Vadakkan

The smell of damp mud transcends my mind to the past, my childhood days in Bombay. Today is one such day in U.S that brings back memories both good and bad. I walk across the ped mall that reminds me of the long walks I used to take with my friends in India. The jokes we used to laugh about and the fun we had. My memories were baked old when I revisited India after being in U.S for such a long time. It was a trip full of experiences and moments to be unfolded. While I was away, time had stopped for me. And I had a lot of catching up to do in a month. I had missed a lot of experiences and stories being out of India.

Loud traffic, pestering taxi drivers and beggars awoke me from my long slumber as I stepped out of the airport. I was actually in India absorbing like a sponge everything that came my way. My first impression was that a lot of things (and faces) had changed. During the trip, I had been bragging to my brother, *Arre*, wait until we hit Andheri, I know the locality. But before I knew it, Andheri had passed and so had the locality I grew up in. The entire *naksha* of the place had changed. I would not have recognized the area if it hadn't been for my Dad. As I stepped inside the building, all these peering faces went by like a slide show. Then one by one, I matched names to the faces. The long gone familiarity was back and I felt at home once again.

My very first goal was to do everything that I could not do in U.S. I was like a kid who had just got her dream trip to Esselworld and was eagerly waiting to try out every ride, but not knowing which to choose first. I definitely had to try *ganne ka ras* (sugarcane juice which was quite alien to the Americans I know). My friends in the U.S had assured me that things would not be the same when I go to India. But I was happy to find that my favorite drink still tasted the same. And of course, my friends and I had our long walks, flavored with stories of the past; chatting about "Rose" and the "Friendship" days that I had missed. I revisited Juhu Beach and tried out every

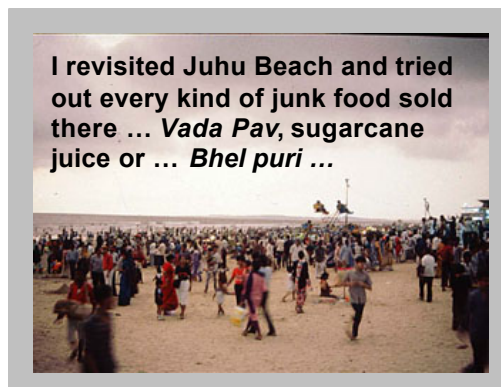
kind of junk food sold there. It was a pleasurable experience since there were hardly any restaurants that offered *Vada Pav*, sugarcane juice or even *Bhel puri* in U.S. I was very fortunate that just like the sugarcane juice none of my friends had changed. They were still the same friends I had left years ago. My stay in Bombay would not have been as memorable if it hadn't been for them.

Oddly enough, living in the US taught me more about our culture. The rituals and the traditions that I never before had to explain now required clarification. My classmates in the US would ask me about the "dot" which was referred to our *bindi*. Is it a Ruby or a Garnet? At first such questions would annoy me. Then I realized after all, curiosity is part of human nature. My American friends were just trying to learn more about my culture and me.

At times, the questions seemed never-ending and it got tiring. The explanations were quite difficult for me. How do you try to explain to a person who has never been to India about cultures in India? How do you explain being Indian to anybody? There is no formula like our Bollywood movies to

explain "Indianness". To me, it's an *aviya*" (a Kerala dish that has all kinds of vegetables in it), a mesh of different colors that each has their own uniqueness. To some India brings to mind lots of jungles, snakes and unending poverty. To others, India means something more spiritual.

We realize the worth of an object only when we lose it. Its like taking simple gestures, customs for granted. You miss them only when they are no longer in your presence. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. I have changed a lot going to places and being among different cultures. One admires the beauty of other cultures thereby achieving a new respect for their own. It makes you feel Indian at heart not *guju* or *malu* or *gulti* and so on. ■



Dilchasp Masala *by Celine Simon*

Ingredients: Rice, chicken, onion, tomato, green chilli, ginger and garlic paste, puthina (mint), coriander leaves, garam masala powder and whole garam masala also, turmeric powder, chilli powder, coriander powder, cashew nut and dry grapes (raisins).

