Five Famous Indian and Pakistani Houstonians

By Mandy Oaklander
Published Tue., Aug. 16 2011 at 10:31 AM

Dust off your South Asian flags, because this week we celebrate India's (August 15) and Pakistan's (August 14) Independence Days. Sixty-four years ago, India freed itself from the Brits and split itself into two countries. Luckily many crossed the hemispheres all the way to Houston, making us indebted to the subcontinent for everything from space shuttle martyrs to bikini-clad medalists. Here are five famous Indians and Pakistanis who have made Houston their home:

5. Mariyah Moten
When Karachi-raised Mariyah Moten entered a beauty pageant in 2006 wearing a bikini, her homeland was not pleased. Moten repped Pakistan in China's "Miss Bikini of the Universe" pageant (apparently a thing) and by doing so infuriated officials back home, who believed that a nice Muslim girl doesn't represent her country in a bright red bikini. It was the first time Pakistan entered the contest. According to Britain's Daily Mail, Pakistani authorities denounced her claim of being Pakistani:

"We have asked our missions in Washington and Beijing to investigate this because it is against our policy, culture and religion," senior Culture Ministry official Abdul Hafeez Chaudhry said.

In an interview with DesiClub, Moten stood by her participation. "It's always hard to accept changes but with time people learn to accept them," she said. "I hope that this will allow people to see the
different types of beauty Pakistan holds within it." The firebrand model has since graduated from University of Houston with a degree in hotel management.

4. Renu Khator
Renu Khator, the president of UH since 2008, is the first foreign-born head of the school and the second woman. Nationwide, she's the first Indian-American to lead a major research university in the U.S.

But when she lived in India as a young woman, she didn't even want to leave her homeland of Uttar Pradesh. At age 18, according to her biography, Khator's parents arranged a marriage for her to an Indian living in America. She went on a ten-day hunger strike in protest. Eventually she moved to America, began to learn English and fell in love with her husband. Khator went on to get her PhD in political science/public administration. After 22 years as the provost at University of South Florida, Khator became UH's thirteenth president.

3. Kalpana Chawla
When she left her North Indian hometown of Haryana in 1982, Kalpana Chawla didn't know she was headed for the history books. The aerospace engineer got her master's degree from University of Texas at Arlington, then got a second master's and PhD at University of Colorado at Boulder. (Feeling underaccomplished yet?)

She joined NASA, and became the first Indian-born woman and second Indian ever to fly in space. Chawla's third flight into space ended in tragedy. In 2003, space shuttle Columbia exploded over Texas as it returned home. Every crew member died.

2. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
Born in Kolkata, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni left India for America to pursue graduate school, and eventually received her PhD from Berkeley. A poet and novelist, Divakaruni has written around 15 books, many of which deal with the immigrant experience. She won the American Book Award in 1996 for her collection of short stories, Arranged Marriage, and has written for The New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly. Two of her books have been made into movies, and one has been turned into a Tamil TV serial. Divakaruni now teaches creative writing at UH.

Wrote Divakaruni on her web site:
Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them: women in love, in difficulty, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to [be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life.

1. Raj Bhavsar
   So he was actually born right here in Houston, but Raj Bhavsar has created his fair share of milestones. Bhavsar, a gymnast whose parents are Gujarati, is the third Indian-American ever to win a medal at the Olympics. During his third Olympic games in 2008, Bhavsar and his World Champion U.S. team earned a bronze in artistic gymnastics, a sport that surely sculpts the best biceps known to man. Bhavsar even has a gymnastic position named after him: "The Bhavsar."

Now at the ripe age of 30, Bhavsar performs in Cirque du Soleil.