

THE AMERICAN BAZAAR



A tale of two actresses at Pranna in New York – Bipasha Basu and Qurrat Ann Kadwani

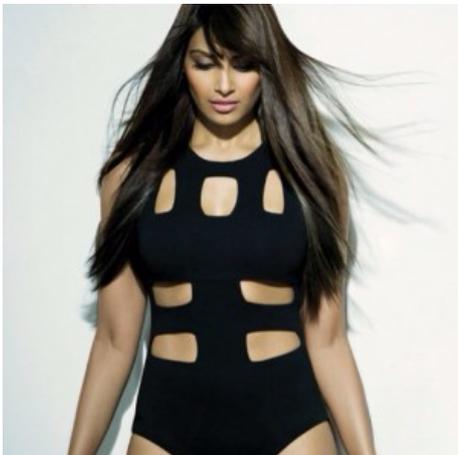
May 6, 2014

An evening in Manhattan.

By Sujeet Rajan

NEW YORK: As looks and talent go, the two are outstanding: one, a veteran diva in Bollywood, Bipasha Basu, with a string of hits at the box office. She oozes sensuality, on and off the screen. The other, a strikingly attractive award-winning Indian American actress, Qurrat Ann Kadwani, who is set to appear in an Off-Broadway play; at the cusp of roles in Hollywood, TV soaps, beginning her journey in film.

Both women look amazing, radiate good health; are avowed fitness fanatics. They put lesser fit mortals around them – yours truly included – to shame. Most gaze in pure admiration at them. They even resemble each other in some ways: have prominent high cheek bones, dusky brown complexion.



Bipasha Basu (Photo courtesy of Twitter)

They both are also ambassadors for the ridiculed.

Basu, a winner of the Ford Supermodel of the World contest, who started her modeling career in New York at the age of 17, speaks often against the stigma attached to dark-complexioned women in India.

Kadwani speaks about recent performance of the traveling play ‘*They Call me Q*’ – where she plays 13 different characters. It’s being produced as an Off-Broadway play later this month. At college campuses, in places like rural Mississippi, girls of color and minorities thank her profusely for giving them self-belief, living as they are in communities driven by racism, where obesity, low self-esteem is a way of life.

I had gone to meet both actresses last week, under one roof on the same evening, at Pranna – an upscale lounge

on Madison Avenue. The experience made one thing clear: the glaring chasm between glamorous Bollywood, and actresses off it, was on full withering display.

For Basu, it was a regular hyper-halo evening. A throng of exultant, smitten, worshipping crowd surrounded her, cameras going berserk. For the young Kadwani, brought up in New York, the event underlined the power of fame, of popularity of a fellow actor from overseas. Looking in from the outside, she learnt a valuable lesson on charisma on home turf, from an outsider.

At 35, Basu has reached almost the end road of the romantic and sultry stage of her career – for which she is best known – but has still three big banner films lined up this year – Sajid Khan’s comedy *Humshakals*, a 3D movie, *Creatures*, by Vikram Bhatt, and the action thriller *Bang Bang*.

With luck, Kadwani may emulate some of the glittering career of Basu, if she breaks in early enough in Hollywood.

The two of them being there at the same time was a coincidence. Kadwani had a press conference lined up there at 6 pm, for her upcoming Off-Broadway play, along with her brother, Obaid Kadwani, co-producer and co-director of *They Call Me Q*. At 8 pm, Nutan Kalamdani, the co-founder of Awesome Internet Television, had with some other organizers – Priya Haider, Suman Nagpal, Ritesh Parikh, Seema Jagtiani, Renu Moorjani and Sapna Manhattan – organized a ‘*Beedi Jailaile Night*’ featuring the ‘hot and sizzling’ Basu. At \$25 and \$100 VIP tickets (the latter came with an open bar on the first floor featuring vodka, and the anticipation of hobnobbing with Basu), it was an opportunity for people to show some dance moves too, to Magic Mike, DJ Chad and DJ Ripple’s concoctions.