Method: Take oil in a pan, add onion thinly sliced, let it cook brown, add tomato to it, stir fry, add turmeric powder, chilli powder, coriander powder, garam masala powder, then add coriander leaves and puthina, add chicken to it. Let it cook.

Soak the rice in water for half-an-hour, cook it half, add to it whole garam masala, chicken cube and lemon juice, while cooking, add salt to it. Drain it. Keep it aside. Fry 3 big onions separately in ghee till dark brown, add to it cashew nuts and raisins.

Take one utensil add little ghee to it, put some cooked chicken with masala, then add little rice, top on that add fried onion mix, little coriander and puthina (cut small). If you need you can add color to it. Repeat these layers twice or thrice. Then cover with the aluminum foil, close with the lid and keep it on fire for 15 - 30 minutes. Biryani is ready to serve with raitha (yogurt mix ie. onion, tomato, green chilli, curry leaves, salt.).

Now try, and enjoy the dilchasp biryani!!!!



OUR VOICES

Dear Readers,

Hello again and welcome to another edition of Ekta! Foremost this year we would like to thank all the people who submitted their work (Thank you!). We are proud of the creativity, intelligence, and diversity evident in the pieces presented. Also we would like to thank everyone for the kind words (and not so kind words) that we received for past issues. We always welcome praise and criticism.

This year Ekta was created with the intent that all viewpoints and opinions are allowed space to be expressed. Hence, the creation of "Our Voices", a space dedicated for you. We have tried to reflect the diversity in our Indian community in Iowa City. We also hope that you get inspired to write and create after reading our issue.

Ekta Editorial Board
Sonia Cheruvillil
Tohfa Manji
Neekesh Dharia

Are you a desi lost in the corn-fields of Iowa? Do you want to find other desis like you? Well get involved with ISA!

Getting involved is easy now. ISA is finally in the 21st century. We have a website that is functional and has vital information such as job postings, want ads, upcoming events and most importantly, movie screenings!

Don't forget to bookmark this essential desi website:
<http://www.uiowa.edu/~isa>

Along with all the other cool things you will find on the site, you can find EKTA in its full glory (in full color, PDF format).

You may think of this as a shameless plug but its not; I really want you to go to the damn website and check it out.

So get you desi selves to the nearest computer and post your biodata today!

Neekesh Dharia, Web and Technology

This letter is regarding last year's Ekta. Every year Ekta features interesting and fun articles. Last year's Ekta, however, chose to include profanities and other inappropriate subjects into its issue. The decision was unnecessary and wrong. I hope future Ekta Board members show greater maturity and greater selectivity when choosing articles.

Anonymous

[Editors' note: We believe in diversity and allowing people to voice their opinions, no matter what they may be.]

I just wanted to send my long belated congratulations to the Editorial board and the authors of articles in last Fall's Ekta [2000]. It was wonderful to read the very naturally written articles. One of the guys who narrated his frank experiences of being an Indian American was the best and most touching.

Good luck for keeping up the good work in return for virtually nothing. Just wanted to convey that there are people who appreciate it.

Amit Thakur

ISA: GRADS VS. UNDERGRADS

From the moment I entered the University of Iowa as a freshman, many people warned me about the India Student Association. I heard horror stories about the board, and the ever-rising notion that there was a definite tension between the undergraduate and graduate student population. A few of my friends had served on the board and told me about some of the comments made by graduate board members. A popular quote was "We can't let Americans take part in Diwali. Only Indians should be allowed to take part in Diwali." Or when another board member proclaimed, "The ISA website should be only open to Indians." Another good quote was when a former ISA member told me "The India Student Association is a graduate organization. Thus, the undergraduates should not have any say in its matters." These comments should not be taken lightly. I find it extremely disturbing that members of ISA would be so closed-minded and uninterested in undergraduate affairs.

