

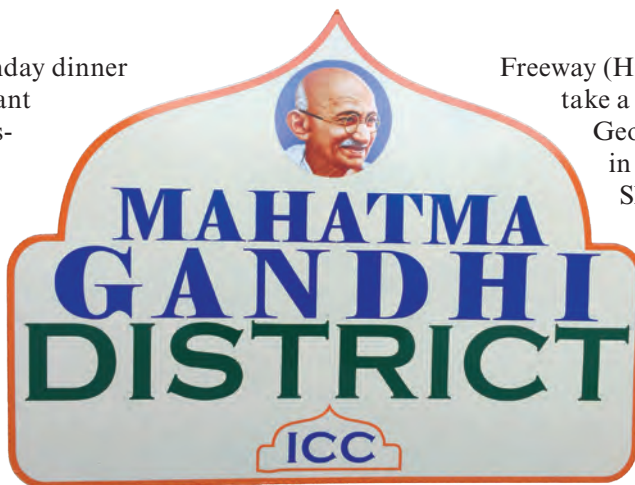
Pass the Naan

The Story of Houston's Mahatma Gandhi District

By Alex LaRotta

My wife D'Arcy had her birthday dinner at Bombay Sweets Restaurant in the Little India District of Houston in 2010. While driving down Hillcroft Avenue, we noticed new toppers adorning the neighborhood street signs proclaiming, "Mahatma Gandhi District," complete with a small engraving of the revered Indian leader. "Wait—when did that get there? Is this an official historic district now?" My search for answers to these questions formed the genesis of my doctoral study at the University of Houston as part of the Gulf Coast Food Project in the Center for Public History some years later. This project, completed with five UH film students, resulted in an oral history project and film documentary on the making of Houston's Mahatma Gandhi District, also known as Little India. It features merchants, community leaders, and Houston Mayor Annise Parker, discussing the history and significance of this district and the city's Indian and Pakistani population.

Where and what exactly is the Mahatma Gandhi District? From downtown, head south on the Southwest



One of many identical street signs welcoming Houstonians and tourists alike to Little India.

Photo courtesy of India Culture Center.

Freeway (Highway 59 South), exit Hillcroft, take a right, and there you are.

Geographically speaking, it is in Southwest Houston, near Sharpstown, outside the 610 Loop, and inside Beltway 8. North to south along Hillcroft from Westpark to the Southwest Freeway, east to west along Harwin, it is a triangular nook containing one of the largest South Asian populations in the Western Hemisphere. But if you are still unsure, look for the red-trimmed street toppers on the area's major thoroughfares welcoming you to the Mahatma Gandhi District.

The roughly half-mile-by-mile Hillcroft-Harwin corridors are brimming with Indian and Pakistani restaurants, jewelry stores, grocers, *sari* shops, salons, and various Indian- and Pakistani-owned businesses. The nearby vicinity also includes vendors, and even diplomatic consulates, from around the world. It is all so patently, expressively *Houston*.

Observing the region's magnitude suggests that, like much of Houston, the area dates back just a few decades. I sat down with Sharan Gahunia—co-manager and heir to Raja Sweets, one of the district's staple eateries—to talk about the making of the district. Sharan's late father, Joginder "Yogi" Gahunia, founded Raja Sweets in 1986. Instrumental in the civic effort to officially designate the district, Yogi helped shape the neighborhood in the same fashion as Houston's other well-known Asian American enclave: Chinatown. Unfortunately, Yogi passed away in 2002, eight years before the dream was realized.¹

The official designation brought the attention that Yogi desired for the neighborhood before his passing. "I feel like now with the Gandhi District being established, a lot of people know where we are because they can pinpoint the location," Sharan admitted. "I've had co-workers even say, 'Let's go visit the Gandhi District today. Let's go get our Indian fix.'" Sharan, who has a full-time job, helps her mother Resham Gahunia—sweet-maker-in-chief—manage the restaurant in her spare time and is next in line to take over the iconic eatery.

Yogi, along with fellow members of the India Culture Center, one of the district's foremost Indian American civic organizations, initiated a movement in the early 2000s to display Mahatma Gandhi street toppers in that area. "My dad is one of the people they call the 'founding fathers of Hillcroft,'" Sharan continued. "When he came to Houston



Joginder "Yogi" Gahunia (left), with Mayor Lee Brown, dreamed of the Mahatma Gandhi District having the same cultural impact on Houston as Chinatown.

