

At Home ABROAD

RECONNECTING WITH JACKSON HEIGHTS,
NEW YORK'S LITTLE INDIA

By Piyali Bhattacharya

PIETRO SCOZZARI/DINODIA



Considered one of the most diverse and multicultural neighbourhoods in New York City, Jackson Heights is so much more than a South Asian enclave.

RICHARD LEVINE/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

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hen most Indian-Americans consider a “return to roots”, they usually mean that they’d like to spend some time in India rediscovering their heritage and identity. But when I go back to the place of my origin, I take a journey to the country that lies on the other side of that hyphen.

Although I went to school in Westchester County, just north of Manhattan, I decided to study for a year at Delhi University, and after college, moved to the city to work. I married a Delhiite and we became a Global Indian Couple. We’ve made our home in both America and in India, trying to fly back and forth between the two as often as possible.

Going back to the country of my birth has always involved a trip to Jackson Heights, one of the dozens of ethnic enclaves around New York City. Like Southall in London, Jackson Heights is lined with nostalgic images of “home”: Bollywood posters and Kishore Kumar songs blaring on a stereo in the distance; whiffs of chicken tikka masala wafting through the air vents of subway stations; and the general sense of a busy marketplace and gossip corner come dusk.

Neighbourhoods like this provide the smell and feel of home for immigrants who have spent too many days in a row shovelling snow and eating cold pasta. They also provide a space for Indian migrants to bring their children when a trip to India is not on the cards. My mother realised that if she wanted to live in the States and raise “Indian” children, she’d have to bring the homeland closer. And so, Jackson Heights was firmly part of my childhood years.

Two years ago, I decided to start writing a novel about an illegal immigrant from Bangladesh and in order to get a better sense of my protagonist, I started making weekly trips to Jackson Heights once again. I interviewed fruit vendors, chefs at restaurants, taxi drivers, and shop owners. As I delved deeper into the lives that had, for so long, been only in my peripheral vision, I realised that I had never noticed the people who make a community like Jackson Heights function.

Who were they and what did their vision for the Jackson Heights community entail? To answer that question, I look to Subhas Ghai and Raj Gandhi. In 1973—eight years after the Immigration Act of 1965 allowed skilled and educated South Asians to start trickling into America—Ghai and Gandhi saw the desi population of New York starting to bulge and created for them a business that would fulfil a very specific need. Their store, Sam & Raj, supplied cheap American electronic items in dual voltages (110 volts for an American outlet, 220 volts to use



1 In the early 2000s, the most popular mile of 74th Street was renamed Kalpana Chawla Way in memory of the late Indian-American astronaut. **2** Patel Brothers, a Jackson Heights institution, may be one of the biggest speciality grocery stores in New York. Its aisles which stock idli makers, iron tawas, and “puja items” provide immigrants with more than a whiff of the home country. **3** The Jackson Heights stop on the E, F, V, G, R and 7 New York City Subway lines is a familiar spot for most South Asian New Yorkers. Facing page: In New York’s “Little India”, everything from Bollywood music to immigration-specific legal advice is available.

SCOTT GRIES/GETTY IMAGES (STREET SIGNS), BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES (PATEL BROTHERS)



BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES



Thalis at Jackson Heights' restaurants draw diners from all over the East Coast. Food tours, offering an insight into the neighbourhood's immigrant cultures, are common.

Facing page: Jackson Heights is one of the most popular places in the United States for homesick desis get their fix of fresh, fluffy naan (top), veggies such as karela (bottom left), and sweets like jalebi (bottom right).

the object abroad) for South Asians to take home to families hungry for gifts. Almost overnight, Indians from all over the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut started flocking to the shop, located just off of Roosevelt Avenue on 74th street in Jackson Heights, Queens. New York's "Little India" was born.

