



I'm white, I'm single and I'm from small-town Northern Ontario. I never thought I'd fit into Little India. I couldn't have been more wrong
By Cynthia Brouse

Indian Summer

IF YOU DRIVE EAST along Gerrard Street on a weekend night, past Chinatown II at Broadview, past quiet Leslieville, past Greenwood, the mundane view suddenly erupts in a metaphorical masala of fairy lights and Hindu gods, tandoor smoke and cumin, ads for international phone cards, Bollywood movie posters, tabla beats and ululating voices singing ghazals and bhangra—all crammed into a narrow street lined with narrow buildings that have seen better days. Just as abruptly, after little more than a half-dozen blocks, it all stops at Coxwell, where the “Upper Beach” begins and real estate prices rise. Filmmaker Deepa Mehta set parts of her spoof, *Bollywood Hollywood*, in the clothing and jewellery stores on this stretch. “It reminds me of the India I knew 40 years ago,” she says.

Bollyhoo: the area that extends just a few blocks along Gerrard Street is a destination for South Asians from Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago and Pittsburgh

I bought my house there a decade ago. I used to tell people I lived in Little India, but I learned that was a misnomer, implying the existence, either today or in the past, of a large number of East Indian residents. In fact, only a handful had ever lived there. The moniker applied by the local merchants, “Gerrard India Bazaar,” does a better job of describing what is really a business district that serves a distant clientele.

For a long time after I moved in, the only people I'd see on Gerrard before 4 p.m. were



the white locals on their way to one of the dollar stores, Coffee Times or greasy spoons that bracket the area (the Chinese and Vietnamese residents shop farther west, near Broadview). The few non-South Asian establishments right in the Bazaar—a Greek hairdresser, a United church—stood out like outposts of an older world.

What made me want to live there was the transformation that occurred later in the day and on weekends. The people who came to lick kulfi and chew paan, buy Bollywood videos and Islamic books, or get outfitted in bridal saris and 22-karat-gold wedding jewellery lived in Markham, Mississauga or Malton. They weren't likely to show up in the Bazaar until the afternoon, but they were still hanging around late into the evening. As a woman living alone, I instantly felt safe here at night. The slender sidewalks were crowded with families: parents with children in strollers, many of the women in saris or hijab; groups of teenagers; chattering grandparents. There were no nightclubs—just lots of nightlife. By midnight, the shopkeepers had put away their samosa stands, swept the sidewalks and locked the doors, and the whole scene went home to the suburbs.

I loved it. But occasionally it was awkward living near a commercial area that didn't seem to be catering to me. I could buy cilantro on every corner, but not if I needed it at 10:30 in the morning—and anybody wanting a bagel or a cappuccino was out of luck. The Bazaar comprised a distinctive spine whose ribs—the streets running north and south off Gerrard—belonged to an entirely different body. And far from just two solitudes, there were at least half a dozen. Besides the huge ethnic dividing line that is Gerrard, there were socio-economic lines, too. Though I have a small-town, white working-class background, I had spent 12 years in an apartment in the genteel Beach. But I couldn't afford to buy there. I was shocked the first time I went to the No Frills on Coxwell and a fight broke out in the checkout line. One of my brothers was quick to inform me that the hole-in-the-wall bar near my house was known as “the Kick 'n' Stab.”

As it turns out, I wasn't the first to be drawn to the Gerrard India Bazaar for its cheap real estate. It's what created the strip in the first place.

TORONTO IS KNOWN for its ethnic business enclaves, and in some ways, the India Bazaar is much like other immigrant areas. Not many Greeks live in Greektown either, but the difference is that at one time they did. As in Kensington Market, Chinatown and Little Italy, the Danforth attracted immigrants who lived in the surrounding houses and opened stores and restaurants featuring the goods and cuisine of their native culture. When they became more prosperous, they moved to the suburbs, leaving behind a market that was enjoyed equally by locals and tourists, Greek and not.