This year's board was no exception. Their true colors became evident during the Diwali show. I was shocked at the blatant disrespect given to many undergraduates, and the immature actions of some board members during the show when they tried to physically remove people from the show. If the capacity of the room had been met, ISA should have paid for security. Nobody on the board has the right to physically push or shove anyone. I was also surprised to see one board member turning people away from the room by

claiming they had reached full capacity but allowing his friends in without tickets or volunteer nametags. The board also failed to respond to my numerous inquiries towards an undergraduate/graduate problem. I emailed and talked to several board members throughout the semester, yet I never received a response. The fact that ISA ignored these inquiries shows how little they care about undergraduate concerns.

Although many graduates did not care to see this issue come to light, I do agree that in order to facilitate a more positive undergraduate/graduate relationship more undergraduates need to become involved in ISA. However, graduate students have not exactly helped undergraduates become involved in ISA. ISA has a program set up for incoming Indian graduate students, yet when undergraduate Indians enter the University of Iowa there is no avenue for them to be incorporated into ISA. I served on the board for a full term and tried to get many undergraduates involved in ISA. Most of them had the same response, which was that ISA had not taken any interest in undergraduate affairs, so why should they bother spending their time on the board? This idea has been perpetuated by the constant disrespectful treatment by the graduate students of the ISA board toward the undergraduates. I sincerely hope that next year's board will realize the importance of maintaining a sound relationship between the undergraduates and graduates, and bring more undergraduate involvement to ISA.

Rachna Chaudhari

American-Desi-From-A-Boat

If you are a desi, chances are you know who F.O.B.'s and A.B.C.D's are. Fresh Off the Boat. American Born Confused Desis. Perhaps the oddest acronyms known since it has so little to do with Indians or Americans. Certainly Indians in India would be largely puzzled by identities so carelessly linked to transportation. It is a strictly Indian-American term, referring to the gap between first and second generation Indian-Americans. Years ago (back when I was unaware of any such acronyms), when people asked I would say, "I grew up in India. I am Indian" Smiling proudly, rolling my rr's, extending my ee's. Iiiiinddiiaa. My India. Disclaiming America in every way. I did not grow up in the suburbs of Iowa. I grew up in Bombay—a name I belonged to, a name that had made space for me, understood my Indian-ness without needing an explanation. Bombay—a word with far more exotic possibilities than I.o.w.a. It was only later on a trip to India that I discovered parts of me distinctly American, like extensions I didn't know I had. I imagine a fashion crisis with my body in a kurta and jeans underneath.

In America, as Indians we are all trying to reconcile our Indian traditions with clashing American values. We are Indians in America, trying to lay down our Americanisms on top of Indian-brown skins.

Perhaps that's why it is so difficult to understand the "F.O.B's" and "A.B.C.D's"—terms that clearly separate us, divide us. One would think such meaningless designations would be just that—nonsense. But as we know, they become a superficial, but strong measure of Indian-ness in a world that is not Indian. You look around and you see white swamis with clear blue eyes in the Ped Mall, asking you about the Bhagvad Gita. And the Vortex is selling "Shiva Loves You" T-shirts for \$25 and the Peaceful Fool has cut up my mother's sarees into dipping, hugging dresses that my mom would crack my head open for wearing. An uneasy inclusion that feels even more alien.

These days when people ask me, I say, "I came here when I was eleven." And I nod when I hear, "Oh, so you are American."—a word that feels like an ill-fitting shirt. (Does it show?) "You have an accent," some note, puzzled. And I am grateful that I haven't entirely dissolved in some proverbial melting pot. I am an American with strong and proud Indian roots. Not an A.B.C.D. with an accent.

Sonia Cheruvillil

My Movie Star

by Mona Toke

My one dream in life is to meet a movie star. There were many instances where my dream was halfway fulfilled. What I mean is that I have seen many actors/actresses in concert. My dream is shared with millions of other girls.