The Jackson Heights of my childhood was laid out on the small strip of 74th Street between Roosevelt and 37th Avenue. As we drove into the neighbourhood, the streets would start to look different. Indian women in salwar kameezes and saris wandered on the sidewalks, the shops sold everything from raw mangoes to India-imported Bournvita, and a mix of Hindi, Punjabi, and Gujarati would reverberate through the air.

We would start with the most important thing: food. In the 1990s, the best place to eat in Jackson Heights was Jackson Diner (it still is). At the time, the diner was a hole-in-the-wall but we were loyal patrons of their butter naan and sweet lassi. Then Ma would have to stop by India Sari Palace while Baba and my brother headed to Patel Brothers to pick up the important groceries that we couldn't find in Westchester: mustard oil, *dhaniya* leaves, methi seeds.

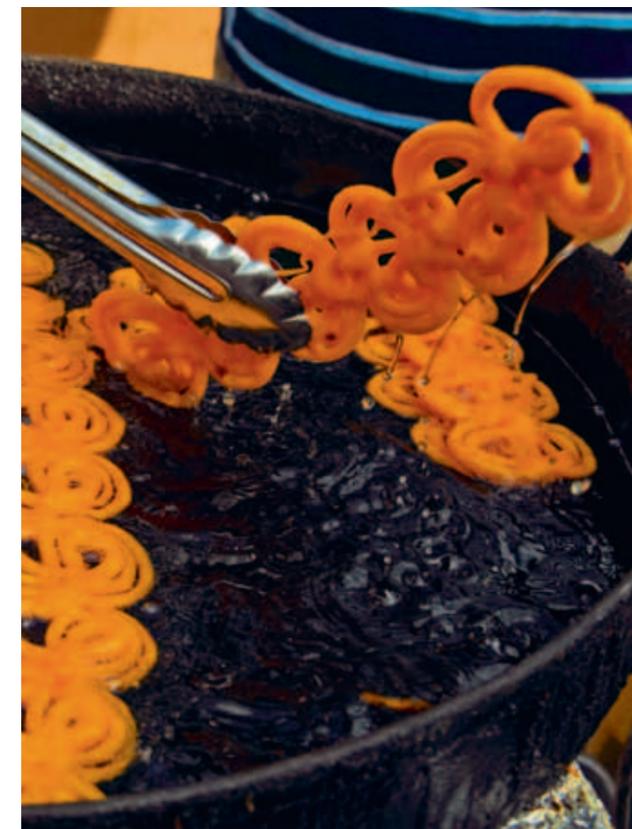
I remember being fascinated by India Sari Palace. Located just across the street from Sam & Raj, it was the other shop that put Jackson Heights on the map. On entering, we were greeted with rows upon rows of satins, silks, and chiffons, and on either side of the shop were wall-to-wall mirrors. It was the decadence of South Asia steeped in the supermarket

economics of the United States. I was enthralled by the way the shopkeepers threw the fabric in the air to attract customers, the way they could drape a sari on a woman in a matter of seconds. Because we travelled to Kolkata every summer, there was often no point in buying the highly marked-up and sometimes poor quality sequinned chiffons that I.S.P. specialised in, but once in a while Ma would indulge herself. Not necessarily because she wanted the sari, but because, I now realise, the purchase of a sari in Jackson Heights on a snowy Saturday in February made her feel like she was sharing something with her American daughter that her mother had once shared with her.

After I.S.P. came the monthly pit stop at Sam & Raj. Here we found all manner of magical items such as high-powered hair dryers and double-compartment spice grinders (in dual voltage, of course) and more importantly, enormous suitcases to carry these treasures to India and back. Finally, we would head to Rajbhog Sweets for some chai, samosa, and kulfi *falooda* before heading home.

