



Left: Nusrat Durrani. Below: Afshan Durrani.



# Designed to Succeed

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

**He loves music. She loves art and fashion. Together, they have emerged as a power couple with distinctive style.**

For MTV executive Nusrat Durrani and fashion designer Afshan Durrani, seeking new challenges and chasing their passions have been a constant in their search for professional fulfillment that has taken them from India to New York, via Dubai.

Mr. Durrani was part of the team that launched MTV.com, now a leading entertainment destination. He has played a key role in leading MTV into the digital realm and launched e-commerce across all MTV music sites since joining MTV Networks in 1996.

As senior vice president and general manager of MTV World, he was also the guiding force behind the 2005 launch of MTV

Desi, the channel customized to cater to the South Asian community in the United States.

The channel “represented the coming of age of the young desi community in America,” he says. “We gave young South Asians a place to express themselves, celebrate their culture and be a part of the Asian revolution in the U.S. We have shone the light on hundreds of artists of Indian origin that had previously been ignored by mainstream media.”

MTV Desi was followed by two more niche channels for Asian audiences in the United States—MTV Chi and MTV K—in December 2005 and June 2006. The MTV World channels were taken off the air in February 2007, but will be relaunched in a different format.

In fact, the MTV World experiment led to Mr. Durrani’s current and perhaps most ambitious project. He is leading a team that will utilize MTV’s vast international presence to launch its first global pop culture network. “The audience for the new project is bicultural...such as young people of Indian origin who live in the U.K., U.S., and other countries,” he says. An online beta—

an unfinished version released for customers to test before the final version is released—is set to launch at the end of this year.

In 2007, Mr. Durrani received the Pinnacle Achievement Award, which recognizes an individual who has reached the top of his professional field, from the New York-based Asian American Business Development Center. Last year, he was also given the Trailblazer of the Year award by the South Asians in Media and Marketing Association.

The other half of this power couple is Afshan Durrani, owner and creative director of Lost City Products, a company that produces couture fabrics for furnishings and upholstery. Inspired by Mughal art, architectural motifs, literature, poetry, Sarasatic prints from Japan and early 20th century Austrian artists and designers, Lost City's products are sold through showrooms in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas.

Mr. Durrani grew up in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, while Ms. Durrani is from Kashmir. As second cousins, they met during vacations and their parents often joked they would get them married when they grew up. Now "it's not a joke anymore. It's real," says Ms. Durrani, who graduated from the University of Lucknow.

Their seven-year-old daughter, Laila, considers herself a global citizen and speaks Hindi, besides English. Having spent all her summers in India, she can also read and write Urdu.

"She has two goldfish in New York—Cat and Mouse. Unfortunately Mouse died [recently]. Laila also has many rabbits, birds and fish in her home in Lucknow. Her favorite music these days is Rilo Kiley," says Mr. Durrani.

An MBA from the University of Lucknow, Mr. Durrani started his career in New Delhi with Uptron (U.P. Electronics Corporation Limited). He moved to Dubai with his family in 1990, where he was marketing manager for Honda Motor Cars.

"After five years in Dubai, both Afshan and I were restless and wanted to pursue our passions—art, music and fashion on a large scale," says Mr. Durrani. So they resisted the urge to continue their "comfortable, predictable" lives and moved to New York in 1995, where they both went back to school.

While Mr. Durrani got an M.A. in communications from the New York Institute of Technology, Ms. Durrani enrolled at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He and Laila are American citizens while Ms. Durrani has retained her Indian citizenship.

Mr. Durrani's move to MTV was a seemingly natural step for a person who grew up with varied musical influences—Indian classical, pop, rock, Bollywood—and who says that music is as important to him as food or water. "I watched MTV for the first time in Dubai and was blown away by the creativity of the brand and what it represented," he says. It was tough for him to get a

job with MTV as they thought he did not know "anything about American pop culture."

While Mr. Durrani was scripting his success story, Ms. Durrani was weaving her own tale of achievement, one imbued with the royal hues of the Mughal era. Her company Lost City was launched in 2002 and creates fabrics using techniques that are hundreds of years old. However, Lost City's overall design aesthetic is modern and edgy.

"The Mughal age was a renaissance period and the richest in terms of art history. We have not even touched a fraction of what it has to offer," says Ms. Durrani. "We are not interested in regurgitating what India is already famous for." Lost City products, she says, are aimed at the global-minded individual.

The fabrics are created by a group of about 100 artisans in Lucknow. First, the yarn is hand dyed and the designs are sketched on tracing paper, which can take up to a week depending on the intricacy of the pattern. The artwork is needle-pricked by hand and the perforated design is printed onto fabric stretched on a wooden frame. The artisans then sit around the frame and embroider the design.

"The typical reaction in America is, 'This is too beautiful to be hand-embroidered.' But when an artisan pours his heart and soul and skill into something, the result has to be beautiful," says Ms. Durrani.

So is it difficult to get clients to look beyond the exotic aspect of Indian designs? "No....There's much more to India than dancing elephants and burning incense. It's Indians themselves [who] have to take the lead in upgrading the image of our country and its reality," she says.

With products that seek to revive the vanishing art of embroidery, Ms. Durrani says Lost City is also an homage to all that is being lost to commercialization and modernization. In fact, the recently launched Lost City Web site (<http://lostcityproducts.com>) embodies the company's philosophy. At the heart of the site, which features obscure video clips, is the sumptuous fabric collection and the stories that inspired each design, including Rabeha Balkhi, an ancient Afghan princess who wrote poetry, and punk rocker Nick Cave.

What helps the Durranis, and so many other people of Indian origin, make a mark in the United States? "South Asians have a solid work ethic, dreams, ambitions and a heritage that is thousands of years old. How can they not do well?" says Mr. Durrani.

"America," says Ms. Durrani, "liberates you in more ways than one. Its freedoms extend beyond speech and dreams. Like India, it's a great country that lets you explore your full potential."



Afshan Durrani draws on a range of inspirations to design Lost City's hand-embroidered fabrics.

MOHAMMED JAFFER/SAPINDIA



Please share your views on this article. Write to [editorspan@state.gov](mailto:editorspan@state.gov)