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ACBD Chronicles: Americans Captivated By Des

At a social gathering recently, small talk with an American woman dressed in Indian togs led to the inevitable question about her work. She turned away coyly, drew her *dupatta* across her face in mock shame, and fluted in flawless Hindi, “*Hain... main to ek tawaif hoon, ek giri huwi aurat hoon (I am a courtesan, a fallen woman).*” When the Indians around her recovered from spluttering into their drinks, clarifications were sought. “*Mein naach ne waali hoon (I am a dancing woman),*” she continued mysteriously.

After the jokes and banter subsided, it was ascertained that the lissome Lori Clark was indeed a dancer of no small achievement. A kathak exponent, she had spent four years in India learning the art. Her Masters dissertation was on dance forms in Indian movies, in exploration of which she was a voracious patron of Bollywood, from Mahal (her first film) to Pakeezah to everything A.R.Rahman. She now had such mastery over the Hindi film genre that she could dish out the corniest dialogues, including the “maa ka doodh” variety.

Most Indians have a stereotypical view of Americans. They are loud, boorish, insular, promiscuous etc. But sometimes, one comes across an American of such involved and passionate learning that it takes your breath away. He or she would have spent years studying Mirabai’s bhajans, or the marriage customs of Gonds, or the municipal budget of a backwaters Bihar town. And there will be no greater authority in the world on the subject than this person.

For instance, you would assume that the last word on IITs would be some Indian expert involved in the setting up of the schools, perhaps even an alumnus who had delved into its past. But no; on the subject of IIT, there is no greater expert than a certain Prof Kim Sibaly, whose research goes back almost a century, and includes a Ph.D on the origins of the institution. Similarly, you will find Americans who have mastered Tamil grammar or some aspect of Bengali literature.

Such passion is not restricted to academicians. Some months back, I was accosted by a homeless man in Downtown Washington. “Hey, you know BKS Iyengar?” he asked me unexpectedly, instead of proffering the usual hard luck spiel. “Well, I know *of* him,” I replied hesitantly. He then went into a 15-minute exposition on BKS and Hatha Yoga that had me standing upside down. Perhaps he was an expert fallen on bad days.

You see a lot of this on the cultural front. In a recent staging of August Stringberg’s “A Dream Play” in Washington, the role of two apsaras were played by American women trained in Indian dances. Playing the sitar for its live background score was Brian Silver, who works with VOA’s Urdu service. Elsewhere, half the crowd for the reunion concert of the group Shakti was made up of Americans aficionados who probably knew their ragas and talas better than the Indians. Band leader John McLaughlin certainly did, as he sat cross-legged and kurta-clad to play the electric guitar opposite “Mandolin” Shrinivas.

If you stay long enough in the U.S., instead of drawing conclusion on the basis of touristy visits, you will come across many such instances. The term ABCD – American Born Confused Desis – is sometimes used to describe culturally rootless Indians. These Yankee Indophiles may well be called ACBDs – Americans Captivated by Des. And in some ways they are as much part of our extended fabric as ABCDs or NRIs. For that matter, they are more Indian than the RNIs -- Resident Non-Indians – back home who are Indian only by virtue of their birth certificate.