



Commentary

'Paki go home': The story of racism in the Gerrard India Bazaar

Aqeel Ihsan*

York University; ORCID: [0000-0001-7777-4002](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7777-4002)

Abstract

For South Asian Canadians who migrated to Toronto in the 1970s, the only place for them to purchase and consume South Asian foodstuffs would have been in the area referred to as 'Little India', which later developed into what is referred to today as the Gerrard India Bazaar (GIB). Little India is located on Gerrard Street, encompassing the nine blocks from Greenwood Avenue to Coxwell Avenue. The very first South Asian entrepreneur in Gerrard Street was Gian Naaz, who rented the defunct Eastwood Theatre in 1972 and began showing films in Hindi and other South Asian languages. Naaz's success inspired and attracted other South Asian

entrepreneurs, some of whom opened restaurants and grocery stores. These early South Asian businesses on Gerrard Street combatted racism and racial stereotyping and the GIB was a microcosm of the violences South Asians experienced all across Toronto in the 1970s and 80s. As such, this paper tells the story of how South Asians, both them and their businesses, persevered and helped develop the GIB as an ethnic enclave because it allowed South Asians to affirm notions of home and belonging in Canada, all without ever having a distinct residential identity.

*Corresponding author: aqeel8@my.yorku.ca

Copyright © 2023 by the Author. Open access under CC-BY-SA license.

DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i4.556](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i4.556)

ISSN: 2292-3071

Résumé

Pour les Canadiens d'origine sud-asiatique qui se sont installés à Toronto dans les années 1970, l'unique endroit où acheter et consommer des produits alimentaires sud-asiatiques se trouvait dans la zone surnommée « Little India », qui s'est développée depuis, et est devenue le Gerrard India Bazaar (GIB). *Little India* est située sur la rue Gerrard et comprend les neuf pâtés de maisons entre l'avenue Greenwood et l'avenue Coxwell. Gian Naaz, le tout premier entrepreneur sud-asiatique sur la rue Gerrard, y a loué le défunt Eastwood Theatre en 1972 afin de présenter des films en hindi et en d'autres langues sud-asiatiques. Le succès de Naaz a inspiré et attiré d'autres entrepreneurs

Keywords: Gerrard; bazaar; racism; South Asian; food; Toronto

For many South Asian immigrants, a visit to the Gerrard India Bazaar (GIB) “reminded [them] of the hustle and bustle of a market back home. As soon as [one] 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* and *pani puri*” (Yelaja, 2007, para. 3). These sights and smells that attracted South Asians to the GIB were in many ways a sensory assault on white Canadians who carried negative connotations of South Asians and their cuisine. One white woman remarked that South Asians are “dirty, physically dirty—you can see it on them. And [their food] smells...” (Jones, 1975, A1). These stereotypes and negative perceptions were widely held and affected South Asians in their everyday lives. More specifically, white Canadians did not want ‘unassimilable’ settlers with their “smelly cuisines” to settle in Canada (Mehta, 2012, p.156). ‘Smelly cuisines’

sud-asiatiques, dont certains ont ouvert des restaurants et des épiceries. Ces premiers commerces sud-asiatiques sur la rue Gerrard luttèrent contre le racisme et les stéréotypes raciaux; le GIB formait alors un microcosme où ressortaient les violences subies par les personnes d'origine sud-asiatique dans tout le Toronto des années 1970 et 1980. Cet article raconte l'histoire de la manière dont les Sud-Asiatiques et leurs entreprises ont persévéré et ont contribué à faire du GIB une enclave ethnique parce qu'il leur permettait d'affirmer les notions de foyer et d'appartenance au Canada, sans pour autant partager une identité résidentielle distincte.

were a major cause of concern for white Canadians, so much so that newspaper reports perceived them as being a hindrance to the ability of South Asians to acculturate and assimilate into Canada. Due to these stereotypes, racism plagued the GIB and it saw South Asians tackling concerns from white Canadians that they would pollute the “clean Canadian cultural landscape” (Mehta, 2012, p.156). Racism consisted of verbal abuse, property damage, and even physical abuse. As such, this paper will discuss how the entrepreneurs on Gerrard Street persevered through racial discrimination to allow the GIB to emerge as one of the most prominent sites where South Asian immigrants could purchase and consume South Asian foodstuffs, and how food, as a conduit for multisensory immersion, was weaponized against the South Asian community.

