



## 19 ETHNICITY IN THE CITY: READING REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN INDIAN STOREFRONTS

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What are the representations of ethnicity in the urban environment?

In the early decades of the twentieth century, tourist brochures and guide books promised that to enter the borders of San Francisco's Chinatown was to enter "another world" to shops full of "strange jewelry" and produce markets displaying preserved foods in "fantastic forms". In these descriptions the distinctive material culture of the ethnic ghettos—architecture, dress, store window decoration, and signs—begin to symbolize the ethnic community.

The contemporary landscape of urban spaces used by Indian immigrants is not limited to a territorially bounded ethnic enclave. In Northern California—from San Jose to Sacramento—dispersed networks of regional retail shopping strips, suburban residences, cultural and religious institutions, and professional offices catering to recent Indian immigrants are spread across the landscape rather than being concentrated in ethnic ghettos. But even in this networked landscape immigrants continue to use distinctive stereotypical imagery—just as in ethnic ghettos—to make the ethnic spaces legible and visually distinct from the urban context where they are located.

Consequently, there is a tendency to see ethnic public spaces solely in opposition to the normative mainstream. Indeed, on first glance, the rhetoric of difference embodied in the material culture may emphasize the dichotomy. I will argue that by reading the manifestations of ethnic spaces in the context of local history and within the context of a larger urban setting, one can uncover the multiple layers and meanings that lay hidden behind these imagery. For example, if we are looking at ethnic stores, we need to set the material representations of difference within the context of the local history of that place, and the backgrounds of individuals who shop and sell in these stores and their history of immigration.

University Avenue in Berkeley runs East-West and connects the University of California campus to Interstate 80. Although University Avenue is dotted with ethnic Indian stores, the street is not an Asian Indian ethnic ghetto<sup>1</sup> and the majority of the patrons as well as the store owners do not reside in Berkeley.<sup>2</sup> The prosperity of these stores depends on the ability of the out-of-city customers successfully identifying the Indian stores from the neighboring non-ethnic stores. The legibility of these spaces as "Indian" become absolutely important because they are not set in the context of the ethnic ghetto.

One of the recurring signs used in the storefronts along University Avenue to represent an Indian store is the image of the Indian woman wearing a sari. A sari is an un-stitched fabric, usually 6 yards long, that is wrapped around the body.

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Female mannequins wearing the Indian sari or the posters of Hindi movie heroines are ubiquitous and have become a way of representing Indian culture—distinct from the American.

The image of the Indian-woman-in-a-sari representing the domain of the ethnic community and homeland is not new. An early example of this image can be seen in a news magazine published in 1920 by the Gadar Party of San Francisco. The Gadar Party was an organization of nationalist Indians in the US, organized to gain independence from Britain. On the cover of their journal was a figure of Liberty blowing the horn of Independence. Here she is shown wearing an Indian Sari. The picture of this presumably Western Anglo woman, was appropriated as a symbol of the Indian nation by changing her dress.

The rhetoric behind the image is reiterated in contemporary movies, media and literature too.<sup>3</sup> Take the example of the movie *Parades*. The movie poster sets up the binary opposition: Indian soul vs. American dreams. Ganga the heroine becomes representative of the “Indian soul” as she is shown to embody the cultural notions of propriety and domestic values of India.

Similar messages in the mannequins and movie posters on the storefronts tell us only a partial—if not incorrect—story of the culture and social structure of the ethnic group. By associating the image of the woman primarily as a symbol of Indian cultural values these representations render invisible the cultural and class differences those same images can portray.<sup>4</sup>

How can we identify the difference between these stores when the store fronts and material culture from outside look very similar to each other? A map of the Indian stores along University Avenue begins to show us what the storefront design successfully concealed. There is a cluster of stores concentrated towards the western end of University Avenue. Between San Pablo and Sacramento there are hardly any Indian stores. Towards the eastern end there are a few Indian stores that—unlike the former—are more spaced apart.

