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WOMAN OF VISION

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Joint family by her side, Nooyi shines in business

Lavina Melwani, New York

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If you ever visit the Connecticut home of the Senior Vice President of Strategy Planning for PepsiCo, do remember to take your shoes off before entering. If you forget, at least remember to take them off before entering the large puja room where a light always burns and the air is perfumed with incense. PepsiCo may be as American as mom and apple pie, but Indra K. Nooyi, a powerful executive of this ^{US}\$31 billion company, is a Hindu and proud of her ancient heritage.

"The great thing about the US is that as long as you're darn good at what you do, people will accept you," observes Nooyi. She relishes the creative challenges of her job at PepsiCo: "My goal is to make sure we are constantly renewing ourselves. When you're ten million dollars in size, it's easy to grow at ten percent. We are 31 billion

dollars, which means we have to add \$3 billion of revenue every year. It's like adding a company the size of Hershey to PepsiCo every year." Nooyi came to the US from Chennai to earn a Master of Public Policy degree from Yale University. She was Senior Vice President of Strategy Planning for Motorola before joining PepsiCo, and has made it to the top the old-fashioned way, through sheer hard work.

Although hard work, ingenuity and boldness all are important factors for success, Nooyi believes that her Hindu culture is a very powerful anchor for survival and success in this country. She keeps an image of Ganesha in her office, and in fact, some PepsiCo officials who visited India and received images of Ganesha there, having learned that He is the God of Auspicious Beginnings, now keep images in the office. Nooyi thinks nothing of going to a PepsiCo board meeting in a sari, for she believes the corporate world appreciates people who are genuine. "Be yourself" is her magic mantra. "I'm so secure in myself, I don't have to be American to play in the corporate life."

A staunch vegetarian, Nooyi has never tasted meat or drunk alcohol. She says, "Now when we go out, even my chairman will tell everybody to make sure there's vegetarian food for Indra." A Hindu brahmin, Nooyi has always seen the world through the prism of her mother's faith and beliefs, and calls her the guiding light in her life. The family are Aiyar Saivites but also devotees of the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. Her mother-in-law is equally religious, with an affinity for Guruvayur, the Krishna temple in Kerala, and the Subramanyam Temple near Mangalore.

Says Nooyi, "Our family is so deeply religious, that whenever anything goes wrong they will pray and pledge a visit to the temple. So whenever we go to India, we spend all our time in temples, executing all the promises my mother and my mother-in-law made for the various illnesses or problems in the house!"

Nooyi recalls that while growing up in Chennai, which has temples on almost every street corner, prayer and ritual were the markers which gave

meaning to life: "Our house had a very large temple room, and my mother used to pray three or four hours every morning. So the house was a deeply religious house, and every occasion of life and death was observed with great care and exacting standards."

Nooyi's husband, Raj, a partner in a management-consulting firm, travels five days a week, so she is fortunate to have her married brother and sister living in New York. The three of them literally fight to have their mother stay with them. She believes three generations living under one roof is wonderful, the way it was meant to be. "Now my mother lives with me, and my kids see her praying, so they too sit down and pray with her. Two days ago when my little daughter was feeling sick, she went and lay on my mother's lap. She chanted hymns and caressed her; after a while my daughter said she felt much better."

During the day, Nooyi is often exposed to the pressure cooker world of international business, but when she enters her home, it is like entering a sanctuary of calm. She says Carnatic music plays

in their home 18 hours a day, and the feeling is much like being in a temple. Does she think her religious convictions help her to do a better job in the corporate world? "I don't know about a better job, but it certainly makes me calm," she says. "There are times when the stress is so incredible between office and home, trying to be a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and corporate executive. Then you close your eyes and think about a temple like Tirupati, and suddenly you feel 'Hey--I can take on the world.' Hinduism floats around you, and makes you feel somehow invincible."

Is it tough being a mother and a corporate executive? Nooyi admits that it is a very difficult task: "You can walk away from the fact that you're a corporate executive, but you can't walk away from the fact that you are a mom. In terms of being a mother and a corporate executive, the role of mom comes first." What sees her through tough times? "My family and my belief in God. If all else fails, I call my mother in India when she's there--and wake her up in the middle of the night--and she listens to me. And she probably promises God a visit to Tirupati!"

Pepsi details:It's the world's number two soft-drink maker, after Coca-Cola. But beverages make up just one-half of sales for the diversified food and drink company. The other half comes from Frito-Lay, the world's leader in snack chips. PepsiCo's 1997 sales reached ^{US}\$21 billion. Its employees number 142,000, while Coca-Cola has a mere 29,500. PepsiCo is listed No. 31 in the Fortune 500 most wealthy companies in the US.