The rise of the GIB was not without hostility. Racism was rife during the 1970s and 80s. According to Ubale, in Toronto in 1977, half of the complaints received by

the Ontario Human Rights Commission concerned racial problems (Ubale, 1977, p.26). In 1977, 40% of the 200,000 South Asians in Canada lived in and around Toronto, and they were especially targeted during this time. Ubale looked at reports of hate crime where South Asian men were brutally assaulted, threatened, many had their homes vandalized, and others experienced name calling with phrases like “dirty Paki” or “Paki go home”. The derogatory term “Paki” was a particularly potent one and is recorded as having been first used in London in mid-1966 (Ubale, 1978, p.18). The term was so offensive because it reduced the term South Asian, which itself is an umbrella term that refers to people from the Indian subcontinent, and typically includes the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, to a singular identity. Immigrants from these countries are diverse in terms of their origin, ethnicity, religion, language, food and their experiences in Canada are just as diverse, and to reduce them to simply “Paki” was an erasure of their unique identities. Emerging in London, the term entered the Canadian lexicon in 1975 when it appeared in a *Toronto Star* newspaper article (Ubale, 1978, p.18). This article was met with immediate backlash from the South Asian community who held several protests to highlight the issue of how news media in their reports on racism in Canada has used the term “Paki” as accepted terminology to describe Asian immigrants (Owaisi, 1975, p.2).

Many of these crimes went unpunished, and South Asians in Toronto felt that despite paying taxes, they did not enjoy the same protections from the state as white Canadians and also criticized the inaction from the police. One business owner recalled that, “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’” (Plummer, 2012, para. 20). Owners, as well as the customers waiting

in line at the Naaz Theatre, the first South Asian business on Gerrard Street, or various other establishments would hear these taunts. Gian Naaz also reported racist slogans being painted outside of his theatre and was even the victim of a racial assault himself. On May 10, 1975, Naaz and his friend Ghulam Rabbeni were taunted and called “dirty Pakis”, and told “they’re making the country dirty”, and eventually assaulted by Thomas Givens, a twenty-year old Toronto man, and two of his friends (Keating, 1977, p.4). Rabbeni was even struck in the head with a pipe, knocking him unconscious. Despite being confronted violently, Naaz continued to persist with keeping his theatre open because he believed, “For people from India, there was nothing else at the time” (Plummer, 2012, para. 4). Another racial attack took place on February 25, 1978 when the windows of Darbar-e-Akbari, a Pakistani restaurant on Gerrard Street, were smashed and the main entrance had a swastika painted outside. Mr. Haider Khan, the owner, decided not to remove the swastikas as a symbolic reminder of the hatred South Asians experienced and were experiencing during the time. Again, the police took no action and Mr. Khan was told by the police that “[they] can’t guard [his] store 24 hours a day” (Crescent Correspondent, 1978, p.2).

Due to the inaction of the Toronto Police, the restaurant owner of Moti Mahal, Gurjit Chadha, was discouraged from stepping outside of his store unnecessarily. He said, “I don’t go outside much because I want to stay out of trouble. Once you get into trouble, there’s just more trouble” (Johnson, 1980, p.1). This trouble he refers to included having his glass window smashed, being taunted by gangs of white youths on the way home or on the streets. “They call us Pakis. You don’t do anything, but inside you get mad” (Johnson, 1980, p.1). Another restaurant owner named Vig Hashim also stated that his business had suffered due to intrusion by white youths who would abuse patrons

dining inside of his restaurant, and sometimes, even throw cigarette butts and dirt in their food. Hashim also said that his attempts at trying to resolve tensions would be futile, and the intruders would just say “Shut up, Paki” (Johnson, 1980, p.2), and this was because they knew there would be no real consequences. Despite the indifference shown by the police to the patrons of the GIB and the often-violent acts of racism experienced by the South Asian community, people still came to Gerrard Street on the weekends. They still brought their families to connect their past to their present, and to show their children how they used to experience life ‘back home’.

Not only did businesses persevere, but so too did the South Asians for whom the bazaar would have fulfilled a nostalgic longing for home. For many, “coming to see a movie in Naaz Theatre was like going back home” (Beveridge, 2017, 1:57). Aside from watching movies, one could also hear different South Asian languages being spoken, visually see traditional South Asian clothes being worn, and smell roast corn, and burning incense (Acharya, 1997, A7). As such, the GIB offered a sensory experience to an Indian which was described by Jandoo as being similar to “making a journey to India, with all the same sights, smells and atmosphere” (Yelaja, 2005, A01). The GIB sold not just movie tickets or ethnic foodstuffs, but served a greater purpose by providing a tangible connection to the ‘homeland’ for the South Asian community.

