

EasternEye

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Power
List

Celebrating Britain's

101

Most Influential Asians

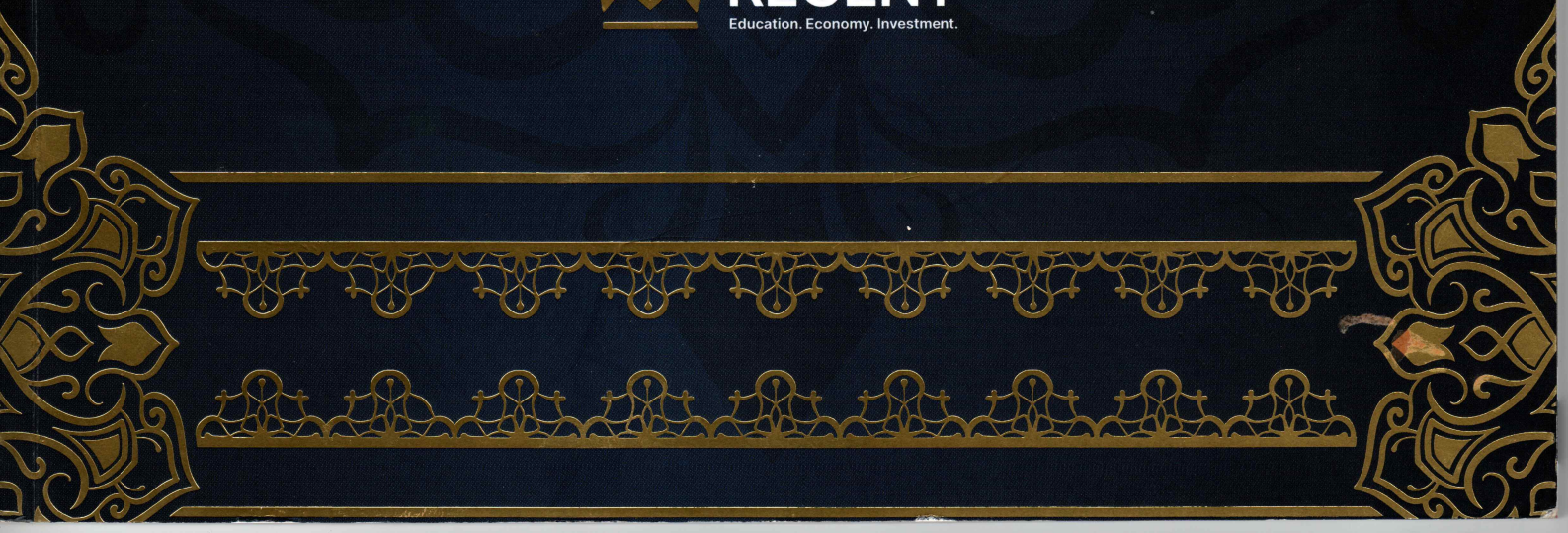
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SOARING DREAMS:
Chila Burman at Tate Britain;
(below) in her studio

Neon queen

Chila is lighting up the art world in Britain

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Arts

CHILA BURMAN is flying high – literally. British Airways have commissioned her to paint a 787 Dreamliner aircraft in her characteristically colourful way to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the airline’s operations to India. Today, she is probably the busiest British Asian artist in the country. Her work has long been collected by museums and private art lovers all over the world.

And this year the Tate is publishing a thick volume on Chila’s work. But behind her success lies nearly 50 years of hard work. Speaking to *GG2 Power List* at her studio in Hackney in East London, she acknowledged: “I am now definitely treated more as an artist because I’ve made it but I don’t know about the others.”

However, watching her progress in the very competitive art world, it does seem many young Asian women have been inspired by Chila. The government certainly considers Chila to be a role model for what diversity has achieved for Britain.

The word, “GREAT”, was emblazoned on the side of her sparkly ice-cream van the government displayed in Doha during the football world cup in 2022. Chila’s trademark tiger on top of the vehicle was a throwback to the days of her late father, Bachan Singh Burman, a Punjabi Hindu, who came over from Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1954. He sold ice-cream from a van which had a model of a tiger on top. His daughter is now known for her tiger fashioned with a variety of neon lights.

