

Hollywood's

Lesser-Known

Indians

BEYOND THE LIKES OF KAL PENN, KUNAL NAYYAR, RUSSELL PETERS AND AZIZ ANSARI, THERE IS A NEW GENERATION OF INDIANS THAT IS MAKING ITS PRESENCE FELT IN AMERICAN FILMS AND TELEVISION.
BY NIKHIL TANEJA



ADI SHANKAR, 29

Creative Producer, Multi-Hyphenate, Rebel with a cause

Claim to Fame:

Producer of *Dredd*, *The Grey*, *Lone Survivor*, *Killing Them Softly*

What he's up to next:

Producing the all-female *The Expendables*, the *Dredd* animated miniseries and acting in five-odd films

He is a creator, not a businessman or producer.

Our ancestors survived because they were creators: when it rained, we created shelter; when it got cold, we created fire. Creation is the reason our species is alive, so, the fact that there are dudes who want to chill behind a desk all day makes me sad.

He was inspired to make his own rules.

I was misdiagnosed with cancer when I was 18. Three weeks after that, the doctors said, "We are sorry. We screwed up." I realised that no one really knows what they're talking about. Before, it was like, you would go to one place, you'd learn what's cool, polite and right, and then, at another place, you'd be asked to adapt again. But, after that, I stopped giving a fuck.

The West welcomed him with open arms,

when his people didn't.

I don't spend a lot of time in India because the people used to think I'm a screw-up, and asked me to give up films. I was discouraged by other brown people that they don't like brown faces in Hollywood, which is just bullshit. I was accepted here completely. You know what's a problem? Being white and from Ohio, because then you are competing with everybody.

His eyes are set on India now.

I'm presenting *Gangs of Wasseyapur* internationally because we have interesting stories to tell. Anurag Kashyap, Vasan Bala and others are doing some fantastic stuff in the independent scene. I want to deconstruct the stereotypes about our people and I will sure as hell do that from here. I even want to cast an Indian actress in *The Expendables*.

Sometime last year,

Indian-American actor Kal Penn (*The Namesake*) tweeted, "Creepy Australian Guy: Whoa, are you Russell Peters?! Me: No, I'm Kunal Nayyar. Creepy Australian Guy: I love Parks & Rec! Me: High 5!" It was a joke alright, but Penn, who is arguably the best-known Indian actor in Hollywood, having starred in the hit Harold and Kumar trilogy, made a strong point about how brown-skinned actors still have a long way to go before a white-skinned audience gives them the acknowledgement they so deserve.

Less than two years later, Creepy Australian Guy may as well be the minority audience, because one look at the current film and TV landscape, and it's all but clear that young Hollywood has a new mantra: diversity. This could be because of the tremendous talent that South Asians have to offer, or this could simply be sound business sense — as the world continues shrinking, South Asian audiences need to be appeased because of their enormous numbers and healthy buying power.

But, Penn, Nayyar (*The Big Bang Theory*), Peters (stand-up comedian) and Aziz Ansari (*Parks and Recreation*), along with a handful of others, most prominently writer-actor Mindy Kaling (*The Mindy Project*), subverted the norm, and became part of the reason that diversity is the norm today. Of course, Hollywood may now grapple with other kinds of absurdities — such as which minor community talent (among Asians, South Asians and Latinos) to go with in which project — but the good news is, the door of opportunity is now wide open.

And, so, as young Indians in Hollywood firmly make their presence felt in mainstream American projects on every creative turf, from writing to acting, the challenge has now shifted from finding a voice for the community to finding bigger platforms for the voice to reach a global audience. "I think it is the responsibility of every generation to improve upon the ways and perceptions of the last one, and I want to do that with India in Hollywood," says Adi Shankar, the 29-year-old producer of films such as Mark Wahlberg-starrer *Lone Survivor* and Liam Neeson-starrer *The Grey*. "Korean films compete on an international level. So, why can't ours?" he asks.

Actor Tiya Sircar, who has acted opposite stars such as Owen Wilson and Matthew Perry in Hollywood blockbusters, is excited about the evolving cinematic landscape of India too. "You look at a Kalki Koechlin, who is not necessarily from India, being accepted purely on talent, or *The Lunchbox* working just as well in India as it did internationally, and as an actor, that's such great news for me. I want to contribute to the change too," she says.