Anyway back to my half fulfilled dream. I saw movie stars in concerts, concerts where they perform songs from their movies. They dance to the songs, some actors can sing, but mostly dance. Every year newcomers enter the movie industry and the hotter they are, the more fans they have, which can be said for American movie stars, too. Right now, there is one actor who is on the top. Every movie he has starred in was a hit, and all his costars became just as famous. He could be compared to Midas, everything he touches turns into gold. He is a very good-looking actor and you should believe me when I say he can act very well. My dream in the beginning was to meet any good-looking star but after this guy came in the movie he was the one I wanted to meet. Just recently that dream sort of came true.

I was on my way to visiting my grandparents. Before reaching my grandparents' house we had a layover at the international airport. I always heard from people who laid over at this airport that they would occasionally spot an actor or actress walking around getting to their flight. I did not believe that I would be one of the lucky people to spot a movie star going to their flight.

I was sitting with my family and all of a sudden I noticed that an actor I always wanted to meet. He was walking like no one would notice him, however I did notice him. I shouted to family, "Oh my god! Look who is walking by!" My family told me I was crazy and I told them to look. They finally looked and

joined me in my excitement. My cousin happened to have a camera on her. She ran with her camera and got a really awesome picture. Even though photography is prohibited, she was still able to take the picture and she got weird looks but no one stopped her. Now if we were at Los Angeles or some other airport in the United States, she would be stopped immediately by security. Also, there would be no way to get near the person because of guards. I am sure they wouldn't be walking around freely. That was not the case in this airport because he probably had another person walking with him.

I wasn't brave enough to go up to him and talk to him. The next time I come up to this situation, I will have the audacity to talk to him. Hopefully his new wife will not mind. That is also what hurts, is that he was flying to get married to his childhood sweet hart. He broke the hearts of all his fans. Oh well, a girl can still dream, cant she? ■

"He broke the hearts of all his fans. Oh well, a girl can still dream, cant she?"



RANGELT CHICAGO

by Jim Slopinski

Ok, as I look now at one of the promotional fliers that were strewn everywhere along W. Devon Avenue in Chicago last October, I clearly see the words "dandia," "raas garba," and "Navrati Mahotsau." But when I first looked at one, I only saw the lovely pictures of Urmila Matondkar and the announcement that she would be appearing with the Bombay Beats Orchestra on October 13 at the Rosemont Convention Center. Of course even if I'd noticed the other words, to me they would have been meaningless. I undoubtedly would have taken "Navrati Mahotsau" to be someone's name.

I balked at buying a ticket right then and there, since I wasn't sure if I'd be able to return to Chicago on that date, but once home I found out this indeed would be possible. I called one of the businesses listed on the flier and nervously asked if tickets were still available, and to my relief was informed that I'd be able to get one at the door. Of course I worried that half of Chicago would be showing up for this, and vowed to be at the Rosemont Convention Center a full two hours before what I thought would be some kind of concert was scheduled to begin.

Now you must understand that Urmila is one of my Bollywood dreamgirls, and seeing a trailer for an Urmila video was a major milestone in my early Bollywood development. This trailer was within the context of another milestone: my first ever Sonali Bendre movie. The movie was "Bhai," and I had not long recovered from seeing Sonali zap Sunil Shetty with laser rays that shoot from her fingertips, stunning him and causing little cartoon stars to pour from his ears, when here comes this spicy, exuberant music announcing a video titled "Nice and Naughty Urmila."

