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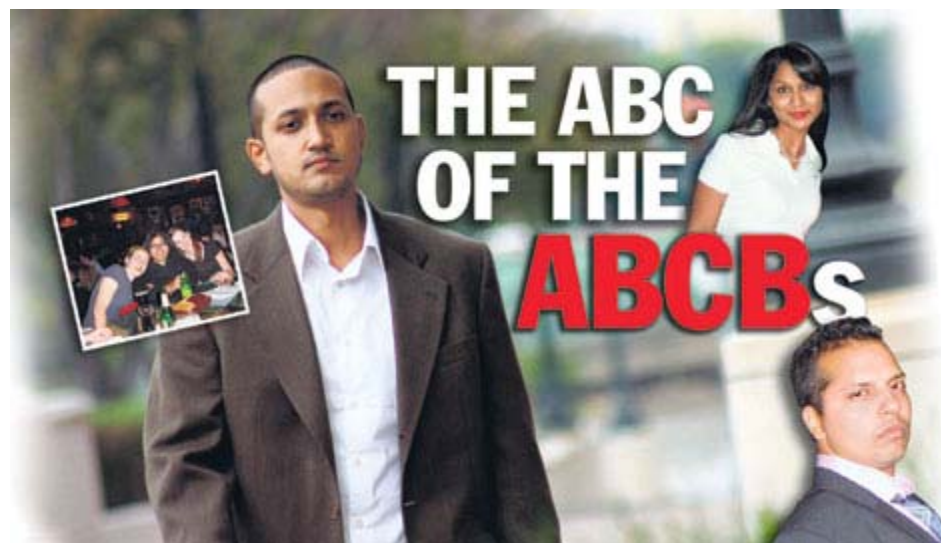
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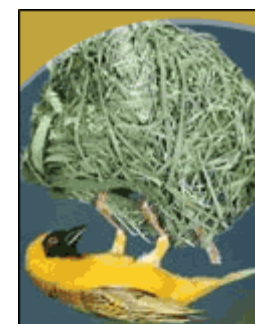
For American-born Bengalis, their Bengaliness is often the most baffling aspect of their background. Without the first hand experiences of being a Bengali in Bengal, the second generation's image of their heritage is a caricature, coloured by snap judgments during brief visits, reports **Turna Ray**



GeNext: (clockwise from top-left) Prianka Nandy; Marko Dutta; Mohar Chaudhuri; Som Mukerji.
 (Below) Victor Banerjee with the cast of The Bong Connection

As 28-year-old Raja Bagchi recently discovered, literal translations from Bengali to English can be hilarious. While packing up some leftovers at a Thai restaurant with his parents, Bagchi realised that *kukurer baksho* didn't have quite the same connotation as "doggie bag." Bagchi, who works at a health information technology company in Austin, Texas, admits that even though he can speak Bengali, he converses in English with his Bengali friends — unless, of course, they need to talk about someone else within earshot who can't speak the language.

Prianka Nandy, 25, of Fairfax, Virginia, has never heard the term "Bong" used in reference to Bengalis. The public policy graduate student also struggles to characterise Bengalis and resorts to cues from Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*. In the scene Nandy describes, actress



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Shefali Shetty and a Bengali male character are bantering. "In my opinion you Punjabis are way too ostentatious," the Bengali says. "In my opinion you Bengalis are way too pretentious," Shetty snaps back. "I remember that scene made sense to me for some reason, but I don't really know why," Nandy admits.

Second year finance student Mohar Chaudhuri, 19, can rattle off cultural stereotypes about all types of Indians. Gujaratis are cheap, Punjabis dance the *bhangra* and South Indians speak funny, she chuckles. When it comes to explaining Bengali quirks, however, Chaudhuri is stumped. Growing up in a predominantly white neighbourhood in Houston, Texas, she wasn't exposed to Bengalis. Suddenly, she remembers a scene from Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*. "They were eating a lot of sweets in that movie," Chaudhuri recalls. "It's true about Bengalis liking sweets, because whenever I go to see family friends they are always offering me *shondesh*."