When Gian Naaz first opened Naaz Theatre, he did so with the goal of having a “place where Indians could

meet socially and where women would have a reason to wear saris” (Bauder, 2010, p.19). The GIB was and continues to be a unique area because it has a well-established South Asian commercial identity, despite very few South Asians actually living in the vicinity. People continue to visit the area en masse despite there being a boom in the ‘905 Area’ malls in Brampton and Mississauga that also cater to a South Asian clientele. As such, the GIB as a space was of fundamental importance to immigrants in retaining their culture, and through the lens of food history, one can get unique insight into the violent and traumatic experiences that the South Asian community experienced during their settlement, establishing of businesses, and identity formation. Despite the various challenges to the South Asian community, the perseverance shown by the early South Asian entrepreneurs, some of whom still operate their stores on Gerrard Street in 2022, and their patrons allowed the GIB to thrive as a space where South Asians could freely express themselves through their clothes, language, and the food they consumed. Furthermore, the GIB served a dual function in not only catering to South Asians, but also serving as a learning space for white-Canadians who could come in and purchase what would otherwise be viewed as exotic products. This learning experience acculturated Canadians to South Asian cultures and created pathways that allowed them, and their “smelly cuisines” to become more accepted in Canadian society, and in turn, lessen the racial discrimination that South Asians historically experienced.

Aqeel Ihsan is a PhD History Candidate at York University, specializing in migration and food history. His research interests focus on the South Asian diaspora currently residing in Canada. His doctoral research seeks to conduct a food history of Toronto by placing ‘smelly cuisines’ at the centre and chronologically tracing the history of the most prominent site where South Asian immigrants could purchase and consume South Asian foodstuffs, the Gerrard India Bazaar. He hopes his research can extend beyond food history and add to Canada’s overall history of immigration.

References

- Acharya, Madhavi. (1997, July 21). Smell of incense, rustle of silk, Little India a feast for the senses. *Toronto Star*, A7. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/smell-incense-rustle-of-silk-little-india-feast/docview/437708233/se-2>.
- Bauder, Harald, & Suorineni, A. (2010). Toronto's Little India: A Brief Neighbourhood History. <http://www.geography.ryerson.ca/hbauder/Little%20India%20Expedition/Little%20India.pdf>.
- Beveridge, Nina. (Director). (2017, July 21). From Little India to the Gerrard India Bazaar—Chand Kapoor and Inder Jandoo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZgvip5-Kf8>.
- Crescent Correspondent. (1978, March 15). Front Windows Smashed in Racial Attack. *Crescent*, 2. <https://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/crt-1376/page-2>.
- Hit immigrant, man gets 90 days. (1977, April 1). *The Globe and Mail*, 2. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/hit-immigrant-man-gets-90-days/docview/1241352081/se-2>.
- Johnson, Arthur. (1980, May 24). 'East Indians: Racial Slurs, Growing Fear'. *The Globe and Mail*, 1-2. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/east-indians-racial-slurs-growing-fear/docview/1124990622/se-2>.
- Jones, Frank. (1975, May 10). 'Racism: Is Metro Turning Sour'. *Toronto Star*, A1, A4.
- Keating, Michael. (1977, March 4). East Indian hit: Man, 21, convicted of racial assault. *The Globe and Mail* (1936-2017), 4. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/east-indian-hit/docview/1241353462/se-2>.
- Mehta, Julia. (2012). Toronto's Multicultural Tongues. In Franca Iacovetta, Valerie J. Korinek, & Marlene Epp (Eds.), *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics* (pp. 156–169). University of Toronto Press.
- Owaisi, M. Lateef. (1975, May 10). Racism in Canada. *Crescent*, 2. <https://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/crt-2478/page-2>.
- Plummer, Kevin. (2012, January 28). Historicist: Nights Out At The Naaz Theatre. *Torontoist*. <https://torontoist.com/2012/01/historicist-nights-out-at-the-naaz-theatre/>.
- Ubale, Bhausahab. (1977). Equal Opportunity and Public Policy: A Report on Concerns of the South Asian Canadian Community Regarding Their Place in the Canadian Mosaic.
- Yelaja, Prithvi. (2005, August 20). For silk and samosas, Little India is still big World's biggest Little India. *Toronto Star*, A01. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/silk-samosas-little-india-is-still-big-worlds/docview/438856824/se-2>.
- Yelaja, Prithvi. (2007, August 25). Little India: Six blocks, many stories. *Toronto Star*. https://www.thestar.com/news/2007/08/25/little_india_six_blocks_many_stories.html.