

Sheetal Sheth: All American Dream Girl

by christopher phillips photography charles bush/shooting star

Since her cinematic debut in 1999, Sheetal (rhymes with lethal) Sheth has appeared in *ABCD*, *Pocket Full of Dreams*, "The Princess and the Marine," *Indian Cowboy*, and *Wings of Hope*. This month Sheetal essays the female lead in director/writer Anurag Mehta's thoroughly entertaining debut film, *American Chai*.

Born in New Jersey, Sheetal gravitated to performing at an early age. "I grew-up being really involved with cultural dancing," she says. "Every day I'd be dancing or practicing...since I was six years old."

Sheetal's subsequent film career resulted from a fortuitous decision she made in high school. "I tried out for basketball and a play. I was accepted by both but could only choose one, and thought, 'I love basketball but I've never tried [acting] before.' I wanted to do something new so I chose acting... and I've never stopped."

When not in front of the camera, the NYU graduate can be found sky-diving, bungee jumping, hang-gliding—"anything with a thrill." In addition to plummeting from great heights, Sheetal also devotes her time to community service, doing work for various programs, including Americorps, developing lesson plans and teaching at inner city schools.

Sheetal acknowledges the difficulty for many first-generation Americans to find the balance between the traditions of their ethnic heritage and the culture of their nation. "In some ways," Sheetal states, "[the adherence to custom] becomes even more strict when Indians come here because they are so afraid that their kids will become 'too American,' so they take it to the extreme." Sheetal's current turn in *American Chai* addresses this experience. It is the story of Sureel (Aalok Mehta), a first generation Indian-American in his senior year of college. Surreptitiously trying to establish himself as a musician while under the watchful eye of his very traditional father (who believes his son to be pre-med), Sureel's life takes a down turn when he's kicked out of his band and loses his girlfriend. That is until he meets Maya (Sheetal) who inspires him to claim his passion and follow his dream.

With so few Hollywood stories being told of the Indian experience, what does Sheetal see for the future of Indian stories in Hollywood?

"I have a problem with that vocabulary. People see movies like *American Chai*, *ABCD*, or any other film that has Indian people in it and they think of it as an 'Indian movie.' These are American films. These are stories about the American dream and the people who try to find it." ▼