The India Bazaar grew the other way around. This forgotten little pocket—not quite Riverdale or Leslieville, sandwiched between the Danforth and the Beach—was once dominated by Greek and Italian construction workers and Anglo-Saxon people who worked at Colgate and Wrigley in the days before those names branded condo lofts. By 1972, when a north Indian busi-



Eastern standard: South Asians make up 10 per cent of the GTA's population. For many who settled in suburbs like Markham, Mississauga and Malton, the Gerrard India Bazaar provides a welcome taste of home



nessman named Gian Naaz bought the old Eastwood Theatre, just west of Coxwell, to show Bollywood films, the strip had become poor and shabby. The Naaz Theatre drew hordes of South Asian visitors, but most of them could already afford to live in better areas than the east end. Before long, an Indian record shop opened up nearby, then a restaurant and a clothing store, and soon a South Asian market had been grafted on top of a mostly white district. Old hardware stores and hair salons became sari emporiums and sweet shops. An area that covered barely three blocks was transformed into a destination not only for the inhabitants of South Asian communities around the city and across Canada, but also for those in Buffalo, Detroit and Chicago. Today, with more than 100 stores, it touts itself as the largest South Asian market in North America. Suppliers in Bangalore and Delhi know all about Gerrard. By the time I moved there, a purposeful walk to the post office on a Saturday afternoon involved elbowing my way through a wall-to-curb mass of sociable amblers. I sometimes felt like a tourist in my own neighbourhood.

Today, the crowds don't seem so dense. There's no shortage of South Asians in the GTA: the group now makes up more than 10 per cent of the population of Toronto, nearly as many as the Chinese. But the suburban community has matured: its mem-

bers can buy Indian goods in the rival shopping precincts that have sprung up closer to where they live, at Islington and Albion Road or at Airport and Derry, where there's lots of parking and the stores are newer and shinier and less cramped. Still other South Asian families, and their westernized offspring, don't care to buy their homeland's goods at all. And in the past few years, there's been a 70 per cent drop in American tourists to the Bazaar—thanks to SARS, the sinking greenback and September 11 (crossing the border wearing a turban and carrying a bag of chickpea flour can be a recipe for harassment).

And yet, if not as visitors, the Bazaar is finally attracting South Asians who want to live there, many of them Pakistani refugees. But there probably aren't enough to replace the tourists. So the merchants are learning to adapt. They know their future depends on drawing non-South Asians, too. And as the India Bazaar reached out to me, I began to return the attention.

SOCIOLOGISTS TALK ABOUT social networks: you have a “dense” network if you know a lot of people in a given community, and you have a “multiplex” network if those people also know each other—in other words, if you're linked to people in more than one way. In the small town where I grew up, the girl who lived next to me went to the same

school I did; we attended the same church; her sister married my uncle; our dads worked together.

After I moved to Toronto in 1975, it took me a long time to figure out how people made connections in a city, by definition a conglomeration of strangers. In 20 years of apartment living, I formed bonds in university and at work, but I never knew my neighbours. When I went house hunting, I unconsciously sought a dense, multiplex network based around my home. I've succeeded in forging links in this neighbourhood, and some of them overlap with my work and family life. If I go to a hardware store with my neighbour and run into a colleague or my cousin, I am filled with a sense of joyful belonging.

Ours is a front porch kind of street. When I look up and down its length, I see a low-to-middle-income assortment: retirees, young parents who are teachers, nurses, actors, social workers, cab drivers, beauticians. Interspersed with the modest houses and cheerful gardens are a few scary-looking rental properties, with tenants like the ones who decided to celebrate Canada Day by lighting Roman candles in their kitchen garbage can at 7 a.m., narrowly escaping when the house burned to a shell.

An old Chinese woman squats on the sidewalk before her front yard vegetable garden, sharpening a meat cleaver against

the concrete with great, energetic whacks, her bok choy hemmed in tidily by a set of old refrigerator racks. The 2001 census showed that in the immediate vicinity, almost 14 per cent of residents named Chinese as their home language, more than five times as many as claimed Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi or Bengali put together. But the most notable incursion of home buyers on my street in recent years consists of single straight women, and gays and lesbians, who are fixing up the dilapidated century-old row houses and semis.

A gang of women on my street, who work mostly in education or the media, formed a potluck dinner club that met monthly for more than five years, until the value of our houses doubled and a couple of members cashed in and moved away. New connections took their place: there's Judy, a belly dancing teacher from Trenton, and

ing on the Bazaar's signature barbecued corn on the cob, trying not to smear the fresh lime juice and spices on their uniforms. They were a symbol of how much things have changed: one wore a turban; the other was black; both were Sikhs.