Indo-Russian actor Annet Mahendru, who is a series regular on spy drama, *The Americans*, on the other hand, is miffed that she loses out on Indian roles because she looks "ethnically ambiguous", and this conundrum is echoed by actor-director Natasha Chandel too. Director Shripriya Mahesh puts things in perspective, "I may not have lived in India for a long time now, but I consider myself very Indian. I have many stories inside me, but the one that I feel like I have to make is set in India. It is never possible to truly move away from your country." So, here's a look at some of the more prominent of the lesser-known Indian faces in Hollywood.

ANNET MAHENDRU, 25

Actor, Indo-Russian, 20-something, Stunner

Claim to Fame:

Playing Nina Sergeevna Krylova on Cold War spy drama/thriller, *The Americans*

You can see her next in:

Penguins of Madagascar, *Sally Pacholok* and *Bridge and Tunnel* in movies; and Season 3 of *The Americans* on Star World Premiere

She considers herself to be a 'gypsy girl'.

I remember hiding in the bathroom in Afghanistan as war went on outside. In Russia, during the Cold War, people were fascinated with me because I was the rare foreign-looking kid. In Germany, I picked up Indian culture from my father's siblings. In New York, I grew up having friends from all ethnicities. I got cast in *The Americans* because the creator thought I had the background of a spy.

She wants to do transformative stories.

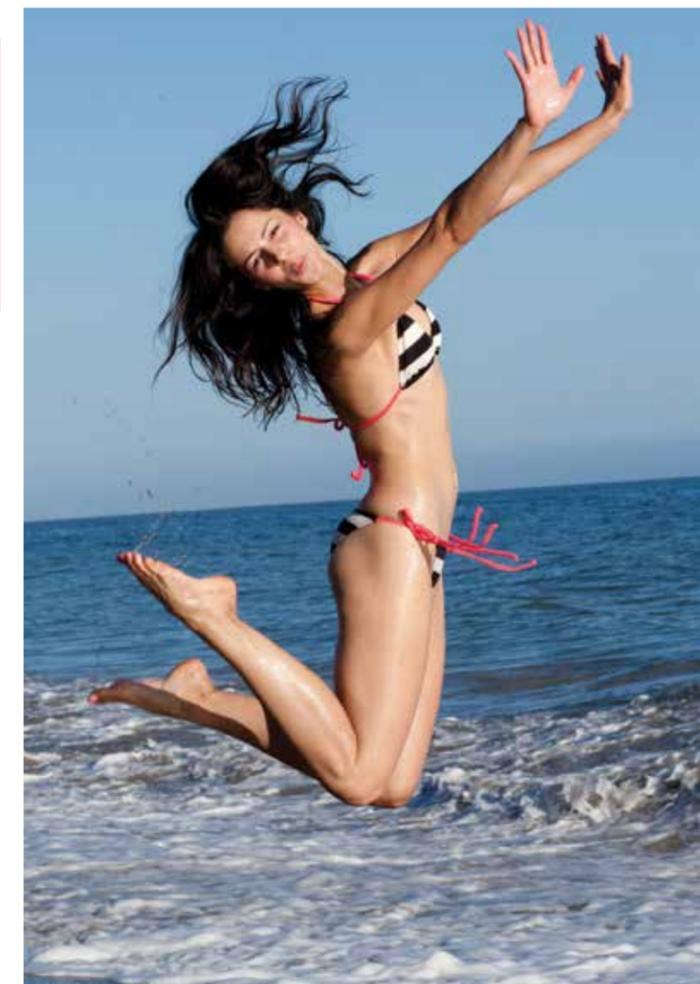
I think we are capable of anything. I want to have the ability to transform beyond me and my personal beliefs. Nina is a KGB officer, and yet, she's able to connect with people across the world even when she's being a double agent, because, ultimately, it's about being human.

Hollywood doesn't believe she's Indian.

It's hard to get people to break stereotypes and look past your appearance. They think Russians have blue eyes and blond hair, so pre-*The Americans*, I wouldn't get cast as a Russian. I never get Indian roles because they have a certain idea of what an Indian looks like, and they aren't able to ethnically categorise me. I want to move beyond ethnicity in casting.

She is dying to work in Bollywood.

When I was five and guests would come to our house, I'd put on my Indian dress and dance to 'Choli ke peeche kya hai' for them. I love Shah Rukh Khan in everything from *Devdas* to *Chennai Express*. I have explored my Russian side now, so I'm thirsty to explore and express my Indian side. Help me!





KARAN SONI, 25

Actor, Funnyman, Future sitcom star

Claim to Fame:

Jurassic World director's Sundance-award winning film *Safety Not Guaranteed* and IT comedy, *Betas*

Watch him next in:

Paul Feig's sitcom, *Other Space*, and Jack Black-starrer *Goosebumps*

He went to school in LA because of The OC.