Qurrat Ann Kadwani

Kadwani’s press conference went off smoothly. The crowd started to swell for the Basu meet. The party began in full swing. The wait began. Kadwani, in a black and golden embroidered dress, however, hadn’t left. She too became one with the crowd in the VIP section, mingling, waiting for the star to appear.

In the VIP section, there were the usual mix of the aging and the young from all walks of life. The younger crowd was mostly on the floor below. In the VIP section, I chatted with a young IT professional, who lives in Allentown, PA, was in town for a work project. After a couple of drinks, the six-footer told me what he had prepared to tell Basu: “I like you Bipasha, because there is nobody like you.” That’s an original one, I told him, between sips of vodka. Informed him she was dating Harman Baweja. “Who’s he?” he asked. As an afterthought, he said he was there to get a photo with Basu to put up on his Facebook. Another tall man – I asked him later and found out he was 6’4’ tall – was chatting excitedly to his friends of what movies Basu had appeared in. What’s it with Basu and tall men?

Eight became 9. Then 10. Still, no Basu. By now, the organizers were anxious. A press conference with Basu had been cancelled the previous day in Edison, NJ. Magic Mike played some Punjabi hits from 10-15 years ago, not

exactly pulsating stuff. On the main floor of the lounge, near the bar, a giant screen telecast a Mariners game. It couldn't have been more incongruous.

Soon came the much-awaited announcement: Basu was on her way. The VIP crowd was asked to go to the floor below. I waited patiently at the bar, shared gossip with Jitin Hingorani, host of AVS TV and who runs Jingo Media, and Sonia Rehani, Executive Vice President with CharlesRutenberg. Hingorani was just back from the IIFA awards in Tampa, had met Basu there too, along with most of the other big stars, so it wasn't a big deal for him. I fed Rehani with some breaking news: Richard Gere and Padma Lakshmi were an item; enjoyed the look on her face. She explained to me that she was not a Sindhi (despite the usually reliable tell-tale ani at the end of her surname) – not related to Hingorani – but was a Punjabi. She enjoyed the look on my face.

As time went by pleasantly, aided also by some Scotch, there was suddenly a flurry of action. The organizers had played a neat trick. Basu was in the house. They brought her from the back door, straight to the VIP section. As she descended the stairs, dressed in an off-white regal full-length gown, hedged in by the organizers and some hefty security men, there were whoops of delight from all sections of the room. The crowd surged forward. She was escorted safely to the floor below, to the back end of the lounge. There was a charge to scamper forward, from most of the women in the room.

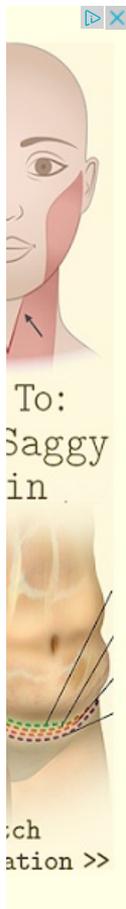
I couldn't see a thing from where I was – except for some flailing elbows and diminutive looking girls pushing the big boys aside, so went up again. Stood on some cushions and edged sideways between some enthusiasts like myself to get a dekho at the Basu below.

The organizers looked nervous surrounding her, wary maybe of a human squirrel suddenly hurtling himself through the air at her, emboldened by the three-hour long binging. I dutifully clicked some photos too of her – failed to zoom in with my iPhone to the point of suggesting I was standing next to her. A woman shouted from somewhere in the room, in a slurred voice: “Bipasha, we love you, because our husbands love you.” Basu laughed at that. Somebody asked her of her DVD on fitness. She looked around and said:” I see a lot of fit people in this room.” Luckily, she didn't glance upwards where I was stationed.

At 11 pm, as I left Pranna, to head towards the Bryant Park Hotel for an after party of New York Festivals' World's Best Advertising awards – I had missed attending the evening gala waiting for a glimpse of Basu – the crowd surged forward a little bit closer to Basu. She looked ready to flee. Somewhere in that crowd was Kadwani too.

(Sujeet Rajan is the Editor-in-Chief of The American Bazaar)





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