But legitimate complaints are bound to arise in any neighbourhood that exists cheek by jowl with a tourist area, where visitors forget that the colourful venue is somebody else's home. To some, Gerrard's congestion, the old buildings, the omnipresent pigeons, and the discarded corncobs and betel nuts are part of the Bazaar's appeal. "It's really pleasantly dirty now," says Deepa Mehta, hastening to add that that's not a put-down. Others, however, don't find the dirt very pleasant, and the local Business Improvement Area, one of the oldest in the city, struggles to keep up with the garbage, mediating disputes with the residents'

"We went to the Bazaar every Sunday. My parents needed a dose of their own kind. But I hated it. I was more into Levis and hamburgers"

Diane, a United Way researcher whose status as a parent with kids in the local school, as well as her natural community-mindedness, makes her a lot more plugged into the neighbourhood than I'll ever be. They introduced me to their favourite Indian restaurant on Gerrard, The Famous, which has become something of a hangout.

In 1977, this magazine published a story titled "Terror in Toronto," which described violent, racially motivated attacks against immigrants from South Asia, who felt compelled to arm themselves when the police turned a blind eye. Since then, indifference seems to have replaced ethnic conflict. Racism still festers in pockets; this summer, an elderly woman who attended my yard sale railed against "those people," decrying the "foreign" smells, unfamiliar habits and garbage in the alleyways. "This area used to be beautiful!" she snarled. "NHL hockey players lived here!" (Her sister told her to shut up, and bought my popcorn maker as atonement.) But most people I know are proud to live here. And at last year's second annual Festival of South Asia, on a hot, late-August weekend, I spotted two relaxed-looking cops standing on a corner munch-

association and educating its members about the inadvisability of feeding pigeons, which some South Asians believe brings good luck.

A stalwart of the BIA, Balwant Jajj Singh is a leader in building bridges between the locals and the tourists. He owns B.J. Supermarket and claims his is the only store in Canada that carries both South Asian specialties and western groceries; it's also one of the only places on Gerrard that opens at 10 a.m. This cross-cultural business strategy may make B.J. the most well-known—and well-liked—person on the strip. A handsome, turbaned Sikh with puppy-dog eyes and a kind smile, he lives above his supermarket with his extended family. Unlike most of the merchants in the Bazaar, he truly is my neighbour—and he sees appealing to Canadians like me as an inevitable mission that the Bazaar must accept.

"People told me my store would never work," he says. But it did; despite the presence of the No Frills around the corner, locals and visitors shop at B.J.'s, whether they want Oreo cookies or fried moong dal. He points to Rang Home Decor—a new shop run by Trish Mahtani, the business

school-educated daughter of the BIA president—which combines South Asian style with Western design ideas and has lately been featured in tony magazines. I may not be interested in buying a sari or a carrom board on Gerrard, but the elaborately embroidered and beaded cushions and fabric at Rang pull me in as much as the restaurants do.

“As the population grows and our second generation rises,” B.J. says, “whether we like it or not, the mainstream is going to be our main customer. Look at the U.K. Curry is the number one seller there; it used to be fish and chips in a newspaper.”

Does the Bazaar exert any pull on that second generation? Devjani Raha is a 34-year-old filmmaker whose parents came from Calcutta and brought her up in Mississauga. “When we were younger,” she says, “we went to the Bazaar every Sunday. Mississauga was so white—my parents needed a dose of their own kind. I hated it; it was boring. I was more comfortable with peanut butter and Levis and hamburgers.” But now that she’s older, Raha and her friends find they need a regular Gerrard nostalgia fix. “There are these Hindu religious comics you can only get there that remind me of my childhood,” she explains.

The sheer multitude of South Asian cultures represented on the strip is unusual. Here you can eat South Indian dosa or bhel puri from the north, buy halal meat from a Pakistani butcher or bangles from a Sri Lankan-owned clothing store. To my neighbours and me, all seems calm between those whose home countries are perpetually aiming nuclear weapons at each other. Are there imported tensions here, simmering below the surface? Mohammad “Sam” Saleem—a 40-year-old Pakistani immigrant who embodies the name of his store, the Friendly Supermarket—claims that feeding the pigeons is the only thing that Hindus and Muslims have in common. Pulling his bloody butcher’s apron over his short, round frame, he leans forward and says he’s going to tell me the real story, even though some people may not like it. “Inside, Pakistanis want to kill Hindus,” he says. “But it’s not going to happen because there’s rules in Canada.”

