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The Face of India

By REBECCA MYERS

Jay Leno called it "the single most amazing thing to ever happen to me." Actress Molly Ringwald said she went into shock. Even for those accustomed to the spotlight, being on the cover of TIME Magazine is a major milestone. But what happens when someone who isn't famous, or even a model, actually wakes up one day to find themselves the face of America's most popular newsmagazine?

That's what happened to Gunjan Thiagarajah, 29, a sales and marketing employee at a biotech firm in Los Angeles, who graces this week's cover about India Inc. Last year Thiagarajah was a student in business school at UCLA when a friend invited her to a photo shoot with a stock photographer. She thought it would be a fun experience and a quick way to make \$100. She had no idea that, through the process of stock photography, her face would become an international symbol for the future of India.

The photographer was looking for someone to bridge Indian tradition and technology. So Thiagarajah, who is trained in classical Indian dance, came dressed wearing a classical dance outfit and jewelry. She was photographed with a number of modern gadgets: headsets, cell phones, PDAs. It was her first time modeling and she enjoyed striking poses under the lights, although she was doubtful that the photographs would ever be used. "At the time I was doing the photo shoot, I was thinking, 'No one is going to pick up these pictures' this is completely random," she says.

Which might be why she forgot about the entire session until last Sunday when friends began calling to congratulate her and her husband, Ramanan Thiagarajah. "We totally thought they were joking," she says. Since then, she has been inundated with calls from around the world. As it turns out, Thiagarajah is an appropriate model for the story on the globalization of India: she's Indian but grew up in Nigeria and is married to a Sri Lankan, with whom she lives in California.

The experience and attention, she says, have been positive. "It's a great thing to happen," she says. "It's

very euphoric." People who didn't know about her dance background have been very surprised. For now, she doesn't plan to take a modeling career any further, but is enjoying the spotlight while it lasts. She says that one of the nicest pieces of feedback she received was from a friend who said "the magazine made a good choice in picking me because I represented the best of a progressive global Indian woman."

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