Photo courtesy of Raja Sweets.

in the early 1980s, he realized there were no Indian restaurants here, and he wanted to build a small Indian community. Somewhere for Indian people to go to, because we didn't really have anything here."

Yogi's move to the Bayou City is a one-in-a-million immigration tale—quite literally. During the 1970s oil boom, post-industrial Houston experienced one of the largest influxes of Asian and Hispanic immigrants in the United States. Stephen L. Klineberg, director of Rice University's Kinder Institute of Urban Studies, describes this historic phenomenon as a "demographic revolution," an unprecedented wave of some one million-plus immigrants to Houston from 1970 to 1982. The early 1980s signaled another important transformation to the local economy: the gradual diversification of the oil economy into one that included human resources, service, education, and biomedical, among other sectors. This economic shift allowed Houston to slowly recover from the mid-1980s oil bust relatively intact, and newly-arrived immigrants like Yogi became the springboard for this regeneration.



"Yogi" Gahunia was the founder of the well-known Raja Sweets and a founding father of Hillcroft, having played an influential role in building an Indian community in Houston.

Photo courtesy of Raja Sweets.



Sharan Gahunia (center) and her mother Resham (second from left) now manage the popular Raja Sweets. Standing with them inside the shop are Loreal Bryant (left), Joann Brito (second from right), and Ribith Leang (far right).

Photo courtesy of Raja Sweets.

Aku Patel was one of the first Indian American entrepreneurs on Hillcroft. In 1984 Aku and his wife, Meena, opened Karat 22—currently the largest jewelry outlet in Texas—at its flagship location, 5623 Hillcroft Avenue. Other South Asian merchants shortly followed suit. Local developers, such as real estate magnate Ed Wulfe, capitalized on Houston's lucrative strip mall craze, particularly in the

Greater Sharpstown area. Hillcroft and Harwin became prime development areas for Houston's growing economy. "In the early 1980s, a lot of Indian and Pakistani businessmen established their small businesses on Hillcroft," explained Kaiser Lashkari, proprietor of Himalaya Restaurant, a popular Pakistani eatery known for its *biryani*, *hara masala* chicken, and other South Asian dishes favored by food critics and locals alike. "That's how a small, fledgling community started to put its roots on Hillcroft," he added. Although Himalaya opened in 2004, Lashkari owned a prior eatery in that area in the early 1990s.²

The tastes and smells of the subcontinent, including the hard-to-find seasonings used in South Asian recipes, can be found in the aisles of the district's local Indian groceries, which often import directly from family export operations back home. Today, ethnic food grocers are common sites in an international city like Houston, thanks in part to increased immigration over the last two decades. In the 2000 Census, Harris County reported approximately 36,000 Indians and Pakistanis, while Fort Bend County reported around 13,000. By 2010 the combined Indian/Pakistani population reached over 75,000—and that number continues to climb rapidly. Fort Bend County, which includes Sugar Land and Missouri City, recently received acclaim as the nation's single most ethnically diverse county, according to the Kinder Institute of Urban Studies.

In the early 1980s, however, Asian food grocers were few and far between in Houston. Yatin Patel's India Grocers first opened on Hillcroft in the mid-1980s as one of the district's pioneering establishments. Many of these merchants describe how Indians and Pakistanis from all over the United States come to Houston for the district's shopping experience. Celebrations of all occasions—from weddings and birthdays to Hindu holidays such as Holi and Diwali—bring out-of-town shoppers to the district all year long. The famed *gulab jamun* at Raja Sweets is known to attract people from as far away as Atlanta and London. The Gandhi District thrives on the area's affordable shopping centers, freeway proximity, and diverse suburbs.

Animesh Patel, co-owner of Subhlaxmi Grocers, attributed the district's expansion to the massive demographic growth spurt in the last few decades. Like Sharan, Animesh is a second-generation Indian American. In our interview, he switched from Urdu to English, conferring with his Punjab-born father while answering my inquiries on how his shop started. "The demand started here and then the district just started growing. And then, the restaurants started growing, as did the demand for Indian grocery products: spices, pulses [such as chick peas, lentils, and other legumes], pickles, frozen Indian items, and so on. As time went on, more and more people came in, and that's how the district really started. Just a love for food and love of our culture!"³



Animesh Patel saw the demand for Indian grocery items as the population and love for the culture grew.