The problem, it turns out, is not quite so dramatic. The minor conflicts on the strip have little to do with Kashmir and everything to do with this piece of turf on Gerrard and who controls it. They are conducted in a polite and businesslike—in other words, truly Canadian—manner, and they happen to break along Indian-Pakistani lines because of immigration patterns. Most

of the businesses in the centre of the strip are owned by the Sikhs and Hindus who arrived here first, and only they chip into the BIA pot. In the past five years, the unofficial Gerrard India Bazaar has spread to the point where it almost spans the nine blocks from Greenwood to Coxwell. As it happens, the expansion on the west end comprises mostly Muslim-owned enterprises, which don’t pay the BIA levy but still reap the benefits. (Some say that the area would be better named Little Pakistan.)

But ultimately, discord takes a back seat to the desire for peace and economic prosperity. Last fall, Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, and Eid, the Islamic feast day that marks the end of Ramadan, happened to coincide roughly on the same November weekend. The BIA took advantage of the coincidence and held a joint Diwali-Eid festival. When they realized that Muslims would still be fasting until after dark, they moved the kickoff party on the Friday from 2 p.m. to 7.

The Saturday evening of Diwali-Eid was clear and crisp, and Diane and I strolled down the crowded street with some of her visiting family, taking in the (to us) Christmas lights, the noise and the music. Exuberant young men in traditional dress drove a little too fast along Gerrard, beeping their horns at one another. There was a real sense of joy in the air. I couldn’t tell the Muslims from the non-Muslims; some of the shops carried greeting cards for both Diwali and Eid on the same rack.

We had dinner at The Famous, a tiny, plain place with a tasty Punjabi buffet aimed at “Canadians.” The sole waiter amiably raced around serving a packed house. A little tinsel Christmas tree and ropes of holly hung from the ceiling. I ran into my massage therapist there—a multiplex link!

There weren’t many other non-South Asians on the street, but we didn’t feel out of place. We bought a package of two-foot-long sparklers, partly for the sake of Diane’s four-year-old nephew, and partly because we felt happy to be there. At the library, we solicited a light from some teenage boys; Diane thanked them by saying “Happy Diwali!” They looked a little stunned. “Happy Eid!” I offered instead, and they broke into grins. We gave sparklers to some children and made big trails of light in the air, swaying with the mesmerizing song-and-dance extravaganzas of Bollywood on the big screen that spanned the street.

ALNOOR SAYANI, an Ismaili who came to Toronto in 1974 from Uganda by way of the U.K., is trying to bring the Muslim faction

into the BIA. Eight years ago, he turned an old Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet into a popular Pakistani-style eatery: Lahore Tikka House quickly burst its confines and, for some time, consisted of a chaotic concatenation of portable trailers connected to the main building by plywood walkways, awnings and outdoor picnic tables. Now undergoing a rebuilding from the ground up, the place spills out onto the sidewalk on summer nights; squads of waiters in purple T-shirts, some of whom were lawyers, doctors and aerospace engineers in their countries of birth, serve a mean butter chicken.

Sayani is a dapper man of 50 who looks much younger. "This area has the potential to rival Greektown," he says, and the BIA members think so too, which is why they hired a marketing consultant to help bridge the ethnic divisions on Gerrard and to promote the Bazaar to a wider audience (aside from the Festival of South Asia and Diwali-Eid, the BIA also celebrates Christmas, with horse-and-wagon rides and Victorian-costumed carollers on the street corners).

Will the locals go along with it? Most residents recognize that without the Bazaar the area would be pretty dodgy, though a few years back, when somebody suggested Gerrard change its name to Mahatma Gandhi Boulevard, crude signs appeared on telephone poles, proclaiming "Gerrard Forever!"

A recent report on the future of the Bazaar by Ryerson University's planning department proposed less contentious changes. One of its supervisors, Professor Sandeep Kumar, says the group looked for themes that would resonate with everybody. They came up with Bollywood films, something that harkens back to the origins of the Bazaar in the Naaz Theatre. They proposed plastering movie murals on the sides of buildings, installing a Bollywood walk of fame with stars embedded in the sidewalk and dressing up the 506 streetcar like an Indian-style cycle rickshaw.

I'm not sure I want to live in a Bollywood theme park. I suppose it would be nice to see the street spruced up a little, but the neighbourhood's charm comes from its authenticity, as fuzzy as that word may be. Nobody would ever have planned such a place, but in many ways, it works. There isn't a shred of intentional irony (though there's plenty of the natural kind), nor a hint of cool as far as the eye can see. Starbucks? Not a chance. It's the classic gentrification trade-off: when we "clean up" an older, urban district, we kill some of its appeal along with its organically grown grittiness.