I would watch *The OC* and think, 'Wow! What a magical world.' I secretly applied to colleges here after watching it. My parents thought I was doing business studies here. I kept tricking them until I had to tell them that I am studying theatre, and even then I lied to them saying I'll be a producer because they never thought I could be an actor. But, now they even have Google alerts on me.

His worst audition is definitely one of the worst auditions ever.

In my first audition, they asked me to play a terrorist, gave me a plastic AK-47 and a scene in which a white woman is crying, 'Why are you doing this', and there's a bomb about to go off. I was asked to pray "anything" in Hindi that sounds scary and then my character is shot. It was the most

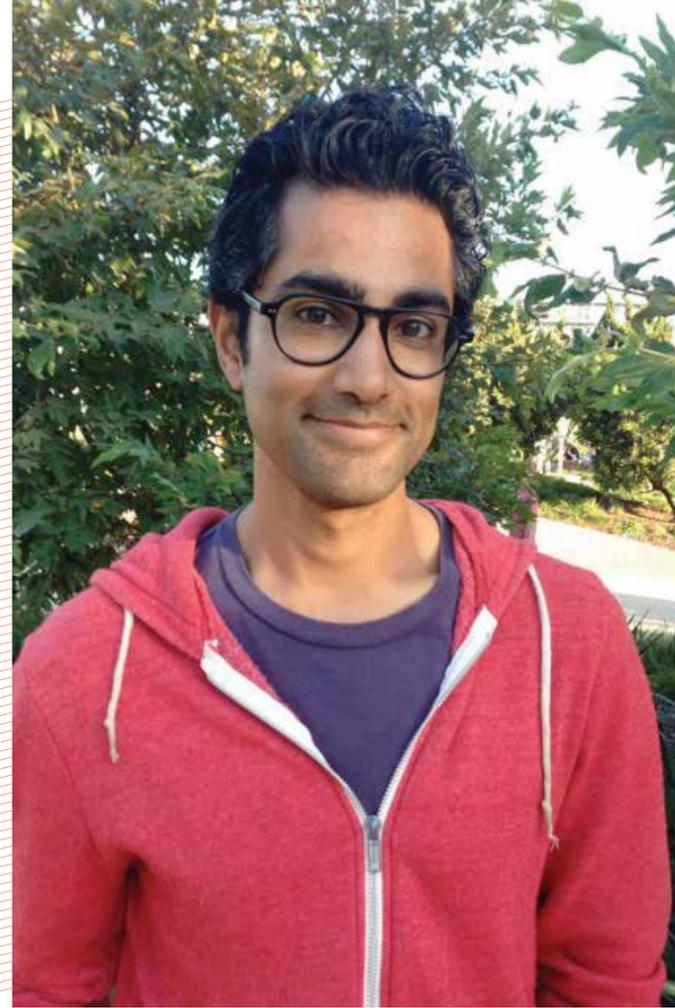
horrifying experience of my life.

Aubrey Plaza is his cool friend and Jake Johnson is his weird uncle.

Working with Aubrey and Jake was like the best acting class in comedy ever. Aubrey is so cool, she once called me to her house for a board game night and I walked in to find Michael Cera there, and the three of us played 'Apples to Apples' all night long. And, Jake's like this cool, weird older uncle, who I'd have discussions on life with and who'd force me to drink whisky and stuff and I'd refuse.

He's ultimately a Delhi boy who likes Karan Johar movies.

I'm a big Shah Rukh Khan fan. I love Bollywood and I love Karan Johar kind of movies; my favourite is *Kal Ho Na Ho*. But, I don't think I'll ever be able to do a song-and-dance movie.



SANJAY SHAH

Writer, Producer, Occasional stand-up comedian, All-round storyteller

Claim to Fame:

Writing/producing Courtney Cox's *Cougar Town*

He last worked on:

Military comedy *Enlisted*

He started off in politics.

My dad was an engineer for 25 years before he decided to be a small businessman and get a Burger King franchise. I started my career as a legislative aide at the California State Capitol. I worked for a state assemblyman. But, I really wanted to be a stand-up comedian, and I also wanted to have a family. Writing for comedies on TV was a pretty good compromise.

He's had an eventful Hollywood career.