By the time I was in high school in the early 2000s, friends started asking me where they could find Indian outfits and food. So I started to lead little expeditions into the city by train. As always, Jackson Diner would be the first order of business. It was around this time that I started to notice Jackson Heights changing. Jackson Diner had found itself a larger space, and shops such as Butala Emporium, Karishma Boutique, and Sona Chandi were added to the list of spots we'd have to stop

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR/GETTY IMAGES



FRANCES M. ROBERTS/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (NAAN SELLER), RICHARD LEVINE / ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (KARELA), FRANCES ROBERTS / ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (JALEBI)



Religious and ethnic identities dissolve, especially around Diwali when street fairs are set up (top); Nostalgic desis may turn to Bollywood (bottom) to brush up on their Hindi but Jackson Heights also has Hollywood connections: Actors Susan Sarandon and Lucy Liu were born here.

by. Jackson Heights had spread out a bit more to include 37th Avenue between 72nd Street and 75th Street, which caused a spike in the range of items available. All of a sudden, we couldn't leave without rifling through Butala's stack of bejewelled bindis or heading to one of the hundreds of music stalls selling the latest Bollywood CDs.

But perhaps the biggest change was the fact that Jackson Heights, in a very short time span, had undergone an overwhelming demographic shift. The availability of something called a Diversity Visa to the U.S. from Bangladesh meant that the Jackson Heights I had grown up with, a largely Punjabi- and Gujarati-dominated area, all of a sudden, had a very Bangladeshi vibe. As a Bengali, this was a pleasant surprise for me. My stilted Hindi transitioned into easy Bangla with shop owners, and of course it didn't hurt that I started getting free iced coffees at the Jackson Heights Dunkin' Donuts.

All of these memories came hurtling back to me when I started researching my novel. One of the lessons I learnt in Jackson Heights may well have been the most important: South Asian immigration to the U.S.

extended beyond the "model minority" of doctors, lawyers, and engineers who dominate our diaspora's representation in books and films. It has also included the mini-mart owners, the taxi drivers, and the dishwashers who come to America struggling to make ends meet, worrying about their immigration status, and hoping to send a little money back to relatives at home.

In the light of this realisation, asking a worker in Patel Brothers to guide me to the *murhi* (puffed rice) section takes on deeper meaning: What is this man's background? Does he have work papers, and if not, does he lie awake at night wondering when he'll see his family again? Does he have a rich relative who will help him with a loan to start his own business? What dreams did he stuff into his pockets before boarding his plane out of the subcontinent?

Today, my trips to Jackson Heights take largely the same form they had nearly 30 years ago. My husband and I drive into the city and food, groceries, and music are all on the agenda. But these days, I make sure to fill the parking meter with extra time. I know I'll need it as I wander down 74th Street (now called Kalpana Chawla Way, after the astronaut) and take a moment to say hello to a familiar face, or recognise some of the ghosts of my childhood as they float alongside me while I walk. ●

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FRANCES ROBERTS/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (STREET FOOD), SCOTT GRIES/GETTY IMAGES (SRIDEVI)



Several boutiques (top) and gold jewellery shops (bottom) in the area help prepare South Asians for traditional wedding ceremonies, and the occasional prom night.



MARKET WATCH

If you're heading to Jackson Heights, don't miss out shopping at these places:

Butala Emporium The one-stop-shop for all things desi, Butala stocks everything from bridal magazines to CDs of the latest Bollywood soundtracks, recordings of religious chants, boxes of bejewelled bindis, and all kinds of knick-knacks from all over South Asia. Their basement even has a furniture section.

Karishma Boutique When I wanted to wear a lehnga choli to my senior high school prom, I headed over to Karishma. I've since sent many friends there to shop for weddings or special occasions they might have to attend.

Sona Chandi Jewelers For new gold or silver jewellery for a special occasion, Sona Chandi is the store. Sometimes it's simply to marvel at the rows upon rows of filigreed gold bangles, ornate necklaces, and nose pins. The window display never disappoints.

Jackson Tailors This shop tucked into a basement on Kalpana Chawla Way, is where residents go to get a sari blouse or choli stitched in New York.

VESPASIAN/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (JEWELLERY), PIETRO SCOZZARI/DINODIA (MANNIQUIN)