Chila was born in Bootle, near Liverpool, in 1957, attended Bootle’s Girl Grammar School, and switched at 13 to Waterloo Park Grammar

School for Girls, where a teacher encouraged her after spotting her talent for art.

She knew it was risky but she took up art as a career nearly 50 years ago, after doing an art and design foundation course at Southport College of Art, then studying fine art and graphic design at Leeds Polytechnic and venturing to London to the highly selective Slade School of Fine Art where she got her MA in printmaking and painting. Her work has spanned “multiple media, from printmaking and painting, to installation and film”.

In September this year, Chila will be conferred an honorary degree by University College London. Her head has not been turned by success, though. And there is a directness about her that has won her many friends and supporters in the art world.

Asked if she would accept the degree, “the Punjabi lass from Liverpool” responded: “This is fantastic news! Of course, I will.”

In February, Chila was shortlisted for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square along with six other artists. “We were up against a thousand people,” said Chila.

She hasn’t looked back since her neon installations lit up Tate Britain during the pandemic and apparently gave comfort to patients recovering in St Thomas’ Hospital on the other side of the Thames.

The British Airways commission is one of her biggest. British Airways was formed when BOAC (British Airways Overseas Airways Corporation) merged with British European Airways in 1974. But BOAC began life as Imperial Airways, whose first flight to Delhi departed on 6 December 1924 and took 14 hours to reach its destination.

Chila said when passing through airports, she would sometimes look longingly at aircraft and imagine what she would do to make them more colourful.

“And now my dreams have come true,” she said brightly.

A great deal is at stake for British Airways: “India’s growth and demographic changes mean demand in the UK-India air travel market

will grow faster than most markets in the rest of the network. Last year, Indian nationals accounted for nearly 30 per cent of all visitor visas for the UK – making them the highest proportion of granted visa holders. The design needs to be colourful and impactful, but we also need to be able to stencil it onto a curved fuselage. The more colours we use the steeper the costs will be. The colour palette also needs to work with our tailfin as we won’t be able to change the tailfin or British Airways logo towards the front. We will leave space for the ‘GREAT’ logo and our ‘India 100’ logo.”

Chila is required to decorate both sides of the fuselage – the main body of the aircraft where the passengers sit – with Indian motifs. She was due to be taken to Heathrow to be shown a stationary Dreamliner “so that I can walk round it and get a vibe of what an aeroplane is like close up”.

Mehndi, used in Indian weddings to beautify hands and feet, has been suggested.

Chila waved at the clutter in her studio and declared: “I have loads of books on *mehndi*.”

She has also been encouraged to think of Indian butterflies.

After her research into lepidopterology, she marvelled: “There is one that is bright orange and red – you don’t see that in this country.”

But she might just give in to the creative process, she said. “I’ll get my sketchbook out, clear this table, get all my crayons, coloured pencils and everything. And I’ll just start working it out. And I just know when I feel happy with it.”

She has produced many sparkling works of art before but not for anything as large as an aircraft. Her design will be spray painted onto the fuselage by high tech engineers in Spain. This apparently is a very expensive undertaking so British Airways have placed great faith in Chila.

She is clearly in great demand. Later this month, she has been invited to a major international exhibition, “Collective Light: From Legacy to Future”, at Art Basel Hong Kong, which is bringing together artists and 243 galleries from 40 countries.

At home, she has accepted an invitation to do a solo exhibition at Compton Verney House, an 18th-century country mansion near Kineton in Warwickshire. It does four exhibitions a

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And now my dreams have come true

year. “It is set in magnificent grounds and has a fantastic gallery,” enthused Chila.

On June 27 and 28, the entire West End in London is expected to be taken over by some 30 of her neon light installations.

The Museum of the Home in London has asked whether it can hang on to her neon depiction of the Indian god Shiva for a little longer.

Another big commission has come from the Royal Mint which has given Chila a free hand in making a coin, jewellery or a bullion – or all three. She recalled that when she visited the Royal Mint’s coin manufacturing base near Cardiff, she was told that she could, if she wished, make a “big large coin which would weigh a ton”.

“Don’t think of coins,” her hosts said, “just think of your ideas.”

Chila was taken aback by the warmth of her reception: “They treated me like a superstar. They were such a fabulous team. They treated me with so much respect.”

That respect has been earned through grueling work over decades.

