

Little India: Six blocks, many stories

Audio and visual art exhibit on Gerrard explores the rich history of the neighbourhood

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Veronica Mal recalls, as a young girl, making the one-hour trek by TTC with her mother and sister from their home in Scarborough to Little India on Gerrard St. E., where one of the first stops was to pick up a lemony Limca soda.

The strip of mom-and-pop businesses — restaurants, paan stands, grocery and sari shops — was reminiscent of New Delhi, from which her family emigrated in 1983.

"It reminded me of the hustle and bustle of a market back home. As soon as you stepped out of the 506 streetcar, you'd smell the barbecued corn, you'd hear the ghazals and Bollywood pop songs blaring from the shops, and your mouth would start watering for mithai (sweets) and pani puri (a savoury snack)," says Mal, 29.

That nostalgia is what drew Mal back to the neighbourhood where she lives today. For a chef specializing in Indian fusion cuisine, it's also handy to shop in the nearby *desi* stores for fresh produce and spices.

Hers is one of more than a dozen stories incorporated into an audio and contemporary visual art exhibit — *Big Stories, Little India* — that opens today in storefronts along the street and runs through Sept. 8.

"As the first neighbourhood for the community, it seems to play an important role in people's memories of growing up South Asian in Toronto," says Haema Sivanesan, executive director of the South Asian Visual Artists Collective.

"It seems to be known worldwide as this unique neighbourhood. I'm from Australia, where there's no street like this though there's a sizable South Asian population — and they've heard of Gerrard Street!"

The exhibit includes an audio documentary of dozens of neighbour-



Veronica Mal, a chef, sips Limca, a soft drink from India, in Punjab Food and Sweets on Gerrard St. E.

ASHLEY HUTCHESON PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

'THE DONALD' OF GERRARD STREET

Ashok Navani arrived in 1972, paid \$35,000 for a small unit next door to the Naaz Theatre and turned it into the Indian Record Shop. He boasts of having been open every day for the past 35 years.

In the beginning, says Navani, 58, "There were four of us — Naaz, a grocery store, a travel agent, a restaurant and me. It was a pretty run-down area."

Racism was rife in the early days, he adds. "Every second day our front glass was broken. Every weekend there were fights with young white thugs beating up people with hockey sticks, saying, 'Paki go home.'"

Navani not only endured but prospered, buying and selling 40 storefronts on the strip,



Entrepreneur Ashok Navani

prompting an Indian magazine to dub him the "Donald Trump of Gerrard St."

His record store was appraised at \$1.2 million a few years ago.

hood stories, in the voices of the residents themselves. Visitors can dial their cellphones to listen to the stories in the very spot they were recorded, to get a sense of the mi-

lieu being described, says Gabe Sawhney, co-creator of [murmur], which has done similar projects in other parts of Toronto as well as Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary,

Dublin, San Jose and Edinburgh.

Spanning six blocks between Coxwell and Greenwood Aves. and crammed with 200 shops, Little India got its start in 1971 with the opening of the Naaz Theatre, which showed Bollywood movies.

"At that time there were no videos or DVDs, so there was always a big crowd at the theatre," recalls Hansa Patel, who has worked at the public library in Little India since 1978.

As part of the exhibit, artist Zahed Mawani shot a super-8 documentary featuring 15 shopkeepers, some here since the beginning and others, such as Abida Rafiq, who are more recent arrivals.

Rafiq is among a handful of merchants who also live on the strip — with her husband and two children in a cramped second-floor apartment. There, she runs her Sidra Tailor shop, fashioning *salvaar kameez* and sari blouses.

"We like it here because it's like living back home. We see our own people and get our own food," says Rafiq, 43, who immigrated to Toronto in 2003.

Artist Ambereen Siddiqui took three long-exposure photographs through the window of Rafiq's shop at night "because that's when the street really comes alive."

Her photos will be displayed in the old Naaz theatre's poster box.

Born in Toronto, Siddiqui moved to Pakistan with her family at age 3, but spent summers with relatives here. Visiting Little India was always a highlight, she says.

Poring through city archives, Siddiqui found a group of shopkeepers petitioned city council to rename that part of Gerrard St. Mahatma Gandhi Way in 1988. Their request was voted down, she says. "Some of the letters against were fairly racist — 'They should go back to their own country,' that kind of stuff."

Artists each had their own take on the area. New York-based Brendan Fernandes designed a postcard of the street inviting people to mail in their memories of Little India. Rashmi Varma designed a "kitschy" window display at Sonu Saree Palace, a longtime shop.

Still formally known as the Gerrard-India Bazaar, the strip has expanded culturally over the years to include shopkeepers from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Visits from South Asians who live in the U.S. have dwindled since 9/11, and the rising Canadian dollar has also kept them away. Competition from suburban South Asian malls in Brampton, Mississauga and Scarborough further reduced the number of visitors.

Ashok Navani, who has run the Indian Record Shop here since 1972, shrugs off talk of Little India's imminent demise.

"This street will never die. My old customers' kids have grown up and bring their kids here now."

Though he could comfortably retire, he has no plans to do so, even though music downloading has cut into business sharply.

"It's become a habit. I come every day to open the store, have chai and chat with my friends," Navani says. "I can't live without my street. I'm addicted. It's in my blood."