Suddenly this beautiful, buxom lass twirls in a grand "Ta-daa, here I am!" gesture, her hair following after and landing square on her face, then upon a glorious sweep of violins rushes up, gingerly brakes with her

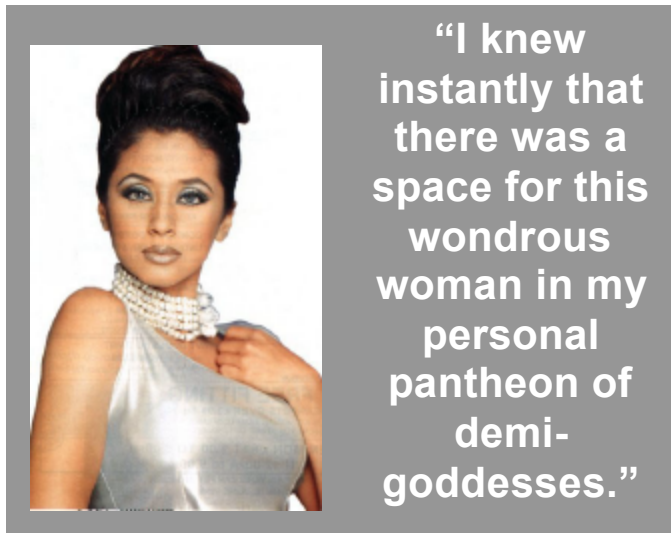
arms outstretched daintily like glider wings, everything stops for a moment as she jabs the air with her hip to the ti-tink... ti-tink... ti-tink... syncopation, and commences to lip-sync. Dear friends, I do not understand Hindi, other than some important Bollywood words like "pyar" and "dil," so I will write what it sounded like to me: "Ha-mu-ji pyaaar du-a, pyaaar du-a, A-LA-HA-MI-A!!!" and on the words "A-LA-HA-MI-A!!!" she shakes her head furiously and her hair scrambles wildly in mid-air, all before what appears to be a sunglassed Anil Kapoor (could this movie be "Judaai"?), who seems as if he doesn't quite know what to make of this woman and her amazing deeds. And if that weren't already enough, we next cut to Urmila in hot pants, bouncing up and down next to Sanjay Dutt's motorcycle, lip-syncing "O Bhavre." I knew instantly that there was a space for this wondrous woman in my personal pantheon of demigoddesses.

Urmila was part of still another milestone. This was during my first post-Bollywood Epiphany trip to New York. I was determined to see a first-run movie in a first-run theatre (my first run at this kind of experience), and the criterion I would use to choose which one I would see was whether it starred one of my favorites. I had a list: Sonali, Aish, Kajol, Juhi, Raveena, Mahima, Rambha, or - Urmila. There were two possible theatres to choose from. I called the first: "Vastaav." Ok, Sanjay's cool, but nope, Namrata was not on my list. I

called the second: "Mast," with Urmila. Bingo!

So one beautiful sunny gold October afternoon I hopped on the E train out to the Kew Gardens Cinema. The ticket seller, who wasn't desi, warned me that the

movie wasn't subtitled, in a way that made me think he was somehow annoyed that these movies were being shown there (for Heaven's sake, it was a 5-plex, like this ruins his life that one screen is devoted to Hindi cinema?). Of course I said firmly, "I know and I don't care." I stopped short of saying, "I'd be content to just sit and watch Urmila for three hours," since, due to his apparent Bollywood unfriendliness, I felt he didn't deserve to hear me swoon over her like that.



I was one of an audience of four (it was, after all, a weekday matinee during school season), the other three being some young desis who sat in the back of the theatre. I strategically located myself in the middle of the theatre, to get the fullest effect from the Dolby sound system, but proceeded to change my seat abruptly several times, to sample different screen angles. I'm sure the desis in the back thought I was dangerous, or at least nuts.

I know intellectually that "Mast" isn't the best movie ever made, and the critics dismissed it. But I thoroughly enjoyed it. From the moment Urmila bursts out from the movie within a movie within Aftab's daydream, to the final scene on the movie set where the camera spins around Aftab and Urmila as they embrace, I was swept away, by the images, by the music, and of course, by Urmila. It was the perfect first first-run movie for me. On my way back from Kew Gardens, I stopped off in Jackson Heights and got the audiocassette to "Mast."