What do we read of this? Are they random dispersions or is there more to this unique dispersal of stores along University Avenue?

I will examine two representative Indian sari stores located at two ends of University Avenue and show that—despite similar looks—the location of the stores point towards class divisions within the Indian community. To do that we will first need to go back in time and set the story of the Indian stores in the urban history of the City of Berkeley and the history of immigration from India.

In 1866, the area around the University of California campus was called Berkeley. A separate town called Oceanview, with its working-class neighborhoods, thrived on the western plains along the San Francisco Bay.<sup>5</sup> Oceanview was incorporated into the City of Berkeley in 1878.

Berkeley at that time—and even now—was divided into the

hills and the plains. As the uninhabited area between San Pablo and downtown was settled during the first four decades of the twentieth century, University Avenue west of San Pablo Avenue became associated with crime and urban blight. This image persists today despite crime statistics that point to the contrary.<sup>6</sup> Going up the social ladder for a working-class resident of West Berkeley meant moving towards the hills. San Pablo Avenue became an imaginary line representing the class divide.<sup>7</sup> Onto this pre-existing context, the Indian store owners laid their own landscape.

By 1910, as a result of the Indian students enrolled in the University, Berkeley had become a familiar name among the few Indian immigrants spread across Northern California. But it was only after the 1965 amendments to the exclusionary immigration laws that the total population of Indian immigrants in Berkeley and surrounding areas became large enough to sustain a local Indian grocery and a dress store. The growing interest in India among the 1960s counter-culture intellectuals also made Indian goods popular among local American consumers.

By 1977, the dress store Shrimati's was the third Indian store to open on University Avenue. Its owner Hitesh Dhupelia, an Indian from South Africa, chose this location because of high property values, proximity of the police and city government offices, and apparent safety of the neighborhood. Shrimati's core Indian customers were skilled, professional, middle-class immigrants who entered the United States under the Third Preference of the 1965 Immigration Act.<sup>8</sup> The Indian immigrant bourgeoisie—as Annanya Bannerjee prefers to call them—favored shopping in the safe downtown neighborhood.

In addition to expensive silk saris imported from India, customers would come to the store to buy cheaper, easy to wash, Japanese artificial-silk saris. In the 1970s and 1980s Japanese fabric was very expensive in India because of an Indian government policy that put a heavy surcharge on imports. Expatriate Indians visiting India would take the Japanese saris as gifts. By 1991, liberalization policies made imported fabrics available—and cheap—in India. As the demand for Japanese fabric declined among the immigrant bourgeoisie, other Indian boutiques selling expensive silks sprang up in San Jose and other South Bay Silicon Valley locations where many professional Indians live.<sup>9</sup> Shrimati's lost its large middle-class clientele to these more famous and well-stocked stores.

The new customers in search of Japanese saris were out-of-townners, many of them from a social class of individuals whose taste differed from that of the professionals. They would compare prices, haggle, and look for deals. In Shrimati's haggling is simply not encouraged.<sup>10</sup> To Dhupelia of Shrimati's, the sari is a sign of one's social class. Therefore he read the change in clientele as a decline in customers with social standing and taste.

Today, we find that despite the deceptive window design, Shrimati's is no longer a sari store. For the last six years the owners of Shrimati's have gradually moved away from the

sari trade to the music and CD business. Given the nature of their business, the sari mannequins near the entrance say nothing of the merchandise inside but serve the sole purpose of marking the entrance window with an easily identifiable sign of an Indian store.

Now let us look at the cluster of stores located on the western side of San Pablo Avenue that has the image of being blighted. In 1978 there was only one Indian store on the western end of San Pablo. The number of stores along this side of the street increased much later—during the mid-eighties. West Berkeley, with its low rent and proximity to the highway, became the preferred place to start new businesses. Today Roopam Saris is one of the five sari stores in this area.