For American-born Bengalis, their Bengali-ness is often the most baffling aspect of their background. Without the first hand experiences of being a Bengali in Bengal, the second generation's image of their heritage is a caricature, drawn from one-liners in movies, coloured by snap judgments during brief visits and animated by their parents' musings of "the good old days."

It's a world of conflicting images — and one that filmmaker Anjan Dutt is exploring in his new project. He is slated to unveil *The Bong Connection*, currently in production in Houston, at the annual North American Bengali Conference, featuring three days of Bong-centric cultural performances, academic lectures and films, in Houston from July 1.



According to Dutt, the title *The Bong Connection* suggests that Bengalis as a group can laugh as well as cry about themselves. Above all, it establishes that "we are asserting our strength not as Bengalis but as human beings," Dutt claims. The film features a motley crew of popular actors, including Raima Sen and Victor Banerjee.

Within an immigrant community as small and fragmented as the Bengalis, commonality is hard to hold on to. According to unofficial estimates, of the nearly 2 million Indians in the US, approximately 30,000 are Bengalis. Local Bengali cultural societies, pujas held in high school cafeterias and improvised youth education programmes offer the only forum for ABCBs, American Born Confused Bengalis, to meet others like themselves.

But Bengali-ness, clearly, is a state of mind. Dutt is effusive about the film's rejection of the notion that cultural identity is rooted exclusively in geography. "The two main characters — one travelling from New York to Calcutta and the other from Calcutta to Texas — realise that they didn't have to leave Calcutta or New York to be Bengalis. Do you have to be in China to be Chinese?" he asks.

For first generation Bengali immigrants, the question demands no contemplation. For, being Bengali is an essential part of their lives. In the hearts and minds of each following generation, however, the distant shores of their ancestors recede even further. Second generation Bengalis seem content with their second-hand understanding of Bengal. After any brief stint in Calcutta, they return to the US with a renewed appreciation for air conditioning and toilet paper.

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"It's always jarring after you get off the plane in Calcutta. You get in a cab and try not to run over a cow," Nandy says. "But after you get used to heat and survive your first bout of dysentery, you're fine." When she visited Calcutta in 1997, Nandy was surprised to find that no one in her family had heard of the Internet. She remembers how slow the pace of life was, how people on the street stared unabashedly and how uncomfortable it made her feel.

Dutt believes that Bengalis are ultimately held back by their obstinate refusal to change. Blaming Calcutta's maladies on the "provincial" old guard "who live in their little Bengali world, stuck in traditions," Dutt asserts that "we cannot keep looking at the old Calcutta, with its political movements, trams, its intellectuals, as the city of Tagore, of Santiniketan, of the joint family."

Which is why, in making this film about the Bengali immigrant experience, Dutt has been careful not to be typecast as the cerebral Bengali filmmaker. "Why do we have to be so damned intellectual and arty? Are we born that way?" Dutt asks excitedly over the telephone, with the din of his cast and crew in the background. "Satyajit Ray and Tagore — they are not the last word," Dutt proclaims, urging Bengalis to go see other things. "If they don't, they risk becoming like frogs in a well," he warns.

Tagore, however, has not yet been forgotten by second generation Bengalis in the US. Chaudhuri, a Kuchipudi dancer since the age of five, visited Tagore's Santiniketan with her parents when she was 14 years old. Nandy, too, during her teen years attended a Bengali-language class every Sunday, where she had to memorise Tagore's poetry and was exposed to Rabindrasangeet. "Tagore gives us an identity. He gives face to a culture that others may not otherwise know about," says 28-year-old law student Som Mukerji .

Houston-based R&B singer Marko Dutta considers his early training in Rabindrasangeet to be the foundation of a burgeoning career as a professional singer. Dutta, who recently released his first album *One Thing I Know* will play the part of a thug in *The Bong Connection*. Eventually, though, Dutta would like to record an album of Rabindrasangeet to hip-hop beats. "It's up to us, the second generation, to take the foundation of our culture, what we learned from our parents, and make it our own," he reasons.

Clearly, in seeking a common discourse within the rapidly changing Bengali diaspora, Tagore is neither the first nor the last word, but all the space between. And for the ABCBs, Tagore in hip-hop is the way ahead.



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