

## **Spice of life**

### **Bollywood star Deshpande opens world of experience at CCAE**

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Indian films are known for their exuberant plotting: A sinister faceoff may be followed by a song-and-dance number, a romantic roll in the snow, a sari-clad spin through the trees, and then, of course, another song-and-dance number.

So it's only fitting that Bollywood star Tara Deshpande should have a similarly breathtaking resume: MTV VJ. Actress. Author. Cooking instructor.

For the past two years, the native of Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India, who now lives in West Roxbury, has been teaching a dizzying array of courses at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education - everything from paper-making and Indian literature to Jewish Indian cooking and, naturally, Bollywood. This Saturday the 28-year-old actress/author/artist/chef will discuss Indian cinema and culture and screen two of her films at the Harvard Square center.

"What doesn't she bring (to CCAE)?" asked Rebecca Kent, associate director of the nonprofit institution. "She's sort of an adult- education program in and of herself."

In a recent interview at a noisy Back Bay Starbucks, Deshpande said she never set out to become an actress. Her late father, an electronics engineer, and her mother, an interpreter, stressed academics.

"(Bollywood) has become such a big business that people regard you as lucky to be in it," said the raven-haired actress. "But that wasn't the way people thought 10 years ago. People from affluent homes or educated backgrounds would not enter this business."

When she was in secondary school, Deshpande began appearing in theatrical productions, including Shakespeare and Chekhov. While studying economics and political science at St. Xavier's College, her turn in Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" landed her a VJ slot on MTV Asia and modeling jobs for Pantene shampoo and Camay soap.

It wasn't long before television and Bollywood came calling and fan Web sites ([www.nttindia.com/tara](http://www.nttindia.com/tara), for one) blossomed like marigolds.

But the work Deshpande chose was a little off the beaten track: independent films, often rooted in realism, as opposed to the escapist fare typically churned out by Mumbai studios. Those over-the-top movies served a purpose, not unlike Depression-era Busby Berkeley musicals, especially in poor rural regions of this democracy of more than 1 billion.

"How do we escape from where we are?" Deshpande asked rhetorically. "Let's go to Switzerland and dance around. Let's wear 25 different costumes and beautiful jewelry. It's a fantasy. It performs its function in a certain way."

But an exodus to urban areas, coupled with economic prosperity, a return of nonresident Indians and the arrival of satellite TV, had begun to spark more interest in serious content and credible plots.

"India is no longer the country it was 10 years ago," Deshpande said. "Art is a mirror of society. When society is changing so does the form of art."

Deshpande's second film, "Bombay Boys" (1998), which will be screened Saturday, was a realistic view of three confused Indian expats trying to make their way in Mumbai. In the movie, which also starred Naveen Andrews ("The English Patient"), Deshpande played the moll of gangster Naseeruddin Shah ("Monsoon Wedding").

The big-screen collision of Western values, the Indian underworld and Bollywood, as well as scenes dealing with homosexuality, prompted government censors to confiscate the negative and make more than 20 cuts to the film. On its release, "Bombay Boys" earned critical acclaim and a measure of public wrath: Outraged audiences burned down several movie theaters.

On and off the screen, Deshpande's poise and intelligence earned plaudits.

"Such an absence of day-to-day histrionics is so rare in an actress as to actually be suspect," noted one Indian magazine.

Her next film, "Tapish" (2000), a mainstream melodrama about two mismatched women who share an apartment, examined the dichotomy of modern India: urban versus rural; hip versus traditional.

Deshpande also had a collection of short stories, "Fifty and Done," about the five Hindu stages of life, published in India by HarperCollins.

Deshpande played maverick parts in several other movies, but she soon left Bollywood. She met and married Daniel Tennebaum, a nice Minnesota boy in India on business. The couple relocated to Boston two years ago, where Tennebaum works as a venture capitalist.

"The Bombay-to-Boston shift was a big adjustment," said Deshpande, who shuttled back to India to complete two 2002 dramas, "Encounter," a police thriller that reunited her with Shah, and the noirish "Danger," where she played a two-timing femme fatale married to a crime lord.

She then accepted an unlikely role: instructor at CCAE. Anything from the South Asian subcontinent seems fair game: Indian-English literature. naner-making. Tandoori

barbecue. The cooking classes inspired her to complete a second manuscript, "Sense and Spice," a collection of food tales interspersed with recipes.

Beyond Brattle Street, she sees Indian culture spicing up mainstream America. In films such as "Monsoon Wedding" and "Lagaan," a historical drama nominated for an Academy Award as best foreign film. Or fiction such as Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Dreams" and Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace." Acceptance can even be seen in politics. Last month, Bobby Jindal, the American-born son of Indian immigrants, ran as the Republican candidate for governor of Louisiana.

"The largest democracy in the world has been sidelined for too long," Deshpande said. "Things are changing."

Beyond Bollywood, featuring a panel discussion, reception and screenings of "Tapish" and "Bombay Boys" will be held Saturday at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, 42 Brattle St., Cambridge. For event information, call 617-547-6789, Ext. 1 or go to [www.ccae.org](http://www.ccae.org).