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MUNCHIES

VICE



## This 24-Year-Old Started Her Own Turmeric Business to Help Indian Farmers



**Mayukh Sen**

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**"If white women are going to consume turmeric, how do I make sure brown farmers make as much money off of it as possible?"**

Sana Javeri Kadri has had a turmeric latte twice in her life. Both times were at wellness cafes, the first in Seattle and the second in Oakland. She was unable to finish either one. The drink was aggressively unpleasant. Why, she figured, would anyone willingly consume what's essentially "milky turmeric water"?

The turmeric latte's recent popularity in the West has been somewhat fraught. The drink's basic equation of ingredients, most importantly milk and turmeric, closely resembles *haldi doodh*

(turmeric milk), a home remedy in parts of India. The fact that the turmeric latte is now being served as a "trend" in so many cafes all over the world, disentangled from its Indian roots, initially **registered** a sense of outrage for many in the Indian diaspora.

For Javeri Kadri, the turmeric latte boom mostly provoked a sense of confusion. Kadri, 24, grew up in Mumbai, but moved to California to attend Pomona College six years ago. Finding herself in a cultural terrain so far from what she knew in India, she had a mounting sense of frustration with turmeric's newfound status as a luxury product, race- and class-coded in a way that was at odds with the realities of the Indian farmers who harvested it so tirelessly.



*Photo courtesy Sana Javeri Kadri.*

So she founded **Diaspora Co.** last August. You could consider it her way of addressing the injustice at the heart of turmeric's sudden stateside popularity. Diaspora Co. sells turmeric sourced directly from Vijayawada, a city in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

The turmeric is harvested by a fourth-generation turmeric farmer named Mr. Prabhu. Prabhu's turmeric is a curcumin-rich heirloom *pragati* strain that Javeri Kadri offers in tins and jars. Farmers like Prabhu often get the short end of the stick in the global spice trade, where supply chains can be so convoluted, with markups so excessive that these farmers often see very little profit. One kilogram of turmeric in India is about US \$0.35; in the States, Javeri Kadri explained to me, it can cost roughly \$35.

I spoke to Kadri over the phone last month as she was about to head to Vijayawada for the spice harvest. We discussed why she feels it's so vital to tell her consumers that she is a queer woman

of color who owns a business; how she sees the wellness-influenced turmeric craze as an offshoot of an intoxicating, archaic image of India that refuses to die; and how she hopes to dismantle neocolonial fantasies about India—or, at the very least, puncture them. For her, the battle begins with turmeric.



*Sana Javeri Kadri. Photo courtesy Sana Javeri Kadri.*

**MUNCHIES: Hey Sana! So describe what Diaspora Co. is to someone who's never heard of it.**

**Sana Javeri Kadri:** Well, it depends on who I'm describing it to.

**Let's say it's some American who has no cultural literacy when it comes to Indian food.**

The example I like to give is, if you think about coffee and cacao ten years ago, [they were] commodity crops—something that had a very low price that was produced in the global South and then consumed here in the West.

With direct trade and working with farmers, the quality of coffee brought into the West has changed completely. The national prices in several coffee- and cacao-growing countries has gone

up. So overall, this idea of direct trade and sustainable tracing of your product has been wonderful for these two crops. I'm trying to do the same thing for spices.

**When did you first see turmeric being commodified as a luxury product in the States?**

I became *aware* of it around the time I graduated, around early 2016. Mostly because, until then, I was a college student living in a co-op, so I wasn't really interacting with American capitalism at its peak.

It wasn't until I graduated and moved up to the Bay Area that I started [thinking], *oh shit, everyone's consuming turmeric!* And I honestly felt a lot of confusion about it. A lot of the time, I found the narrative surrounding Indian food in the States was, *hey, I was an Indian-American and you all made fun of my food growing up my whole life, and now you're claiming it.* I never had that narrative. Nobody made fun of my food! I grew up in India eating Indian food like everyone else.

**Right. That narrative didn't apply to you.**

Straight out of college, the first job I got was at Bi-Rite in San Francisco. That experience was a deep dive into the, shall I say, whiteness of California cuisine? I constantly felt like I was playing catch-up trying to understand what all these words meant, all these holiday and consumption traditions that made no sense to me.