Photo Courtesy of the Gulf Coast Food Project.

The Mahatma Gandhi District contains the hallmarks of a classic American ethnic neighborhood: massive immigrant population, established kinship networks, a language-friendly enclave, self-sufficiency, affordable housing and rental space, and a relatively immigrant-friendly social climate. Moreover, Houston has one other obvious advantage: a year-round subtropical climate, which closely resembles many parts of India and Pakistan.

University of Houston System Chancellor and President Renu Khator, who moved to Houston in 2008, points out that the district “embraces the culture from India,



University of Houston Chancellor and President Renu Khator epitomizes the blend of the Gandhi District with Houston’s character, donning an Indian sari with cowboy boots and hat.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

and it makes Indian Americans and South Asians feel at home and makes them feel valued. Mahatma Gandhi is the father of India. He is so revered. There is no language, state, caste, community, or class boundary around Gandhi’s name. It was just appropriate to name that district after him.” Khator also found the people wonderful, saying, “I just cannot brag enough about Houston and about the Indian American community here. They are just so accomplished, so successful — they have fire in their belly and yet they are so humble.”²⁴

The India Culture Center’s chief trustee, Swapan Dhairyawan, discussed the toilsome process of getting approval for the district designation: “Way back in 2002, during India’s fifty-fifth independence celebration, we decided that we needed to have something in Houston to mark Mahatma Gandhi. You see, Gandhi is a national figure of India, but he is an international figure, too; he is at the level of MLK. So, we were finally able to successfully erect the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Hermann Park, but we also wanted something along Hillcroft Avenue. There were a lot of hurdles at that time.” One of those hurdles included a failed attempt to persuade Hillcroft merchants to sign a petition to change the name of Hillcroft Avenue to “Mahatma Gandhi Avenue.” Among logistical and financial concerns, this largely failed to materialize due to significant resistance from the avenue’s non-Indian population.

According to the city’s planning division, “a written petition for a street name change shall be signed by at least 50% of the property owners along a public street or at least 75% of the property owners along a non-public street. Street name changes are subject to approval by City Council.” A name change seemed unlikely. Beaten but not defeated, the India Culture Center soon shifted gears to this more feasible endeavor, street sign toppers. Dhairyawan recalled, “We got

the merchants together to raise money for this project. And with these signs we said to them: ‘This is your district.’”²⁵

Designating the newly-formed Mahatma Gandhi District in 2010 became one of the first agenda items for then newly elected Mayor Annise Parker. She marked the occasion with a photo opportunity and naming ceremony, recognizing that day— January 16, 2010—as “Mahatma Gandhi District Day.”



Film students and history students came together to create *Pass the Naan*, a documentary on Houston’s Mahatma Gandhi District, for the Gulf Coast Food Project. Left to right are Emily Baker, author Alex LaRotta, Mayor Annise Parker, Rufi Tazani, and Frank Berroteran.

Photo courtesy of the Gulf Coast Food Project.

Gulf Coast Food Project

of the UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

I sat down with Mayor Parker to discuss the significance of the Indian and Pakistani community in forming Houston’s international character.

“The Mahatma Gandhi District is a designated part of the city where there is a concentration of Pakistani- and Indian-owned businesses,” she affirmed. “By looking at that district, it gives us an opportunity to highlight one more aspect of how international Houston is. We are arguably the most international U.S. city.” She pointed out, “One in four Houstonians is foreign born, and that translates to perhaps 100,000 Indians and Pakistanis from that region. And you know, because we are so international and we have many ethnic and cultural enclaves, they all add to the flavor of Houston. But by designating a district, it wasn’t just one street; it was highlighting all of the businesses in the district. It’s a way of saying, ‘You’re somewhere special.’”²⁶

The district certainly is special. The Hillcroft-Harwin corridor is one of the most international areas of this city, a symbol of Houston’s impressive ethnic and cultural diversity.

Alex LaRotta is a first-generation Colombian American and native Houstonian. An avid record collector and deejay, as well as a history Ph.D. student at the University of Houston, he plans a dissertation on the history of Texas soul.