In 2007, I wrote an episode of *King of the Hill* called 'Grand Theft Arlen', and threw a party because I was so excited. Since then, I have written for Trey Parker and Matt Stone at *South Park*, become a writer/producer (which means you have more responsibility running the writers' room on occasion, giving notes on cuts of episodes, communicating with executives and actors, etc), sold a semi-autobiographical comedy

that didn't get picked to series but helped me buy a house, and almost got run over by Mel Brooks once.

He's never faced racism.

People don't care what you look like behind the camera. Every year that I've done this, Hollywood has gotten more diverse both in front and behind the camera. I think it's a good thing. Why Indian actors may get stereotyped on TV shows just comes down to the writers. I think there are lazy writers and there are good writers. Good writers can nail the nuances.

He would love to write for Indian TV... or not.

I'm very interested in writing for Indian television. I would love to write a show about a daughter who doesn't get along with her mother-in-law. Do you guys have anything like that already?

NATASHA CHANDEL, 30

Actor, Host, Digital Creative, Multi-tasker

Claim to Fame:

Her web series *Mumbai Chopra* that she created, produced, directed and starred in; and hosting MTV

What she's up to next:

Directing and producing the web series, *The Can*

Her first short film won awards everywhere.

My very first camera gig when I was a 17-year-old in Canada was a short film called *Pria*, about an Indian girl who uses her love for the movies to tell this boy that she loves him. The film went to over 15 film festivals worldwide and won a lot of awards, and got me my first meeting with NBC in the US.

She did everything on Mumbai Chopra.

I created *Mumbai Chopra* as a spinoff on Paris Hilton. She is a socialite with a good heart, who could be the daughter of a spiritual guru. I was working with MTV News at the time, so had to write, produce, direct, fund and act in this in my free time.

Casting directors find it hard to think of her as an Indian.

I've been going to a lot of auditions for Hispanic and ethnically ambiguous roles because casting directors don't believe I am Indian. They usually think an Indian is a dark-skinned or quirky looking person. Once, a casting director said, 'How can you be Indian? You are pretty!' I was so angry... I mean, have you even seen our people? They are some of the prettiest in the world.

She wants to be a comedy showrunner.

I made *Mumbai Chopra* because I wanted to make a show in which people would realise that Americans and Indians are not all that different. I wanted to create someone funny for American audiences. Also, the only way to change the status quo for Indians is to write our own stuff. I love creating and I love comedy, so my dream is to be the next Mindy Kaling or Tina Fey.



SHRIPRIYA MAHESH

Filmmaker, Entrepreneur, Mother of twins

Claim to Fame:

Directed a short film starring James Franco and Jessica Chastain that will release in December as part of an anthology, *The Colour of Time*

What she's directing next:

Varenya, an international feature film to be shot in India

She used to manage a \$400 million business for eBay before films.

I wanted to be a photographer at 7, but growing up in Chennai, I realised that if I wanted to pursue something creative, I had to find a way to support and sustain myself. So, I got into Harvard Business School, then eventually into eBay. Only when I got engaged to someone in New York, I decided to do a three-month intensive film-making course at NYU.

She believes working in tech is a lot like working in films.

In tech, I was doing something creative too — coming up with an idea for a product and making it happen, which is like films. Also, like films, in tech, the last 10 per cent takes up 60 per cent of the time. It can get overwhelming but you push towards perfection, because millions will sample

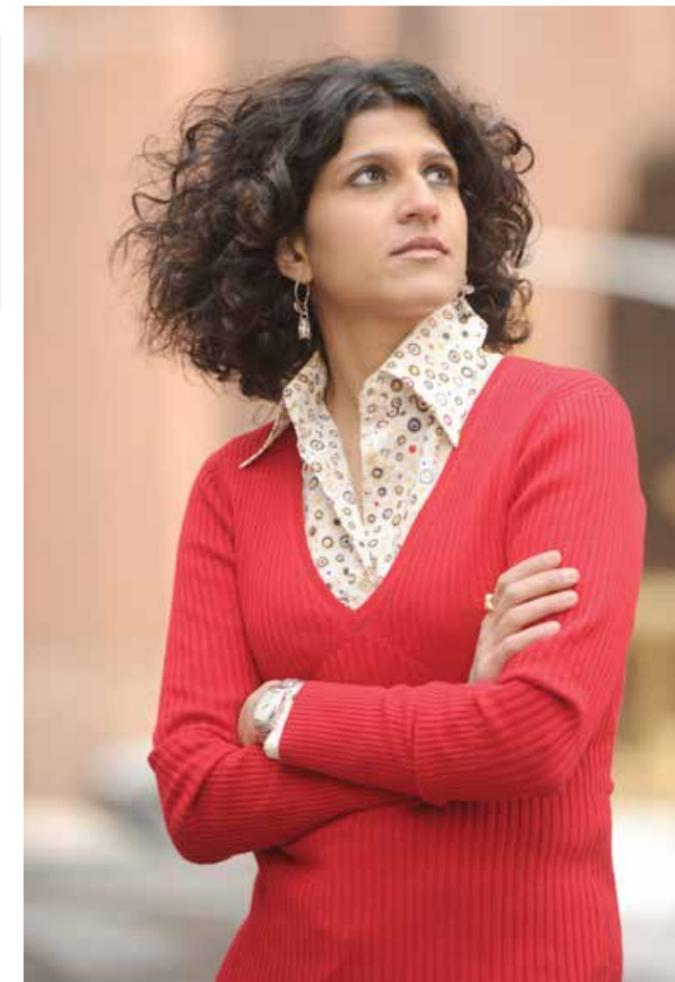
your product. That training has helped me in films.