The demographics of the immigrant Indians in the Bay Area was also changing during the 1980s. The new stores responded to these changes. Chain migration—following the initial migration of professionals—now brought businessmen, working-class, and less-educated Indians into the US.<sup>11</sup> By the late 1980s the population of non-professionals had overtaken the number of professional Indians immigrating to the US.

Roopam Saris is part of a larger conglomeration of Indian stores bunched together in close proximity. These are grocery, clothing, jewelry, food, music/video and electronics stores. A store owner described this clustering as an “outdoor mall” and a “one-stop-shopping-experience”. During the weekends, Indian families from out of town drive to Berkeley. They park and walk to these stores comparing prices, as they do their weekly shopping. The customers represent a cross section of the community differing in class, age, gender, and background. Most teenage children cluster in music and video stores. The women go from store to store looking for good deals, while older males cluster around the entrance of stores. Parking is free on Sundays. Roopam Saris and other stores west of San Pablo remain open on Sundays for their out-of-town customers while Shrimati’s—near downtown Berkeley—remain closed on Sundays.

Once again the gendered images on the storefronts portray the shops as the domain of the homeland—distinct and separate from the adjacent American public realm. The rhetoric of home demands that the modes of propriety, behavior and public transaction expected in the public realm is suspended in the informal homelike atmosphere of the Indian stores. To the customer that means that they can haggle and demand a special low “family” price from the store owners. For the store owners, survival depends on the delicate balance between profitable business and the homelike informality of the ethnic domain. Unlike Shrimati’s, stores owners west of San Pablo marketing to a much diverse clientele don’t exclude those who haggle. Instead they put up signs proclaiming NO RETURNS, FRIENDS AND RELATIVES NOT ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT and FIXED PRICE ONLY to discourage such practices. They place most of the merchandise behind secure counters. As a result, the interior of their store—unlike Shrimati’s open and accessible interiors—is built as a series of zones in which

physical access is restricted to customers according to their familiarity.

Sari mannequins appeal to specific target clientele. The cheaper mannequins in the Roopam Saris storefront are imported from India. These mannequins are draped with gaudier and cheaper fabric. The mannequins of Sona Chaandi, another sari store a block from Roopam Saris, have a sculpted thin Anglo super-model looks that project a more chic, modern image. This store caters to a younger audience.

To an experienced eye the nature of the sari fabric, the mannequin, the nature of the clientele, and way the woman wear their saris speaks of social class, background and taste. Not only are the fabrics expensive, but the method of draping the saris becomes a sign of culture and grace. For example, bad taste is depicted by gaudy and cheap saris worn too high above the ankle. Saris worn by the bourgeoisie become cultural capital for them during social events. The notion of cultural capital rests on drawing a distinction between those who cultivate a certain taste and those who seem to lack that taste.

The history of Berkeley, rent, property values, and the image of the street set up two distinct zones—one inhabited by the working class while the other one associated with the downtown and the University Campus. The connective tissues of a dispersed ethnic Indian landscape mediates that existing local landscape, and is maintained by a system of legible, repetitious, and coherent signs. These signs mark the Indian stores from their neighboring context and thereby allow for a liberating facade behind which the immigrant individual juggles the conforming notions of assimilation and the freedom to retain difference—on their own terms. For the ethnic entrepreneurs this provides an acceptable economic niche in which he makes a rewarding profit. But are these signs so very liberating as we are led to believe? Signs are as perspectival constructs, open to individual readings and interpretations. In the case of stores along University Avenue, the system of signs become tools that welcome some clients while discourage others. To the outside viewer, the invisibility of these covert exclusionary messages hides how divisions and structures of power work within the ethnic group. The cultural landscape of Indian immigrants that unfolds along University Avenue is a fractured landscape reflecting a social division where the breaks are inflected by taste and social class—that is the availability of cultural capital by the bourgeoisie and the lack of it by the rest. By examining how the nascent ethnic landscape mediates into the existing spatial and cognitive structures of the local urban fabric we can find pointers that help recover the unseen from the hypervisible and enrich our understanding of ethnic landscapes.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Planned as a street with a mix of residential and commercial uses, University Avenue is promoted as the “entrance to the city of Berkeley” (City of Berkeley Planning Dept.