After that, I heard about what I believe was Samovar Tea in the Mission [District] over in San Francisco who was doing a turmeric latte. All these women kept asking me about turmeric lattes as if I was an authority, and I had literally no idea what they were talking about. I felt mild annoyance about the assumption that I have an ancestral connection to the turmeric latte. I started to get more interested in doing some research on what spice farming looked like. But then, I started to think: *If white women are going to consume turmeric, how do I make sure brown farmers make as much money off of it as possible?* That was honestly the driving force for the first many months of Diaspora Co.: Let's just make this as profitable for India as possible.



*Photo courtesy Sana Javeri Kadri.*

**Got it. In your explanatory [blog post](#), you talk about the phrase “Made in India” and what specific—and limited—image that conjures for Americans. What does that phrase convey to you?**

So I’m a little confused, honestly. I would assume that a lot of Americans have an up-to-date idea beyond 'Indians have call centers,' 'Indians are engineers or doctors,' but I feel like specifically, to do with food, when people think about [the phrase] "Made in India," there is a deep romanticization of the country's fish and spice markets. India is this exotic, faraway place that movies like *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* play in to. There's this tourist fantasy of elephants in India.

**You also discuss postcolonialism within that post. How has your understanding of postcolonialism rejiggered your sense of power dynamics as they exist in the food world?**

Well, food gets lumped in with that fantasy: Somehow your goods get produced amongst the elephants and the tigers and the brightly colored spices.

Weirdly, I grew up upper-middle class in India, and that doesn’t fully translate to what your understanding of me might be here. My two identities do not easily translate within an American context—being a woman of color in America and an upper-middle class Hindu-Muslim mix in India. In Mumbai, the colonial hangover runs deep. All of our buildings are still named after these old white dudes, and all of our cultural institutions are tinged with

colonialism. Postcolonialism really seemed to explain my sense of diasporic angst being to America. There's this feeling of being neither here nor there, and this feeling of essentially being stuck in the middle because I'm a postcolonial product.



*Kasareni Prabhu's nephew, Kasareni Prabhu, and Javeri Kadri. Photo by Sana Javeri Kadri.*

**You publicly identify Diaspora Co. as a business run by a queer woman of color. Why do you think it's so imperative for you to highlight that for your customers?**

I've been thinking about this a lot. Did you read Angela Dimayuga's piece in *The Cut*?

**The profile of her? Yes.**

I guess I've been thinking a lot about what it means to state that a business is a queer business, and what work that does, if any? Does it just serve to further alienate folks? Or does it further the hope that queers can take over the world? I'm not sure.

Basically, reading Angela call Mission Chinese Food a queer restaurant was about her claiming the space as a haven for queers—to work, to come to, but also acknowledging that it was a space built by queer folk, and feeling it important to name the queer community's contribution to the place.

I think at a time when claiming space and making one's politics public feels vulnerable and wobbly, I'm most uplifted by the queer community. So naming the inherent queerness of this

new business, and this attempt to claim space as also being rooted in my identity, seems important.

I know that a lot of my Indian family comes to my website, sees it, and it makes them squirm. Some of them ask, "Can't you just be a turmeric business?" A lot of my aunts are likely not buying from me right now because that line on my website makes them so uncomfortable.

I think that there was this feeling that I didn't know how I fit into this world of sustainable, well-sourced food. It's quite a bougie world. It's quite a white world, too. I think it felt like it was time to create a bubble where I fit. The driving force behind my business is to put money into the hands of Indian farmers. But then it's also, in the marketing of it, letting folks now that we're not falling into any typical narrative. I'm not your Ayurvedic healer selling you turmeric. I'm a queer woman of color selling you turmeric.

I've been trying to write this for a long time, but why is it important to say something is a queer thing? What does that mean? Sometimes I don't think I'm deep enough into understanding queerness myself other than knowing that I want to name it.

**Of course—it's a process. Thanks for speaking with us, Sana.**

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*