One year later, on another beautiful sunny gold October afternoon, I was in a slow but steady stream of traffic on one of Chicago's myriad expressways, en route to the Rosemont Convention Center. The flier said things would begin at "8 pm sharp," and while I missed my arrival target of 6 pm, I did make it before 7 pm, so not too bad. But when I reached the ballroom where the event was to be held, hardly anyone was there.

The ticket tables were just being set up. I was told that things would get under way at "9 or so," and with relief and joy I purchased my ticket. The ticket had a picture of Urmila on it, the same as one on the flier, and I pointed to her and asked for reassurance that she would be there. "Yes, between 10:30 and 11:30." While the rush to get there was pointless, I did appreciate the extra time I now had. I went to get something to eat, enjoying the lovely warm evening, and then returned to relax outside and watch the desis arrive in their beautiful manner of dress, bangles jingling and the pleasant scents of perfumes and colognes wafting along with them.

When I finally went in myself I could tell immediately that things were not set up for a concert. The chairs ringed the ballroom along the walls, leaving a large open space for dancing, and indeed people were already doing just that. The orchestra turned out to be a small band of five: two drummers, a keyboard player, and two singers, one male, one female. Apart from the ten or so security guards, I'm sure I was the only non-desi there. Far from being disappointed or flummoxed that things weren't as I expected, I was intrigued by what I now took to be some kind of cultural or religious celebration. I set about finding out exactly what was going on.

I was told this was a garba, and the pairs of sticks (which I'd seen before in movies) that many people had brought along were called dandia sticks. This was a popular festival in Gujarat, and many people there that evening were Gujarati. One person kindly obliged when I bid him to write in my notebook the information about the Hindu calendar he was throwing at me. He made an outline: Navaratri - 7 - Sarad Prurima (if I understand his diagram correctly, this was the last full moon before Diwali, and indeed October 13 was crowned with a splendid full moon that contentedly lavished a generous bounty of light upon the night) – Dhan Tarash - Kali Chaudar - Diwali (Oct. 27) - Happy New Year.

I settled into a chair and watched the dance and listened to the music. While the pairs of dandia sticks (they were not being used at this point) and shoes that were scattered around the periphery patiently awaited the return of their owners, "conga lines" snaked around the center of the ballroom, bare feet soft on the plush red carpet, each snippet of line having its own leader whose movements the others imitated. The pace was relentless, yet easy, unhurried. Men and women danced separately, grandmothers coached toddlers, people dropped out for a rest, others joined in with fresh energy. It eventually dawned on me that the band had been playing and singing the same music at the same tempo since I had entered, by now more than a half hour earlier. This impressed me, in part because of the sheer endurance required, especially for the drumming, but also because of the effect it had on me. Instead of being fidgety, waiting for something new to happen, I had become easy, unhurried, too. Clock time graciously went elsewhere and the ballroom breathed without effort in the Now that never ends.

The atmosphere was so powerful that even the young desi rebel couldn't outdo it. One teenage girl had the temerity to show up in pointedly Western regalia: tight designer bluejeans, cool shoes, all the latest sexy urban makeup colors. But far from being the firebrand, she just seemed foolish. She joined a tangle of other teenage girls and seemed to mellow down, her self-conscious self-display melting away. I'm sure deep down she wished she was in traditional dress too.

The atmosphere was conducive to wistful daydreams. As the leading American Bollywood journalist, I've had the splendid fortune of being seated next to Urmila at the Great Big Cine Blitz Annual Banquet. However she is like ice, pointedly ignoring me. I take it in stride and, without stumbling a beat, shift my attention to the ingénues who are also seated at our table. As Urmila overhears our conversation and begins to see I'm no manipulator in search of scandal and gossip, but rather an unassuming and sensible guy, she relaxes a bit,

“And Urmila Matondkar appeared from nowhere and strode slowly and regally across the stage ... my immediate impression was one of royalty ... in her poise and almost serene way of moving.”



obliquely dips into the conversation, and then the dam bursts and she ends up yakking her silly head off to me and we become great pals. Now Aishwarya, being a guest of honor, is confined to the podium and can do nothing to intervene, and so she sulks, her cheeks turning crimson with jealousy at seeing Urmila and me getting along so, and when Salman tries to distract her, she testily blurts out, "Oh Salman, just shut up!" Sonali and Raveena, who are watching from afar, later tease me about the whole affair via e-mail...

