

# Little India's big numbers

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The waiter leaned forward. His dark eyes glanced out the restaurant window before settling on me, fingers tapping a nameless tune.

"It's the time of the Indian industry."

His accent, steeped in his native India, broke through the hum of voices around us.

All kinds of people clustered around the buffet line, talking quietly as they piled their plates with food. The steam rising from the Indian entrees was enough to draw anyone inside the restaurant, not to mention the large sign on the front window that read "All You Can Eat Indian Buffet Lunch, \$8.95."

The waiter reached into the front pocket of his maroon shirt and slipped me a business card: "Jackson Diner, Indian Cuisine: A Culinary Passage to India."

"We are the most famous in this area," he said smiling, looking younger than his 42 years.

Open for lunch and dinner every day, the restaurant is popular not only with South Asians who live in Jackson Heights, Queens, but also with people who don't even live in New York.

"We have people from all over the world," he said.

Ravinder has worked as a waiter at Jackson Diner since his arrival in New York 10 years ago, when he opened the restaurant. Originally from New Delhi, he came to Queens because of the area's cultural diversity. Describing Queens as the "big place for the new immigrant," Ravinder knew the best location for him was Little India in Jackson Heights - one of the largest South Asian communities in the country.

Working on Little India's main hub of 74th Street, Ravinder has watched the steady growth of businesses in the area, which he deems a reflection of India's growing global power.

With the fourth-largest economy in the world and the second-fastest-growing economy, India is becoming increasingly prominent in technology and business. The country has

become an important outsourcing location for multinational corporations, putting its citizens at the forefront of international customer service.

Indian culture is also redefining food, entertainment and fashion in ways people don't even realize.

The Chai tea sold at the nearby Starbucks has been a staple of South Asian culture for years now - though the western world is just now catching on to it. Grocery stores have begun featuring frozen Indian entrees, making the cuisine accessible to people who do not live in multicultural areas.

But the increasing South Asian presence in America also raises the question of whether this newfound exposure harms or helps communities like Little India.

Tasawar Hussain, owner of a Pakistani restaurant, believes South Asia's growing popularity is a good thing. He opened his restaurant, Sheereen Mahal, 19 years ago when he arrived in New York from Pakistan, and has since seen businesses come and go. For the most part, he believes the area is doing well.

For him, the increase of South Asian cuisine in grocery stores can only be positive.

"People like this food," he said frankly.

The 48-year-old owner prides himself on the cuisine he serves to his customers, walking around to make sure everyone is satisfied. Upon meeting him, I immediately wanted him as my surrogate father, or at least a long-lost uncle. His graying hair and warm eyes drew me in as he spoke of his family and business. I even received an offer for a home-cooked Pakistani meal.

Beyond food, American fashion and entertainment also fall under South Asian influence.

The streets near the Jackson Diner and Sheereen Mahal are lined with sari shops, all of them selling South Asian clothing in an array of colors. Shingar, one of the sari shops, has been in Little India for six years, selling Indian and Bangladeshi outfits.

"These are designs everyone can like," said Rjia, an employee of Shingar and a resident of Jackson Heights. The gold bangles on her arm created soft music as she ran her hand over the glass countertop nonchalantly, drawing attention to the jewelry underneath.

Whether it is the family-run store on 74th Street or the giant Macy's in Manhattan, South Asian designs stand out with their bright colors, heavily accented gold jewelry and flowing fabrics.

"Plenty people come here," Rjia said. She paused as a customer came in, immediately gesturing to the room full of brightly colored saris. Her own lavender sari swayed as she walked toward the woman. After speaking for several minutes, the woman left the store and Rjia continued pointing to the different designs, her eyes focused on me.

Always the saleswoman, she spoke about the area, affirming what Ravinder and Hussain said: Different people come from all over to purchase South Asian products. Everyone is a customer.

Next door to Shingar, a song flows from the door, enticing people into PMC Music Co., a store that specializes in South Asian music and movies. The beat is distinctly reggae, but the voice singing over it is in the style of Bhangra, a popular type of Indian music. The fusion of sounds is a recent phenomenon, becoming well known among youth of all ethnicities.

Behind the counter is Dildar, an Indian man born in Punjab who has spent most of his life in the United States. In his late 20s, he enjoys working at PMC Music Co. because it allows him to sell CDs and DVDs while listening to different artists. It is the perfect place for him, with hundreds of South Asian albums and Bollywood films jammed onto shelves throughout the small store.

"Americans love the Bhangra music," he said, acknowledging that South Asians are sliding into Western culture and helping to create a new sound.

Dildar believes artists like DJ Panjabi - famous for his 2003 collaboration with Jay-Z on the remix "Beware of the Boys" - have helped open doors for other South Asian performers.

In a plain white T-shirt and worn blue jeans, Dildar is exactly the type of person PMC Music Co. aims to attract: The hip but casual young person who loves pop culture, both South Asian and American. He turned to stack CDs as he continued to talk, subtly bobbing his head to the beat of the music.

"Business is so good right now," he declared, as a woman came in inquiring about employment opportunities. "As long as I sell, I am happy."

And for other people, the same mentality prevails.

Along 74th Street, the employees and owners generally agree that popularity is great, but having a steady income is even better.

"I'm working 18, 16 hours a day," Hussain said as he described his efforts to keep his wife and two children clothed and fed.

Long hours are not unusual to the workers of Little India. Working all day, every day, prevents many residents from venturing out - but that situation doesn't bother them.

"I am good here, with my daughter," Rjia said.

Almost all the stores are open every day, creating a constant community for Jackson Heights' residents and visitors alike.

And while it is clear that South Asia's rise in the global economy is connected to its growing influence on American culture, the most important thing to people like Tasawar Hussain is the success of his business and putting food on the table.

"I'm just surviving, feeding my family, thanking God."