



We have a lot of self-esteem and strive to earn respect, through our actions. This is a reflection of the Malayali way of living and style of thought.

— Asha Sarath, Actor/Dancer

in focus

TAKING CONTROL

Actress Melanie Chandra on making Hollywood a better place for women and minorities

Unlike broadcast TV, cable networks like HBO and platforms like Netflix are embracing diversity when it comes to weaving narratives.

— Melanie C, actress

GENDER inequality in filmdom is a touchy subject. Despite the current state of turmoil that the American film fraternity is in, Melanie Chandra is working towards shifting the paradigm. She has, in the past, eclipsed seemingly insurmountable odds and triumphed. After graduating from the prestigious Stanford University with a degree in mechanical engineering, this former Miss India America, who had no real Hollywood connections to speak of, chucked her lucrative position as a business analyst for a Fortune 500 company to pursue a career in acting.

Fast forward to the present and now—after portraying fierce, memorable, and well-balanced characters including Fareeda Khan (*The Brink*, HBO) and Malaya Pineda (*Code Black*, CBS) on-screen—this 2nd-degree black belt in Shotokan Karate wants to step behind the camera. “I’m currently developing TV and digital projects for the US market, that puts Indian-American women at the forefront. It’s just the first step,” explains Melanie, adding that she would love to see more women carry an entire film/series while playing a three-dimensional role, and not just the love interest.

Grace and power

But, to shape narratives with ethnically-diverse female characters who are ‘intelligent, beautiful, and flawed’, we need more minorities/women in the writers’ room and beyond—people who’ve experienced things outside of the first world life. “I gained a better understanding of how difficult life is for the less-fortunate while working with a Jharkhand-based NGO called Jagriti Vihara during college,” shares the *Love, Lies and Seeta* star, who was born and raised in a humble, conservative Malayali household located in Illinois.

Besides being an advocate for girls’ education in India speaking at Commit2Change’s fundraiser gala, Melanie also doubles up as the co-founder of Hospital for Hope. “Located in a rural village of 1,00,000 (near Ranchi), where malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, and high infant mortality rates prevail, our small hospital treats almost 3,000 people a month,” concludes the 33-year-old actress, who recently announced via Instagram that she’s preparing for the next phase in her life, motherhood.

Details: melaniekchandra.com

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Melanie Chandra



Abi Varghese

filmmaker

STORYTELLER'S PLIGHT

New Jersey-based director of popular sitcom *Akkara Kazhchakal* on why Malayalam TV shows lack finesse

ONLY a handful of people have meticulously captured the quintessential expat-Indian mindset on screen. As the co-creator of one of India’s first and most successful web series, Abi Varghese trumps them all. “The self-financed and independently shot *Akkara Kazhchakal*—centred on a dysfunctional Malayali family settled in the US—ran for four seasons (2008-2010) and ended up launching quite a few careers,” begins the marketing graduate, who quit a cushy day job at Unilever, to pursue his passion in filmmaking.

Born in Adoor and raised in New Jersey, Abi attributes the cult status of his first TV show to how well the team captured the often unfulfilled NRI dream—get rich quick and retire back in the Motherland. But the *Monsoon Mangoes* director isn’t happy with the current crop of regional TV shows.

Content is King

“Malayalam films are renowned for its progressive elements, even amongst international cinephiles. But why is that we never hear about a Malayali equivalent of TV shows like *Arrested Development* or *Breaking Bad*?” asks Abi, whose short-

film *The Return Address*, was showcased at the Cannes Film Festival back in 2010. “I strongly feel that television content in Kerala has not lived up to its full potential yet. It’s primarily because traditional networks are still looking for 600-episode-long soap operas! However, I feel it’s just a matter of time before these dynamics change,” he adds.

This shift is already visible across the Pacific where the new buzzword is ‘diversity’. Platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video are vying for shows that appeal to a cross-cultural audience. That’s probably why this 35-year-old’s latest Netflix show *Brown Nation* has gained a 99 per cent approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

“That series featured actors from over 20 nationalities and is being streamed in over 190 countries!” explains Abi, adding, “My production house, Infamous Coconuts, is already working on fresh content.” Besides two yet-to-be-titled programmes for American television, fans can look forward to an urban comedy about immigrant families called *Metropark* starring Bollywood actor, Ranvir Shorey.

Details: infamouscoconuts.com

—AM