The music had, by almost imperceptible increments, quickened and then stopped, like a flare that burns most brightly just before going out, and the dance broke up. I awaited the big announcement that Urmila's appearance was imminent, but a sudden, seemingly spontaneous press of people around the stage is what informed me. I followed suit and found myself a spot to the left of the stage. Not the best spot, not the worst. Fortunately, I was taller than the people in front of me. We waited patiently, and then heads turned and attention swelled as the event's organizer came forward and announced, with a satisfied smile (as if he were pleased and proud that he had pulled the whole thing off, and perhaps still a little starry-eyed from having escorted the Special Guest to the venue - ah, the perks of being a successful business person cum civic leader), the arrival of the said Special Guest.

And Urmila Matondkar appeared from nowhere and strode slowly and regally across the stage.

Indeed my immediate impression was one of royalty, not in the off-putting, snobbish, set-above-and-apart

sense, but in her poise and almost serene way of moving. Very unlike the frenetic coquettishness of the Rangeela Girl. Also unlike her movie image was her conservative attire: a long, elegant, light-colored Indian gown, hair up like Cinderella's at the ball, just the lightest touch of makeup. I watched her transfixed, with that odd blended sense of familiarity and strangeness that comes upon seeing someone whose image you've seen up close so many times on a screen in the flesh for the first time, and I continued to be intrigued by how the seemingly staid person before me was the same one who had performed the amazing deeds in the "Nice and Naughty" trailer. Some may have been disappointed that she obviously hadn't come to dance, but I was happy to just be in the same room with my dream girl. It was fun, and I smiled to myself at how far I'd wandered along in my personal Bollywood adventure.

She spoke into the microphone. I can't remember specific words, but the usual kinds of comment suitable for a setting such as this were made: "Hello, it's wonderful to be here in Chicago... How is everyone tonight?... How wonderful it is you're maintaining your traditions so far from India..." all with the clear as a bell speaking voice to be expected from someone for whom good diction is a fundamental job skill (that is to say, someone who is an actress or royalty), and with that particular English that sounds so cheerio British to my American ears. As any diligent speaker would, she approached the edge of the stage and turned to different sectors of the audience in order to make everyone feel included. People stretched to watch and listen, and to the left of me a petite woman, old enough to have begun her movie going days when Raj Kapoor ruled the

screens, was practically tiptoes on a chair, peering over the shoulders of the taller people in front of her. Unfortunately, a young man behind me was loudly making comments, not in English, so I don't know what was being said. But a lot can be known from the tone of a voice and the sly chuckling that follows, and I feel safe in concluding this was salacious heckling, or something similarly rude, from someone who hadn't yet outgrown his too-cool-for-school phase. The result, I'm sure, of his attention-thirsty antics was that Urmila paid less attention to our side of the stage.

Some children were brought on stage to receive the first flowers from a basket prepared for the occasion. Urmila was sweet and kind to them. (I always wonder how these chosen guests make it to the stage - is there a lottery, or who has to know whom?) Then suddenly a teenage boy, obviously not invited to be there, crashed the stage and got himself right up to the star, and with that mix of diffidence and cockiness only a teenager suffers, gazed upon her as if waiting for her to speak to him. But some security guards escorted him away, looking intoxicated (not from drugs but from Urmila's presence) and crestfallen, like an adolescent cat who's just had his catnip taken from him because he's become way too frisky.