She took a James Franco class on Directing Poetry at Tisch School of Arts

James insisted we shoot our entire short films with temporary locations and actors, in the exact same way, before shooting the actual film. So, you get to see what works, what doesn't, what angles need to be changed; and you save time, effort and money on the actual shoot.

Dev Benegal is producing her first full-length feature film.

We became friends through an acquaintance, so when I wrote *Varenya*, I coerced him to produce it. He loved it, read each draft, came to every pitch session, and has been a fantastic producer. The film is personal so I want to make it right.



SNEHA KOORSE, 29

TV writer, Slamdance winner, Prodigy

Claim to Fame:

Writing *The Americans* and *Constantine*

She's currently working on:

DC Comics' show, *Constantine*



She has worked for greats such as JJ Abrams, Alfonso Cuarón and David S Goyer already.

They are all legends and so different from one another. I think the biggest thing is that they all have strong points of view and a vision that they are able to communicate with confidence. The idea-generating part of their brains is also very strong. It's like a muscle that has been strengthened with years of practice.

She is fascinated by the dark side of things.

I am a happy person but I've always been attracted to things in which the stakes are raised to life and death. I like exploring what makes human beings be and do bad. My family had to emigrate from Kuwait because of the Gulf War, so, perhaps, it is to do with hearing stories about that. It's become a joke in *The Americans* writing room now that I love writing

action and torture scenes.

She's made it even as an Indian in a white male-dominated TV writing environment.

People tend to hire who they know and usually its white males because they can have a boys club in the writing room, where they don't have to be politically correct when making jokes. However, people are also more accepting that diversity provides the kind of perspective needed for complex writing. For example, I got hired on *The Americans* because my parents had an arranged marriage just like the spies on the show.

She is looking towards India next.

India is a rich setting for stories. I'd love to do a co-production between two countries; a story about a clash between two cultures, or that involves an interweaving of the two cultures, would best represent me.

TIYA SIRCAR, 32

Actor, Comic star, Next big thing

Claim to Fame:

The Internship and *17 Again*

You can see her next in:

In the animated series *Star Wars Rebels* and the movie *Miss India America*

She was cast as the female Barney in How I Met Your Dad.

If you had to draw parallels, that's the closest one I guess. I played Juliette Banerjee, a no-holds barred, unapologetic and sassy girl, who was such a departure from the sweet and cute roles I get to play because Indian women are usually not given roles that are too liberated, right? It was a privilege to get to play it.

She's worked with comic stars such as Robin Williams, Owen Williams, Vince Vaughn and Matthew Perry.

When I was sitting opposite Matthew Perry in the first table read of *17 Again*, I almost had a heart attack. And, Robin Williams (in *The Crazy Ones*) was obviously such a legend. To get to actually do comedy with them and get a free master-class in improv comedy from them was surreal.

She's made it big by overcoming a lot of stereotypes.

Hollywood at present is more willing to make a male character on a TV show Indian than a female. I was once finalised for a supporting role in *Whitney* but it had come down to whether they should make the male best friend Indian or the female best friend Indian, and they went with male. There are more Kunal Nayyars and Aziz Ansaris than Mindy Kalings.

She has a good head on her shoulders.

Getting my family to come to the premiere of *The Internship* was a special moment for me. My mom's proud of me but always asks me not to get into trouble by putting my thoughts on issues out on social media. I think social media can be used for a lot more than just selfies and what you eat for breakfast.

