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Indian women are hot on the American dating scene, reports **Turna Ray**



US babu, desi mem

"Indian men will either date an American girl or want an innocent, virgin girl straight from India"
Ritu Maghera

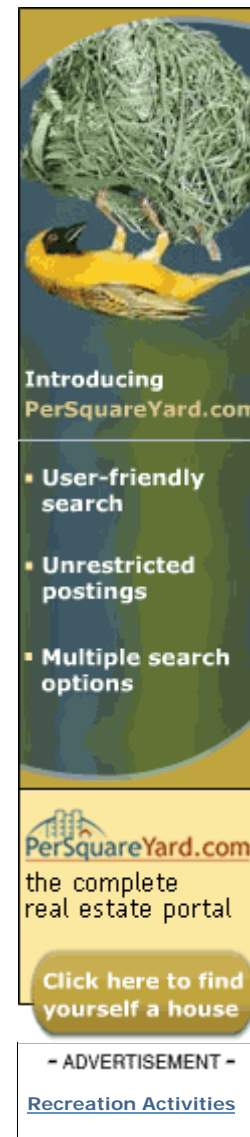
"Americans consider Indian women to be beautiful and strong"
Amisha Upadhyaya

"I'm sorry, but don't expect me to be impressed if you're into yoga, love Indian food or are taking beginner's Hindi. I don't practice yoga, I don't speak Hindi, and who doesn't love Indian food?"
Monica Grover

As a single, attractive, professional in Washington, D.C., Monica Grover is fed up with all the non-Indian men who are all too excited about her being Indian. Tired of American men feigning culture to woo her, Grover put up the following disclaimer as part of her profile for a popular online dating site: "I'm sorry, but don't expect me to be impressed if you're into yoga, love Indian food or are taking beginner's Hindi. I don't practice yoga, I don't speak Hindi, and who doesn't love Indian food?"

Amisha Upadhyaya's fine-featured dusky face and cascading waist-length black hair would turn any man's head. But Upadhyaya, a young New York-based writer-director, admits it helps that Americans consider Indian women to be beautiful and strong. This favourable reputation has certainly contributed to propelling Indian women's success in the United States, she says.

Indian women are the saucy new dish on the American dating scene. Until recently, American men had a taste for east Asian women — Japanese, Chinese, Korean and so



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on. Now, their appetites whetted by Aishwarya Rai's pout in popular fashion magazines and hip hop artist Maya Arulpragasam, aka MIA's, guttural crooning, Western men are craving desi babes.

It may have taken a light-eyed Indian beauty to capture the hearts and minds of American men, but when Rai took the Miss World crown in 1994, it raised the profile of south Asian women outside their own region.

Since then, September 11, the dotcom boom and bust and the sweeping tide of globalisation have changed the way Americans perceive India and the nearly two million Indians who live in the US. All the while, a sizeable second-generation of educated south Asians — desi in appearance but with American ways — has come of age.

According to the latest census data, interracial dating and marriage is on the rise in America. In the US south Asian community, interracial relationships are more common within the second generation. Recent statistics on interracial marriages compiled by Vietnamese-American researcher C.N. Le show that Indian American women born or socialised in the US who marry outside their racial group are more likely to marry white men (21 per cent) than men of other racial groups. Indian women also marry men from other racial groups — Latinos (1.6 per cent, African American men (2.5 per cent) and other Asian American men (4.1 per cent).

Growing up in Indiana, photographer Matt Todd lusted after what was familiar: Farrah Fawcett-types. However, after a two-year stint in West Africa with the US Peace Corps, Todd's preference shifted from the all-American model-actress to Chinese-American actress Lucy Liu. "I moved to Washington, D.C., craving diversity," Todd says. Having casually dated numerous Asians, and recently, three Indians, the 33-year-old blond-haired, blue-eyed American admits he is attracted to "exotic women".

US navyman Tim Franz began dating women of different ethnicities as a student at Boston University. Coming to a diverse university campus from New Hampshire, one of the most Caucasian states in the US, Franz says he wanted something that didn't remind him of his home town. He describes the few Indian women he has dated as attractive, intelligent and motivated. "The fact that Indian women come from such an old and deep-rooted culture makes them all the more interesting," he says.

In general, American men perceive Indian women as being feminine, demure, sensual and family oriented. A typical Indian woman's physical characteristics — straight hair, sharp features, petite form and lighter skin tone — are valued among other minority groups.

So it is no surprise that as south Asians step out into the American mainstream, it is the Indian woman who is leading the way, perpetuating an image of a desi woman that is at once feminine and empowered.

Actress-model Padma Lakshmi, musician Norah Jones, writers Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri and actress Parminder Nagra are accomplished, independent, and not too hard on the eyes. Similarly, the female protagonists in the popular movies of Indian filmmakers Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, Deepa Mehta and others have helped to associate fearlessness and independence with south Asian femininity and sexuality.

As part of the "model minority" in the US, the context of inter-racial relationships for south

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Asian women are markedly different from all other racial groups. According to Susan Koshy, Asian American studies professor at the University of Illinois and author of *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*, Indian women have become the possessors of significant “sexual capital” in the US. “Asian American women, in general, have greater sexual capital than the women of other racial groups [such as] African American, Latinas and native American women,” she says.

Koshy notes, however, that south Asian women do not have this history of sexual relationships developed in the context of military and political dominance with the US, as women from east and southeast Asia have as a result of US military involvement in the region. “Instead the exoticism of south Asian women in the US took place in a more amorphous and less freighted way through popular culture — Hollywood movies, and more recently through Bollywood, fashion, and pop music.”

But Indian women complain that they often find themselves caught between two worlds. Ritu Maghera, 26, dated interracially while she was in school but now dates mostly Indian men. A non-Indian would have a difficult time fitting into her traditional Punjabi Sikh family.

However, finding the right Indian man hasn’t been easy, either. “Indian guys who have grown up here don’t necessarily want an Americanised Indian girl,” Maghera observes. “They’ll either date an American girl or they want an innocent, virgin girl straight from India.”

In between puffs of her cigarette, Monica Grover describes herself as the “antithesis of a typical Indian girl.” The 28-year-old project manager for a Washington, D.C., non-profit organisation has tried to keep her mind and options open while dating men both in and outside of her race. Still, she has found that Indian men look down upon her American-side, while American men fail to understand her Indian-ness.

“Indian men don’t like the fact that I can’t speak Indian languages or cook, and that I curse and smoke. And an American guy thinks it’s weird if our date runs late and I have to call my mom.”

Ultimately, Grover and Upadhyaya predict they will most likely marry non-Indian men. Given their “sexual capital” and generally affable reputation they’ll have no shortage of dates and little trouble roping in an American stud. Their problem, however, is finding “the one”.

And that’s an age-old conundrum confounding race.



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