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Asian Indian immigrants form community near Hindu temple

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By Joe Lawlor
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Flint Twp. - When Rajendra and Hema Bafana moved from India to the Flint area seven years ago, they didn't want to miss the camaraderie of an Indian neighborhood.

So they moved into Western Hills subdivision, where the Kasi Hindu temple and Chinmaya Seva Samiti research center are just down the road. It's as close to living in India as it gets in Genesee County.

According to U.S. Census figures released Wednesday, Flint Township has the largest concentration of Asian Indians in the county, followed by Grand Blanc.

Most, like the Bafanas, live in the northwest section of the township, many in Western Hills.

Three neighboring census tracts contain 356 of the 390 Indians living in Flint Township. That's more than one-third of



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all Asian Indians in Genesee County.

While Genesee County's population has remained relatively steady since 1990, the Indian population in Flint Township has increased by 17 percent.

The township mirrors a national trend of minorities moving to the suburbs. Asians nationally have increased their presence in the suburbs by 84 percent since 1990.

"In many cases, they get off the boat and move directly into the suburbs," said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center of Albany, N.Y., an urban and regional research center. "In some cases, it's like an entire Indian village will be transplanted into the suburbs."

The reason for settlement in the suburbs: They can afford it.

Indians tend to be well-educated professionals - often physicians, engineers, computer programmers or small business owners, Logan said.

"On average, they earn much more than other minorities, and just as much, if not more, than non-Hispanic whites," Logan said.

Logan said Indians are a largely-accepted minority. "On the other hand, any group that clusters together is not always going to get a positive response," Logan said.

Culture shock

Bafana and his friends say they have not always had an easy time adjusting to American life.

"In India, someone is always knocking on your door," Bafana said. "Here, nobody knocks on your door. I would love to

know my (white) neighbor, but I just see him going in and out of his garage. It's like everyone is living their own little lifestyles."

The Indian population in Western Hills is a close-knit community. On Thursday, the Bafanas and the Janvejas visited the Modis, to laugh together and play games. The get-together was spur-of-the-moment, which is not uncommon.

Subhash Janveja said he can call his friends anytime, day or night. They all watch each other's children and invite each other over for dinners.

"There's none of this, 'Why are you calling me at 10 in the evening?' " Janveja said. "A neighbor called me one time at 2:30 in the morning, and was having chest pains. I said, 'I'll be right over,' " Janveja said.

Janveja said late one night a house alarm was going off at a white neighbor's home.

"I knocked on his door and said, 'Your alarm went off and I wanted to make sure everyone was OK.' He was quite surprised that I did that, and he told me, 'Thank you' and he was glad somebody was looking out for him," Janveja said.

Annette Janveja, his wife, shook her head and said none of her white friends would risk getting in the middle of a crime to check up on someone.

The two have been married for 20 years. Annette Janveja, who is not Indian, said her family had to get past some misperceptions at first.

"My parents thought I would have to be cooking Indian food for him every day, or that I wouldn't be considered equal to him," she said. "Just all these little things

that came out after we got married."

Not that there aren't cultural differences.

Reena Modi, 22, said she was not allowed to date in high school, a common rule among Indian families. Modi said she is open-minded about dating and would consider marrying outside of the Indian culture.

"Everything was basically restricted to me. If a boy called, it set the house into disarray," said Modi, who will start medical school at Michigan State University this fall. "But now I can see the reason for it."

Her mother, Dr. Usha Modi, said Indian families stress education without distractions because school is such a key to success.

"We believe everything comes with time. First, you have to focus on study and education, and then everything else will come after that," Usha Modi said. "She's an adult, and so now she knows what's good and bad. It's very hard for a 16-year-old to know that."

When asked about her high school grades, Reena Modi, who unlike the older Indians speaks with a flat Midwestern accent, at first would only say she did "pretty good."

When pressed more, she admitted that she received almost all A's. When she brought home a B, she disappointed her parents.

"I always tell them, even when they bring home an A, that 'I know you can do better,' " Usha Modi said.

To preserve their culture in Flint

Township, Indian families have the temple, and two-hour Sunday school classes at Chinmaya. They also celebrate religious holidays at the center and learn traditional Indian dances. Many families also speak Hindi at home.

"We do more here than what we would do in India. That's because in India, we're already living the culture. When we're here, we have to bring the culture to us," Bafana said.

Despite attempts to preserve their culture, they recognize that some Westernization will happen.

When they go back to India, the natives immediately realize they are Americans, from the way they talk, walk and say "thank you."

"In India, the 'thank you' is understood. You don't have to say 'thank you' for everything," Janveja said.

Kasi temple

Viswanathadeva, the priest at Kasi temple, was philosophical about whether Indian culture would fade over time in the U.S.

Deva - a religious name - said if most Indians become Christians and the Hindu temple is no longer needed 50 years from now, he will be happy as long as the people remain good.

"I was invited to a Christian service, and after the service I went up to the priest and I told him, 'I don't see any difference in what I do and what you do. We light an oil lamp; you light a candle,' " Deva said.

Television creates misperceptions that are hard to shake, Deva said.

"Someone asked me once whether we have elevators in India," Deva said. "Why does everyone believe India is a Third World country? Because of television."

Indians have misperceptions about Americans, too, Deva said.

"Someone came to India from the United States, and nobody wanted to marry him. Why couldn't he find someone to marry? Because everyone was afraid he had AIDS. Why? Because of television," Deva said.

Unlike Christian services, the high temple does not have a set service time. The temple is open for several hours a day, and people can come in at their leisure to pray on their own, or ask the priest to help them pray.

On Saturday, Deva performed services for several small groups, chanting in the ancient Sanskrit language, raising his voice in a sing-song at the end of each phrase.

Wearing an all-white gown, Deva gave each participant a sample of golden holy water to drink, and dye to put a red dot on their forehead. The red dot represents the "third eye" or sixth sense.

He showered yellow flower petals at the throne of Lord Sri Viswanatha, a golden, four-armed statue sitting on a throne.

Standing in front of the all-white temple, he said while religions have differences, they all have the same destination.

"We are all brothers and sisters in this universe. There's nothing all that different about all of us. We are really all part of the of the same community. Because of

ignorance, that's when we can't see the truth," Deva said.

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