

## SUBURBAN SAHIBS

BY S. MITRA KALITA

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Review by Nirav S. Desai



*"There is was an earthquake in Gujarat."*

*"Oh my God, that's so scary. Are Dada and Dadi okay?"*

*Payal remains glued to the television for the rest of the day, while Pradip readies for his evening flight. He fields calls from the media and members of the Indo-American Cultural Society on his cellular phone until boarding time. When Payal logs on to her email account, the forwards have already started. Devastating photos of the disaster - a child crying by a bleeding woman, presumably his mother. Addresses of where to send donations. Pledges to donate proceeds from that weekend's desi parties to earthquake relief.*

*Meanwhile, the efforts to mobilize Edison's large Gujarati community are also under way. In their tendency to group themselves regionally, as Gujaratis, as Bengalis, and Punjabis, and so on, Indian immigrants mirrored previous arrivals, such as the Irish and German who often divided themselves into Catholic and Protestant camps. Yet his community's gump-tion is both a source of pride and annoyance to Pradip. The more an Indian sets himself apart, the more he is acting in self-interest. "Our cause is diluted because of our own people's attitude. 'What is there for me?' they ask, rather than 'What is there for all of us?'" Pradip says many times. "They should think not as Punjabi but as people from the Indian subcontinent and a minority."*

*(pg. 113)*

In her first book, *Suburban Sahibs*, Washington Post education reporter S. Mitra Kalita portrays with vivid contrast the lives of Indian immigrants through three families living in Central New Jersey. Through these three families, the Kotharis, the Patels, and the Sarmas, Kalita weaves a quintessential American portrait of hope and struggle, of success and failure.

Living in the historic town of Edison, NJ, the home of Thomas Edison, the Kotharis, Patels, and Sarmas each are members of the same community, yet not. Despite the obvious similarities, each family being from India, living in Central New Jersey, practicing Hinduism, having family in the U.S. and India, there are some very significant differences. Each family came to the U.S. at different times, has different circles of friends, and different income levels. This resulted in very different lifestyles.

Pradip Kothari arrived in the US in 1972, a member of the first wave of Indian immigrants. His family followed soon afterwards. A born leader, Pradip was convinced by his parents to pursue a career in engineering, which following the changes in US immigration law in 1965 had become something of a visa for Indians looking to emigrate to the U.S. It was only after coming to the United States that Pradip's entrepreneurial spirit flourished allowing him to overcome bigotry, grow a successful business, and rise to prominence in the Indian community.

The Patel's are representative of the often ignored middle wave of Indian immigrants, the extended family of the first wave. Harish Patel and family, after several attempts to move to the U.S. finally committed to staying here in 1990. Harish's brothers came in the 70's and sponsored Harish on a family unification visa. With modest dreams and undying perseverance, Harish set out to establish a better life for himself and his family in the United States. After 15 years, he has learned that with a family and little money, it's not easy.

The Sarmas represent the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of Indian immigration. They had a "gold-paved entry" into the States as holders of the much-coveted H1-B visa in 1995. Fueled by the technology boom, America was hurting for people with high-technology skills. Understanding this, the Sarmas secured jobs, visas, and an almost immediate new and privileged life as compared to their lives in Mumbai. Following the tech bust and rise in outsourcing, many have returned to India but the Sarmas continue to pursue their American dream.

Each of these stories will read rather familiar to those with intimate knowledge of the Indian American community. And the question I pose to Pradip Kothari in response to his quotation above is how can a community that has come to America at different times, with different networks and different experiences, that by-in-large is very comfortable, come together as "people from the Indian subcontinent and a minority." Buried within the pages of Kalita's book, perhaps, lays some of the explanations if not the solutions. The Sarmas who have been used to cosmopolitan life in the city, have some difficulty accepting life in the

suburbs. Upon buying his first car Sanku Sarma sighs, "I'm really in America now." In Mumbai they were used to social interaction with people from all parts of India. Upon moving to America, it just became easier to associate with only with Assamese (people from the Indian state of Assam). As a reader I was forced to ask myself why they gave up their more cosmopolitan lifestyle. Though Kalita does not give any immediate answers, I wonder of such ethnic clustering may be as much motivated by the immigrants as by external pressures. Pradip certainly was a victim of racial bias. He was motivated to start organizing the community after several local Indian stores were attacked. And perhaps one of the most disappointing points in the book comes as Kalita asks this question, however never sufficiently investigates the causes of it.

In the end, *Suburban Sahibs*, while a thoroughly interesting read, offers a well written story of three families to those who are living the story, i.e. Indian Americans. For readers with a passing familiarity with the Indian Americans looking to learn more about this increasingly active and growing community, *Suburban Sahibs* provides a surprisingly comprehensive and informative portrait and successfully weaves it into the larger American suburban landscape.