

The Bollywood Shuffle

"People in India have very simple, very **dry lives**, so we want to be entertained **all the time.**"

By Rebecca Kraus

ART "Famous Studios is the best facility to shoot in Bombay," Raageshwari says with the grace of a star. Awash in the luxury of her air conditioned make-up room, the 21-year-old actress, who's already been featured in two major hits, speaks impeccable English and dips into Hindi only when she needs a worker to fetch her something. She's a model, a VJ on the Asian music channel and a singer, and on this hot day she's landed a role in a refrigerator advertisement.

Raageshwari is keenly aware of what Bollywood, as Indian showbiz is called, is all about. "There's a lot of exploitation because



girls are not taught independence right from the beginning," she says, while an ox-driven cart lumbers by the studio's open window and a breeze sends the stench of pit toilets down the hall. "But there's good money and I'm dealing with very well-educated people."

We talk about Bollywood's formulaic fantasies. "Hindi films really are hyperboles of expression," she says. "All our films are very visual, because we exaggerate our expressions." And the movies are the grandest form of escapism. "People in India have very simple, very dry lives, so we want to be entertained all the time." As we discuss the merits of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the season's blockbuster movie, Raageshwari tries on numerous half shirts, debating which color will go best with the refrigerators. She offers me a soda and a spicy snack with a bug crawling on it. When I squeamishly decline, she invites me to dinner after the shoot.

"The best Chinese food in Bombay," she says as we walk into a restaurant full of obsequious waiters. Stardom certainly has its privileges: Her father and brother are encouraged to park their car on the sidewalk when unable to find a space on the street. At dinner, Raageshwari tells me how she loves Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman. She laments that Bollywood has yet to produce a *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, though; divorce simply isn't something that one brings up in Indian movies. "We're big hypocrites in the film industry. There's no character continuity. A girl has to be like Snow White...up on a pedestal like a god."



It's not just movie characters who are deified; celebrities too are hot topics of discussion, and, even more so, gossip. How has Raageshwari avoided the tabloids? "I've never had a scoop in my life, never had an affair," she states. By staying home and not chatting "unnecessarily" with men, she's one of the few starlets to remain unscathed.

As we walk toward the outdoor toilets together, Raageshwari suddenly turns and grabs my arm. "So are you very conservative? Do you believe in sex before marriage?" she blurts out. Well, "no" and "yes," I reply. She gives me a knowing, slightly mischievous grin.

During the ride home after dinner, I rave about my Indian travels. "It's so nice to meet someone who enjoys things so," says Raageshwari as she presents her favorite self-help book as a gift to me. "In India, our lives are too petty to be able to look at things like that." When I reach out to shake her hand, she leans over and kisses my cheek. I wave goodbye and look down at the book, *Notes to Myself*.

Inside, Raageshwari had written a personal note: "Lots of love. Genuine good wishes. May you lead a very happy life! Forever."

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