Publication, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The Indian immigrants who own stores along University Avenue live away from their shops. For example, Deepak Ajmani of Bombay Music House lives in Hayward, Kirpal Khanna of Bazaar of India resides in Moraga, Manjul Batra of Ajanta Enterprises has built her residence in Walnut Creek, and Jolly Mehta who is a partner-owner of Copy World commutes from her home in Fremont. The owners of VIKS live in central Berkeley far away from their grocery and fast food store in West Berkeley.

<sup>3</sup> In this movie, in addition to using symbolic representations of the ideal Indian woman, a clear difference between home and homeland is also achieved through touristic images of geographic places. The Indian landscape is made of so called domestic images of the village, cluttered courtyard in the village house, merry family festivals, and the ubiquitous image of the women wearing colorful saris set in lush green fields - nature. In contrast America is shown as fast paced, roads with speeding automobiles, theme parks such as Disneyland, slick architecture of tall office towers, and public bars.

<sup>4</sup> Rather these stereotypical images obliterate and render opaque all other information that may tell us how each of these stores are different from one other and how these images may be read differently by different individuals. Borrowing from Arjun Appadurai (1990) one can say that the global landscape of images and ideas are nevertheless *deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.*

This is an important point because often what gets lost in the stereotypical imagery is how are these images interpreted differently by different individuals within the immigrant community.

<sup>5</sup> In 1902 an electric trolley went along University Avenue connecting the hills and downtown to the western plains.

<sup>6</sup> Speaking of the West Berkeley neighborhood, Indian store owner Anil Thakkar reminisces, It was a mess when I came in 1984. All these hookers used to hang around.

<sup>7</sup> This was true for many Finnish factory workers who left their working class cottages along 9th and 10th streets to buy homes along streets such as Cowper just East of San Pablo, and then move further along.

<sup>8</sup> Between 1965-69 (INS Statistics) the number of Indian immigrants who immigrated into the United States under the Occupational Preferences category numbered around 10,692 people. Out of that, 9174 came under the Third Preference as skilled professionals. From Indian Immigrants in the United States: Demographic Trends, Economic Assimilation in the Host Society, and Impact on the Sending Society. By Urmila Minocha Conference paper. Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Population Institute. (1984)

<sup>9</sup> For example Nalli Sarees, a well known and trusted sari store in India recently opened its Northern California branch in South Bay.

<sup>10</sup> Dhupelia's reluctance to serve these kinds of customers is also reflected by Kirpal Khanna who owns Bazaar of India two blocks away, "We don't expect too many Indians because...When they come to Indian stores they think "Oh.. no.. no.. no.. this is our home town, we gonna haggle" ...they expect bargain...and then on top of that they want to return the merchandise after using it for a day or so. So we have over the years lost many many customers."

<sup>11</sup> According to 1979 INS statistics, the total number of Indian immigrants who entered under the Occupation Preferences was 6,753. Out of that 3658 were under the professional and technical preference. The rest were either family members coming under the reunification clause or from the non-professional work categories. From Indian Immigrants in the United States: Demographic Trends, Economic Assimilation in the Host Society, and Impact on the Sending Society. By Urmila Minocha Conference paper. Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Population Institute. (1984)

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Primary sources for this work include interviews with many shop owners from the Berkeley area which are Kirpal Khanna, Bazaar of India (June 1996), Hitesh Dhupelia (March 1996), Shrimati's, Jolly Mehta, Copyworld (February 1996), Manjul Batra, Ajanta Enterprises (February 1997), Kumar Batra (February 1997), Deepak Ajmani, Bombay Music House (December 1995), Chabildas Khatri, Roopam Saris (December 1995), and Anil Thakkar (December 1995).