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The Uneven Promise Of A New Land

Gauri Gill's *photographs of the Indian diaspora in America evoke a shifting world. Writer MARINA BUDHOS explores its contours*

WHAT I LOVE about photography is its blend of the documentary and the artful; how a good photograph can have the surprising, sudden candour of a short story; a minor key insight that suggests the whole symphony of a life; how it seems to steal a scene from your own fleeting memory, forcing you to see the everyday in all its sharply faceted meaning.

In Gauri Gill's *The Americans*, we are given glimpses into South Asian immigrant communities in the America of today. The full breadth of Indian and South Asian immigrants is here: from the glossy-haired professionals of Silicon Valley to the physics graduate student, to taxi drivers and restaurant cooks, to drag queens and bhangra homeboys, to motel owners and Indian entrepreneurs. We have celebrations and rituals, big and small: weddings, thread-tying ceremonies, funerals, exam celebrations, upscale Christie auctions. We have, significantly, Sikhs in the flat hinterlands of Yuba City, a community which dates back to the early twentieth century. Most importantly, we have the full vista of America — from San Francisco terraces to Taco Bells and Dunkin Donuts, from strip malls to Washington suburbs.

The South Asian diaspora is here to stay. They have twostorey, three-storey, old and new homes, apartments, cars, pools, mortgages, debt. They scrub toilets; they meet-and-greet in Washington DC, deliver mail, are shot by snipers. They marry; they gather to watch wedding videos; they do Bharatanatyam performances, celebrate Halloween and India Day and Diwali. Indeed I would say — and these photos suggest — that rather than the stale polarities of East and West, the Indian immigrant is peculiarly suited to America.

Sometimes I think that Indian immigrants — many immigrants in fact — are better suited to America than Americans are. They see the country for what it is, and what they can gain from it with the level-headed clarity of a newcomer.

TO UNDERSTAND the South Asian and Indian diaspora of today, we have to see it as part of something larger: post '65 America, when immigration laws changed dramatically. Indian professionals, often doctors and engineers, were able to take advantage of the new quotas, settling here and spawning the next generation. Then, in the '90s, we witnessed another wave of migration, when IT professionals arrived, some on H1B or temporary visas, but also working class immigrants who came and bussed our tables, washed our dishes, drove our taxis — sometimes under the radar, without proper visas. Indians — and South Asians — have permeated so many aspects of American life, from factory cleaners to well-paid doctors and engineers, that they are now everywhere. The other evening I was at a liquor store, buying wine for dinner. A young Indian man wearing a leather jacket and an expensive watch was buying Scotch and he asked for a huge box of ice. The men behind the counter referred to him as “sir” (only Indian shopkeepers do this in America, so it's always noticeable). They were teasing him — “Why all the ice, sir?” “I haven't figured out how to turn on my freezer,” he explained. Then he roared off into the New Jersey night, in a Jaguar: clearly a bachelor who could afford an expensive car but hadn't figured out his brand new kitchen. A scene such as that would not have been possible even a few years ago — that you could recreate a class dynamic that could happen in Delhi or Bombay; that in a little suburban town we have both, the shopkeeper and the hyper-rich professional.

Immigration itself has changed. We have no singular Ellis Island — once the defining symbol for America as an immigrant nation. Now, a newcomer could just as easily land up in a suburb or the middle of Tennessee, as they could in an enclave in San Jose. We now have global cities and suburbs with overlapping layers of acculturation. In New Jersey, where I live, home to the largest number of Indians in the country, the diners bought twenty-five years ago by Greeks are now owned by Koreans and Bangladeshis. An Italian bricklayer's granddaughter walks down a suburban high school hall with the daughter of a New Delhi doctor.

The Americans shows the small, cultural niches etched by South Asian immigrants on this vast, overlapping canvas of America, often in the bland, impersonal spaces of rented hotel rooms, shopping malls, freeway picnic benches. Again and again, one sees in Gill's images — especially the diptychs — the interplay of an individual against the huge American landscape, which sometimes seems to howl with loneliness, sometimes presses in, gaudy and insistent; fluorescent.

I AM ESPECIALLY reminded of the image of motel owner Dhansukh Patel's parents, in his new home in Nashville, Tennessee. His elderly father perches uncomfortably on a pristine bed in his son's new home; in the paired photo we see an overbearingly empty living room and on the mantel, a garlanded photo of the dead mother. One can practically feel the squeaky smoothness of the freshly polished floor, smell the sawdust of the new construction. Yet, it is the tentativeness of the older man that we notice — he is uncomfortable, overwhelmed, almost hostile. In general, I found that in many of the images the faces of elders register their sense of smallness and frailty against so much undignified change — as in Pritam Singh Gill, once Agricultural Commissioner from Punjab University, now hunched in his nursing home, holding an injured arm.

It's curious that I came to view Gauri Gill's *The Americans*, while doing archival research into an earlier Indian diaspora of over a hundred years ago. At that time, the new medium of photography was used for stiff, posed portraits: Indian immigrants posed in all their stiff, anthropological glory. We now swim in the fleeting ether of media, using cameras and video with almost wilful casualness. For all these differences, I was surprised at how certain visual themes still endure in the immigrant experience: those tiny, cherished talismans of homeland as immigrants insert themselves into their new homeland. Then, it was the harmonium or drums they brought on boats; now it is the stack of bootlegged Hindi videos in a Jackson Heights shop. Or, there is Gill's repeated image of the television — shoved in a corner of a carpeted home, crowned with equipment, potted artificial flowers, family photographs. A shrine of connection in a global, digital age.

YET WHEN I SAW an image of two Punjabi cooks in a Bay Area restaurant, who hail from nearby villages and now share an apartment, I almost wept — these men could have been the same, a century before, sharing a logie on a sugar plantation. Perhaps that's what is so moving about these images — how certain human experiences do persist; how each one of the faces in these photographs carry on, reinvent themselves and, however tentatively, become American.

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