

# DesiDesigns

From *Heroes* to *The Office* to *ER* to *Chuck*, actors of South Asian descent are becoming familiar faces on American television screens, reports SONA CHARAIPOTRA.

Forget *Slumdog Millionaire*. The real South Asian invasion is happening on small screens across America, and these days, these *desi* actors aren't playing live-action incarnations of Apu from *The Simpsons* anymore. We zero in on these now familiar faces.



## NAVI RAWAT

**Where You May Have Seen Her:** Now on the CBS hit *Numb3rs*, Rawat had a stint on *24* and portrayed a pregnant teenager on *The O.C.*

**Navi's Take:** "I'm horrible at math," says Rawat, who defies stereotypes as crime-solving Ph.D student Amita Ramanujan on the FBI drama *Numb3rs*. "It's nice to know that in my work I'm actually doing something of value to the community. It's good for audiences to see that actors who share the same heritage can represent a range of birthplaces, backgrounds and appearances without fitting a particular stereotype."

In fact, Rawat hasn't had to deal with casting directors demanding a *desi* accent

or insisting she wear a bindi. "Since I first started acting, I've found my ethnicity to be beneficial rather than something to overcome," says the actress, who's played Indian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern and white characters. "I see myself as part of a new wave of Hollywood; one in which an actor can represent any colour or come from any background."

But, alas, occasionally, the Miami native, who's of Rajputi and German descent, has ended up on the wrong side of the casting dilemma. "I hope to play more characters that are directly related to that part of my culture and heritage," she says. "I've auditioned for some, but they always say I'm not Indian enough!"

## VERA MINDY

**Where You May Have Seen Her:** As *The Office*'s Kelly Kapoor, she's the *desi* take on the chirpy chatterbox in the cubicle-next-door.

**Mindy's Take:** Kaling, born Vera Mindy Chokalingam in Cambridge, Massachusetts, got her break playing Ben Affleck (yes, Ben Affleck) in a surprise hit off-off-Broadway play she and a pal co-wrote called *Matt & Ben*. When producer Greg Daniels was creating the US version of *The Office*, he hired the actress to write for it. She stole the show in an episode called "Diversity Day," in which her then-quiet character Kelly Kapoor (who has

since evolved into the fashionista of Dunder-Mifflin) slapped Steve Carell's insensitive boss Michael Scott.

Kaling's character has brought much diversity to the show – and to American television – including a Bollywood-musical-inspired episode about a Diwali party which Kaling wrote. "I think the Kelly character is fun to play because she's not a role model for anybody," she has said about the role. "Although I do sometimes believe my parents wish I played a cardiologist at Johns Hopkins [university]." In her spare time, the LA-based actress pens a shopping blog that can be found at [www.ThingsIBoughtThatILove.com](http://www.ThingsIBoughtThatILove.com).





## ADHIR KALYAN

**Where You May Have Seen Him:** He was the fish-out-of-water Pakistani foreign exchange student on the short-lived critical darling *Aliens in America* and played a plastic surgeon prodigy on *Nip/Tuck*. Now he's set to star as David Spade's long-suffering assistant on *Rules of Engagement*.

**Adhir's Take:** South Africa-born, Brit-raised Kalyan started out in the biz by landing the "alien" role on the controversial *Aliens in America*. Since the show was cancelled, he's played diverse roles in big Hollywood films like *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, *Youth In Revolt* and *Fired Up!* in which he plays a flamboyant gay cheerleader. "There's probably more opportunity for me here in the US than there was in England,

which wasn't something I expected," says Kalyan. "Here it really seems to have broken open, and I think with the unprecedented success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, a lot of Hollywood folks are looking for more of our culture. It's infectious, it's vibrant, what's not to like?"

Still, "That is not to say that there's not work left to be done," says Kalyan. "That is not to say stereotypes don't exist. But I've passed on a lot of those roles. I don't want to be a part of perpetuating the stereotypes. There are people who have fought many struggles to get us to where we are, to make film and television reflective on our diverse society. But now, we've got to aim for the leading roles or the really juicy character roles. Hopefully there will be something significant left once the excitement dies down."

## KAL PENN



**Where You May Have Seen Him:** With a sizzling film career featuring hits like *Harold & Kumar* and *The Namesake*, Kalpen Modi is arguably the most recognizable *desi* actor in the United States. But he rounds out his resume with TV fare, including turns as "the terrorist-next-door" on *24* and a medical intern on the FOX hit *House, M.D.*

**Kal's Take:** He may be the most familiar brown face on TV these days, but Penn recalls his share of rough auditions. As

an actor of colour in LA, "when you start working, it's interesting because it's not textbook discrimination - nobody's coming to my apartment and burning a cross on my lawn," he has said. "But you notice that performers of colour have to work a couple of hundred times harder just to get their foot in the door. Double the credits, double the training, just to be seen, just to be taken seriously. So that was really frustrating."

In fact, he went as far as to create a stage name, Kal Penn, to play down his ethnicity. "Every single agent who I met with or auditioned for said you'll never work because you're not white or black," said Penn. "And I said really? So we're not at the point in American society where we're looking for content of people's character or talent? We're just looking at what they look like? And they said this is Hollywood."

