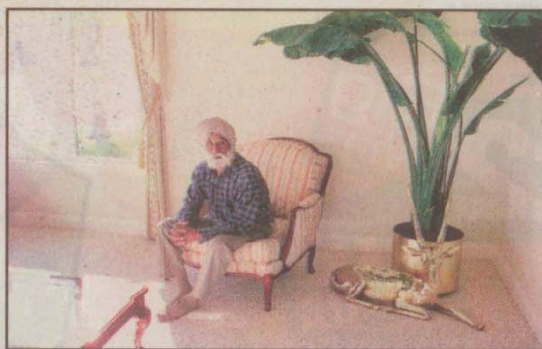




Gujarati boys and girls in the latest Hindi soap chic at a matrimonial convention centre; a sad and lonely Gujarati man in the opulent home of his son, a motel chain owner; a Christie's auction of Indian contemporary art; an NRI home where a Ganesh Pyne Durga and a collection of crystal and porcelain gondola are prominently juxtaposed; a debutante gets ready for her *arangettam*; Silicon Valley boys settle down for the sacred thread ceremony in a mall at 5am; an African American looks lovingly at his wife in a salwar-kameez as he clicks her.



For Gauri Gill from Delhi, such a collage of Technicolor photographic images represents "The Americans", encountered on a journey she undertook with a banker cousin that started at North Carolina and ended in New Orleans. A scholarship from Stanford University had made this project on the Indian diaspora possible. Now she teaches photography part-time at American School. She won the Mother Jone's Award in 2002. The 1970-born Gill, trained at New School, New York, is holding her first one-person exhibition at Bose Pacia Kolkata gallery on Park Street. She tells *t2* that these Americans carry a little India in their head, which sets them apart.

● **Did you take these photographs as an outsider?**

I clearly belonged in both camps. Some part of me was there. Maybe the whole of me. I could have ended up like many of my friends. I can see its pull... its seduction. So much of my family is involved. On the one hand they are clearly American... there is a dilemma. Even in India you don't escape that. The title of the exhibition "The Americans" is a reference to a book by the Swiss photographer, Robert Frank, who had photographed the Depression. This is my answer to him — brown or *desi*. Why are they different from white Americans?

Yankees & Indians



● **The matrimonial conventions must be amazing...**

Yes, couples are speed dating at these conventions, yet all of them belong exclusively to the Patidar Samaj. They are conservative — they don't want to marry outside their community. There is ghettoisation — some separation from mainstream. Nothing to do with class or affluence. The photographs I have taken are up to the third generation. What will happen to the fourth generation? How

will the story continue?

There were heartbreaking stories. There was a real-life *Mississippi Masala* couple — Rajesh and Donnie Speer of Birmingham Alabama. Rajesh was from a remote village. She accidentally cut her hand and her uncle offered to get her treated in America. She studied pharmacy. She married the most handsome boy in school, a black. Twenty years on, he developed a disability. She looked after his family. Her family had disowned her. She is as far out in the frontier as can be. She didn't cut her hair and wears a salwar-kameez and that itself is a political act.

● **How did you start taking photographs?**

I studied painting and applied art at the Delhi College of Art. Photography was a subsidiary. I loved it. It took me out into the world. In a sense, painting did not. In 1993, there was no place where one could be trained. I went to Tribeni Kala Sangam and learnt making black and white prints. I shoot in black and white and use film. But for this I used colour film. I need to get the light — green light of fluorescent tubes — the texture of linoleum floors and carpets. Which is odd. To foreigners, colours in India are much more exciting.

● **What camera do you use?**

A Leica or a Nikon. The film is Portra NC (stands for natural colour) which desaturates colour.

● **Are your photographs selling?**

For the first two to three years, I was prepared for my photographs not selling. But my series on urban landscapes sold. There is a market. But a lot of people don't understand. There are few critics. Museums don't buy them. There is no support from public institutions. A whole culture needs to come up. Only then will the market be meaningful.

Soumitra Das