

Susie is Home

They look after the kids, and more.

Indian au pairs are the new flavour in American homes.

by Payal Kapadia

"Would you like to go to the United States?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, without a thought.

That's no line from an M&B novel—nor even a headhunter lassoing in a potential recruit. But it's no less life-altering for that. This brief telephone call turned the universe around for 22-year-old Elizabeth Seema Manuel. A talk with her father that finally saw her 15,000 km away from her hometown, the sleepy port-city of Kochi, to where she is now—in Hudsonville, Michigan. It's a family conversation, replayed ever so often in Indian homes of late, that signals the onset of a delicate process that involves separation, exile and a whole new world of adventure.

If any of her Kochi neighbours were to see Seema now, they might not recognise her. This sheltered, doe-eyed girl lives with, and works for, the Benson family. She gets the two older Benson boys ready for school, often drives them to after-school classes. Her 'Indian clothes' have given way to jeans, skirts. She's come a fair bit from that day in June '06 when she got on a plane nervously—for the first time in her life—to become among the first Indians to be selected by the Au Pair in America programme.



This is one of the many cultural exchange programmes offered by the Connecticut-based American Institute of Foreign Studies. Three times a month, about 400 girls between the ages 18-26 from all over the world are flown into New York, then on to a three-day intensive orientation in Connecticut, to prepare them for their new lives. The girls are prepped on everything, from CPR and first-aid to a basic understanding of US rules and regulations—and culture—then sent off to the families they have been matched with. Now APIA is looking at India, hoping that young Indian girls will grab the opportunity to live, work and study in the US while doubling up as au pairs, or live-in child-care providers, for host families.

"Right from the beginning, when you go to an interview and then land up on the other side of the world, you know you have to be bold and outgoing," says Seema, speaking to Outlook from Michigan. That's the sort of go-getter attitude Delhi-based Mita Sanyal Felman is looking for. As the APIA representative in India, she has screened close to 60 applications from Indian girls since March '06 when the organisation first trained its sights on India.

"A lot of American families want young English-speaking girls who can interact with their children on a more educational level," says Felman. "India has always been familiar to Americans in terms of Indian food, or yoga, but their knowledge of the country remains vague. They want their children to know more about this country that is making waves all over the world."





The Bensons didn't specifically ask for an Indian girl, but were thrilled to be matched up with one. "It's good for my kids to see different cultures," enthuses mother Katherine. "And Seema has exceeded all our expectations." Her sons, Joshua, 10, and Jacob, 7, are fascinated by Seema's 'Indianness'. They spend weekends doing a messy Indian cook-in, or putting on a 'fashion show' in Seema's churidar-kurtas; and often speak to her family and friends in India over the Internet as though they have known them all their lives.

"A twentysomething au pair is much more fun for the kids," reasons Felman, who also took the help of an au pair to raise her two daughters when she lived in the US. "I can't imagine a 50-year-old nanny from Guatemala playing soccer with my daughters. "

With Seema around to help, it's much easier for Katherine to hold down her demanding job as operations director for one of the largest pharma majors in the US. On an average weekday, Seema is up by 8 to take six-month-old Kira out in the pram, to feed and change her through the day till the boys return at 4 pm. If their mother is travelling on work, it

falls upon Seema to take them to swimming, baseball, karate and gymnastics classes, then to bring them home by 6 pm for dinner, homework, showers and bed. "She has a great relationship with the kids," says Katherine. "They have fun, but she also makes them listen to her."

About 1,500 km away, near Boston, Massachusetts, 21-year-old Susan Thomas looks after the Lewis family's two daughters, Erika, 11, and Mary Kate, 9. Susan is also from Kochi, and a diary of her day reads pretty much the same—though supper is often followed by a family session huddled around the model globe, discussing India, its culture and climate.

Make no mistake, neither Susan nor Seema are glorified 'ayahs'. They are expected to put in no more than 45 hours of work a week, and weekends are typically spent with other au pairs in the area. "There's so much to do here," gushes Seema. "Eating out, hanging out, biking, going to the beach, skating, movies, shopping at the mall, going clubbing, or even sightseeing in nearby Chicago." In her free time, Susan has already toured 10 American states, often joining the family on the annual break to Maine.

As au pairs, Seema and Susan are entitled to their own bedroom and bathroom, Internet and telephone access, use of the family car if the family lives on city outskirts, and anything else they might need to feel at home, including shopping for food ingredients at the nearest Indian store. Their employers are also required to pay them \$139 a week as stipend, and finance six credits of study worth about \$500. While Susan is pursuing courses in HRD and international business at a nearby community college, Seema has already completed six credits in hr management, and is now even taking piano lessons. "If you account for boarding, food, medical insurance, car insurance and all the other expenses, it costs about \$22,000 a year to keep an au pair," estimates Felman.

Host families are rigorously screened by APIA—three references must be furnished, one each from the husband's and wife's employers, besides police clearance and a family interview where a counsellor visits to observe how the family interacts and to vet the living arrangements for the au pair. "I remember our first visit from a counsellor," says Felman. "She asked to see the au pair's bedroom. She wanted to know if the bath was attached, how effective the heating and cooling was, she wanted to know what nights my husband and I went out, what time the kids slept...everything."

APIA is equally tough on screening potential au pairs. Having a passport and driving licence is a must—Seema learnt driving on her aunt's car in Kochi while she waited to be matched. Applicants must hold at least a high-school diploma and demonstrate 200 hours of proven child care—Seema taught at Sunday school in Kochi for three years, and both Seema and Susan had worked part-time at local kindergartens. Applicants are also expected to pay a fee of about Rs 32,000, which covers part of the airfare and medical costs as well as application processing expenses.



But the experience suggests that it was worth all the effort. "I didn't know what a hamburger was," Seema laughs. "At first, I was worried about everything. The Michigan winter was too cold to step out in, I was worried about whether the kids would like me. I wondered how I would drive the long distances here. I wasn't used to wearing jeans much, or skirts. "

But adapting to a new country was easier because the girls had a local 'counsellor' to help them settle in, and to put them in touch with other au pairs in their area. While she was still in India, Seema sought advice by e-mail from her counsellor, Tootsie Panayatou, on everything from the sort of clothes to carry to the kind of courses available at schools in the area. Panayatou handles a "cluster" of 22 girls in the Michigan area, including Seema—and they meet at least once a month to share experiences.

These days, Seema has the confidence to drive the children anywhere. She has learnt that getting American children to obey you isn't about authority, but strategy. Her English skills have improved dramatically. And she has friends—other au pairs—from Brazil, Germany, Thailand, Colombia and Canada. "There is no challenge that Seema has not taken on or overcome," says Panayatou even as she adds, "please send us more girls."