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An East Asian identity crisis

Film hits nerve in community divided by new and old

Aparita Bhandari
 National Post

An American-made film about the struggles of a 19-year-old man of Indian descent coming to terms with his roots has struck a nerve in Toronto's East Asian community.

People are flocking to see American Desi, about a student who tries to escape the suffocating atmosphere of his tradition-bound family when he goes away to university, only to find three Indian roommates who insist on reintroducing him to his culture.

Although he resists all such attempts at first, he falls in love with an Indian girl from his class who puts him on the road to discovering his roots.

The movie was originally called American-born Confused Desi, "Desi" being a non-pejorative colloquial term for East Asian, similar in tone to "Canuck."

In Toronto's growing Indian community, young people of East-Asian descent born in this country are often referred to as "CBCDs" -- Canadian-born Confused Desis -- by more traditional Indians.

The so-called CBCDs in turn call recent immigrants from East Asia "FOBs," which stands for fresh off the boat.

FOBs mock CBCDs for being Canadianized, often laughing at the fact that they cannot speak their native language, or if they do, they do it with an accent. The CBCDs return the favour by making fun of the FOBs' accents and square habits, which includes the way they dress.

"When we saw somebody who was dressed in plaid shirts and baggy, shiny pants, we'd say, 'Oh FOB' and wouldn't talk to them. Or wouldn't talk to them openly in front of other people," says Jyoti Mathur, a Canadian of East Indian descent.

While there may not be a plaid-shirt-clad FOB in American Desi who is at odds with an ABCD (an American-Born Confused Desi) in designer threads, there are several characters who ring true for Torontonians, most notably the character at the centre of the story, Krishna "My Name is Kris" Reddy.

"I can relate to Kris and being called an ABCD," said Seema Jethalal, an OAC student. "I thought of myself as a blend, but when I saw the movie I realized that I am a lot more Canadianized than I am Indian."

Her cousin, Prashant Jethalal, agrees with her. "I learned how to do the garba [an Indian



Glenn Lowson, National Post

Filmgoers line up for tickets at the Woodside cinema, where American Desi is playing. The movie rings true to people of East Asian descent.

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dance] like Kris. I had always made fun of it because I thought it was odd.

"Now my mom is trying to teach me how to cook because I will be going to university soon. One day I tried to make some curry and I put too much spice in it. We had to throw it out," says Prashant, drawing a parallel to a scene in the movie where Kris and his roommates try to cook Indian food.

The two Toronto-area cinemas playing American Desi, the Albion in Etobicoke and the Woodside at Finch Avenue and McCowan Road, are favourite hangouts for South Asians, both CBCDs and FOBs, because they mainly show the latest Bollywood (the Indian equivalent of Hollywood) flicks.

Cruise by Woodside cinema on a weekend and there is usually a large crowd gathered outside. Once inside, you are greeted by large posters of Indian movies and strains of Indian music in the background amidst the general hubbub.

Not all South Asians are fans of Indian movies, which are usually three-hour extravaganzas full of song-and-dance routines, but American Desi has managed to attract a wide audience.

"I was completely expecting to hate it. I thought it would be one of those Indian movies where they try to depict Americans accurately. But I loved it. And it was so short!" said Seema Jethalal.

"It was a riot!" exclaimed Sonya Rathee, a student at the University of Toronto. "I am usually very picky but I am impressed that somebody was able to come up with this movie that described how we are. And it was different from all those depressing movies that deal with how South Asian people have it so hard to live here. This was really light-hearted."

The comic situations in the movie are derived from the conflict between the preconceived ideas that ABCDs and FOBs have of each other.

In the movie, Kris can't stand the smell he associates with Indians, while his FOB roommate, Salim, thinks American-born Indian girls are morally corrupt. The movie makes light of these matters, but these complaints are often heard in reality.

"I went to West Humber Collegiate until last year," says Shivani Joshi, a 16-year-old high school student who was born in Canada. "There's this hall that's called the 'Ref Hall' [short for 'refugee'] because all the FOBs have their lockers there. Generally people try to avoid it because there is this smell ..."

The "smell" has to do with the spices that are used in Indian cooking, and is often a reminder of the CBCDs' own discomfort with their history and the racism they may have faced growing up.

Log on to a popular Toronto-based Indian site and it is evident that animosity is not one-sided. "All Canadian-born girls are sluts," one thread on the message board reads.

But not all exchanges are antagonistic. Often there is a middle ground: CBCDs learn a little more about their cultural backgrounds from the FOBs, and the FOBs get help adapting to Canada.

American Desi has been criticized in some quarters for falling into stereotypes, but in Toronto, at least, the majority seem to love the film.

"It's amazing," says Ms. Rathee. "You can tell we have all had the same experiences. Right from the opening scene, we were all laughing."

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