Urmila turned toward my side of the stage and came to the edge and started tossing out the flowers from her basket, expertly ignoring Mr. Too-cool-for-school. This is when I really caught the full force of her magnificent round eyes, those eyes capable of such wonderfully unabashed melodrama, as she was now within twenty feet of me. For a brief moment light obliquely hit them, causing that eerie cat's eye sheen that contact lenses can make at times. (Secrets of the stars revealed! Urmila wears contacts!) Taking advantage of her proximity, people left and right were snapping pictures.

Now I'm not quick on the draw when it comes to snapping pictures, since I know next to nothing about photojournalism, and besides, I'm rather reluctant to take pictures of someone who doesn't know me, I think this rather invades a person's privacy, even if the person's a public figure and supposedly used to it. But I had brought my camera along, and now, caught up in the spirit of the flashing cameras going off around me, fumbled to retrieve it from my jacket pocket. I waited for the right moment, and framed Urmila perfectly in my sight as she leaned forward with a smile to toss a flower. This is cool, I thought. I confidently pressed what I thought was the shutter release and the camera promptly shut down. I had pressed the on-off button.

Well, I don't have a photo for my trouble, but I do have a vivid memory of Urmila through the viewfinder that I

can retrieve from the photo album of my mind any time I want to see it.

She descended from the stage to give out the rest of her flowers, and the security guards had their hands full buttressing her against the phalanx of fans who pushed in from all sides. Being a star at times must be no fun. But she was a trouper, and held on to her poise until the last of the flowers were given away. And then - poof! - it was all over. Urmila drifted away amid the security guards and fans, and I watched until her noble Cinderella hair disappeared around the far side of the stage. The music resumed, and once again people took to the floor to dance, this time in a more free-form style, dandia sticks now waving and lacking above their heads.

But for me the garba was over, and I followed the others who had also come just to see the star out the door and into the autumn moonlight. driving away, somewhere on Cloud Nine, I thought about the questions I would ask Urmila the day I have the splendid fortune of being seated next to her at the Great Big Cine Blitz Annual Banquet. ■



News In Brief

National News

Riots Break Out in Major Metropolitan Areas Due to Rising F.O.B. - A.B.C.D. Tension

MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREA, SOME CITY--Several A.B.C.D.'s were scolded severely by their elders at a nearby Auntie's house... During the riot, F.O.B.'s were apprehended while attempting to steal CDs and pirated DVDs from local video vendors.

Entertainment News

E!'s Real Bollywood Story: Grieved By Own Shameless, Shirtless Posturing Throughout Career: Salman Khan

FILM CITY, BOMBAY--Today, after years of titillating Indian people all over the world with his bare body, Salman Khan admitted to being thoroughly ashamed of his behavior. Hanging his head, in what can only be seen as deep embarrassment, Mr. Khan walked out of his mansion cloaked in *sharam*. To the dismay of filmmakers, he refused to even adorn himself in a *really tight shirt* in his soon-to-be-released new film, *Hum Pyar Mein Marte Hain Aur Jeete Bhi Hain, Lekein Kaise?* Salman simply shook his head saying no over and over again to repeated requests to TAKE IT OFF, TAKE IT ALL OFF!



Last Week



This Week

Local News

Indian Couple Found Frolicking in Hubbard Park, Claiming to Be *Deewane Dilwale*



IOWA CITY, IA--Late last evening, both Anita Parker and Ramaswamy Krishnagopal Balasubramaniam declared themselves to be *Deewane Dilwale* when they were found skipping across Hubbard Park. Authorities say they were part of a carefully choreographed, synchronized dancing that involved several hundred other

Indians who all appeared out of nowhere. When asked if they had a permit to perform on university grounds, the couple fled in gleeful joy, laughing hysterically and condemning puzzled IMU officials for having no *dil*. Oddest were the rapid changes (at least three) in wardrobe the couple undertook during their singing escapade.

How do you feel about U of I Indian students shunning their fellow Indians?



"Who the #\$\$&% does she think she is?"



"I chase them and tell them to embrace their culture."



"I am deeply hurt. Deeply."



"Indians? There are Indians on this campus?"



"I don't care. I shun Indians too."