And while he agrees that perhaps the tide is turning, it's still a struggle. "It'll start changing when we have more Indian people on the control side of things, writers, producers, directors," he said. "But any actor when they start out has those kinds of experiences based on type. The thing with people of colour is that we don't have the luxury of being too tall or too short or whatever. Right off the bat, you're just too ethnic."

## PARMINDER NAGRA



**Where You May Have Seen Her:** Catapulted into the spotlight by her kicky turn in Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*, Nagra's become a staple on NBC's long-running medical drama *ER*.

**Parminder's Take:** Nagra honed her acting chops on the Brit theatre scene and with stints on comedies like *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No. 42*. But the cross-over commercial success of *Bend It Like Beckham* - which took \$30 million in the US alone - cemented her status as the *desi* actress *du jour*. She had a run on the critically-praised 2003 Brit TV drama *Second Generation* before donning a white coat on-call on NBC's *ER*, which wraps its run in May, as Dr. Neela Rasgotra for six seasons. Next up for Nagra is the animated film *Batman: Gotham Knight*.

## NAVEEN ANDREWS



**Where You May Have Seen Him:** From *The English Patient* to *My Own Country* to *Bride & Prejudice*, Andrews exudes movie-star charm. But his long-running role as *Lost*'s Sayid Jarrah has been Andrews' most memorable turn yet.

**Naveen's Take:** "I have to say this, the Indian parts that I've played, like in *The English Patient* or *Kama Sutra* are parts that white people would have given their left arm to be able to play," Andrews has said. "That said, it's always refreshing when something comes up where how it's written in the script has nothing to do with India or race or colour or any of that sh\*t. And I get to be able to do it."

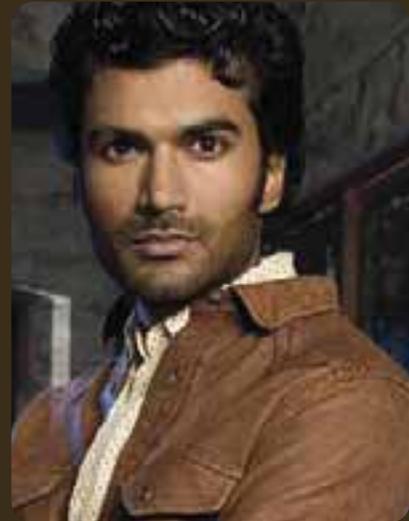
## SENDHIL RAMAMURTHY

**Where You May Have Seen Him:** Most viewers would know him as *Heroes*' tortured scientist Mohinder Suresh, but he's also done gigs on *Guiding Light*, *Ellen*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Ultimate Force*.

**Sendhil's Take:** You'd never know that under that refined Brit accent, Ramamurthy's really got a Texas drawl. It just goes to show he's got the chops. But the San Antonio-born Tamil actor, who happens to be director Jay Chandrasekhar's cousin, was pre-med at Tufts University in Massachusetts when he got bit by the acting bug.

And while it was a hard path to follow, you won't find any funny-accented stereotypes on Ramamurthy's resume. "I've made a very conscious decision that I'm not going to go in on stereotypical stuff - I'm just not into it," he has said. "I've turned down auditions for lots of roles like that. I won't do it, and my agents won't ask me to do it. I don't fault other actors for doing that. Sometimes you just need to work. But for me personally, I would rather just go and do something else."

Luckily, with *Heroes* going strong into its



third season, he won't have to. "I have to take my hat off to [producer] Tim Kring for writing a part like this," Ramamurthy has said. "I've never auditioned for a part this fleshed out, this well-rounded. Every facet of his life is touched on in the series. I feel so lucky."

## KUNAL NAYYAR

**Where You May Have Seen Him:** He plays astrophysics grad student Rajesh Koothrappali on the hit sitcom *Big Bang Theory*, but Nayyar is also a writer whose hit play, *Cotton Candy* is still running in New Delhi. He's currently working on a screenplay.

**Kunal's Take:** So why are there so many *desis* on TV these days? "Because we're so sexy," says Kunal Nayyar. "We're a sexy, sexy people. But really, I think the world is becoming a smaller place and the younger generation is growing up with such a plethora of cultures. I mean, look at me: I was born in England, grew up in New Delhi, and for the past nine years I've been in the United States. Before it used to be black and white, then slowly there were Hispanics, then Japanese, then Koreans, and now it's time for the Indians. We Indians, we like to multiply. And now we've become such a strong force in science, in politics and now in the arts."



He says the South Asian invasion on TV is reflective of reality. "My show is about a bunch of grad students at a major science university so of course there would

be *desis*," says Nayyar. "And my character is actually based on the friend of one of the producers. He's fresh off the boat and pathologically shy to boot. So there is some truth to the characters we're playing these days."

Still, "I've been incredibly lucky, but it's never easy to be an actor, whether you're white or you're black or you're yellow or you're blue," says Nayyar, who plans to spend the summer doing a Bollywood film. "If a role calls for an Indian, there are going to be 20 other Indians in that waiting room with you. It's getting easier because there are more roles, but it's still a challenge, a lot of hard work and a lot of luck. And it can be frustrating, because why can't I play a David? Because my skin is brown, I have to play Raj? Why can't I be the high school quarterback or the lawyer, rather than the geek or the doctor? I think that's going to change. That's the next step."