Gerrard's grittiness doesn't come just

from pigeon poop. Before Alnoor Sayani improved the landscaping and lighting behind the Lahore Tikka House and put up a security camera, cleaners regularly picked up 150 syringes a month. Directly across the street from him is a scene that is, in some ways, as foreign to me as it is to him.

"**HAVE YOU HEARD** about the lonesome loser?" the Little River Band blares from the Kick 'n' Stab. Neither I nor my neighbourhood pals ever set foot inside the place my brother warned me about. Though it's not much bigger than my living room, rimmed by a corner full of windows and a wide chunk of sidewalk, it dominates life on our street. Officially called Jenny's Place, even its regulars call it The Kick. Its menu is mainly restricted to North American beer; you could get a hamburger or a pickled egg if you asked, but I don't think anybody goes there to eat. The customers, mostly white, reside locally, drink abundantly and lack a number of things, such as full sets of teeth.

Jenny is not around anymore. The bar is now run by a sweet and clean-cut couple—Ali from Iraq and Cathy from China—who appear to get along just fine with their customers. Occasionally, I hear about the incidents that gave the place its nickname. But in 10 years of waiting for my streetcar in front of The Kick, I've never witnessed any kicking or stabbing, only a lot of staggering and loud exchanges. There seems to be a solid, if dysfunctional, sense of community there. Drinkers congregate around the door, comparing notes on their welfare case workers or their Percocet prescriptions, while their kids play hopscotch a couple of metres away. They never bother me, and we rarely converse.

If you discount the odd Muslim who slips across the street to The Kick for a forbidden drink while waiting for his food to arrive at Lahore Tikka House (which doesn't serve alcohol), there couldn't be a more disparate set of regulars sharing an intersection. The customers at The Kick appear to ignore the hijab- and pyjama-clad diners across the way in what used to be their KFC, next to a jewellery store (one of almost two dozen in the space of just a few blocks) that used to be their Brewer's Retail. The disregard is returned politely. Mostly, the two groups play their parts in the weird science fiction that is urban life, in which clumps of us exist in parallel dimensions, each occupying the same territory but seemingly oblivious to one another.

Jane Jacobs would love The Kick and its juxtaposition with the South Asian stores. Strangers, she wrote in *The Death and Life of*

Great American Cities, can live together safely and prosperously by creating a delicate civic dance that doesn't bring them too close together nor force them too far apart. Still, I was curious enough to exceed the boundaries of that delicate dance. Since I'd been to Lahore Tikka House, I decided it was time to cross the street. Inside The Kick, I sat down for a beer with a guy named Sid, whose son, I later realized, shovels my snow for small change—another multiplex connection!

Then I was drawn to Herbie, who looked a bit like a cheerier version of Pete Townshend, with a long face and kind, black-ringed eyes. Originally from Gambo, Newfoundland, he'd been in Toronto since 1963 and was just getting ready to retire from an aluminum extrusion company.

"It's just this little town, you know," said Herbie in a chesty, smoke-cured rumble. "The people from India or Pakistan or Sri Lanka—they're all beautiful people, you know, they're all friendly."

"Mommy, can I have six dollars?" shouted a little girl from somewhere near the bar door. I glanced across to the Lahore Tikka House and realized that the sense of family I'd detected when I first moved here didn't flow only from the South Asian tourists.

But this is not a little town, and I've learned to live with that. Along with the sense of comfort and security that dense, multiplex networks can bestow, they also breed conformity and suspicion of outside influences. They ensure that everybody in little towns thinks the same, talks the same, looks the same and acts the same. Which is why I left the place where I grew up. Maybe that's why Herbie left Gambo, too.

Herbie turned his lined face toward me and blew away some smoke. "Anyways, little lady," he said, "this is a beautiful community. Clashes? No, no, no, my darling. That's an old thing. Being prejudiced is a passé thing, you know. It's not in today." The only people Herbie hates, he said, are socialists.

We may not be pals, Herbie and I, or Sam, or B.J. "A neighbourhood is not the primary venue of social blending," wrote Ryerson's Sandeep Kumar and his colleague Mohammad Qadeer in *The Ontario Planning Journal*. "One's interactions with neighbours may not advance beyond the level of polite nodding, except in times of emergencies and collective actions."

In that nod, there is both distance and connection. There's tolerance, too, though that's clearly not enough. But maybe there's also the potential for respect, if not friendliness. It's the Toronto way. In a neighbourhood where we are all tourists, at least we have that in common. **END**