



Making waves

Lawyer and community organiser, Roopal Shah, gets ready to hit the Californian waves. According to a study, immigrant women from India are one of the fastest growing segments of small business owners in the United States. Immigrant women are inclined to taking risks. They really just put themselves on the line, the study says.

Revisiting Satyagraha in Phoenix

Apartheid segregated Whites, Africans and Indians, ghettoising the Indian and African communities. Post-segregation, young Indians are hopeful. They believe one day the Mahatma's ideals will bridge this divide in South Africa.

The Indian diaspora is helping India expand its role on the world stage



Not skin deep

A contestant gets her lipstick fixed at the Miss Teen India Georgia Pageant at Georgia Tech University, Atlanta. The fascination with Brand India started in 2006. Seeking inspiration from India, leading global luxury brands, such as Pal Zileri, Lladro, Alberta Ferretti, Jean Paul Gaultier, Salvatore Ferragamo and Zegna have started using Indian elements to enrich their couture. Couture that breathes India.

No Indian cab driver will take me to Gandhi's house. Parked in front of

Holiday Inn at Durban's South Beach, the cabbies protest about safety. Someone asserts that since it has been raining, the main road will be washed out and we will get stuck at the bottom of the hill, unable to flee. The word impossible comes out a few times, with the sense that going there would be a bad idea, something you just don't do, like wandering through New York's Central Park at night. I walk back into the lobby, and a few minutes later a young driver, squat and tough looking with gel in his hair, comes in and agrees to take me. But when we get to the car, an older man intervenes and packs me into the front seat of his rusty Toyota. We head off — but not to the Phoenix Settlement.

Phoenix is the South African township, on the northern periphery of Durban, that began as an Indian settlement when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a young lawyer schooled in London, moved from Johannesburg in 1904 to focus his political activities on the plight of



Johannesburg-based painter Sharlene Khan

Indian labourers in the British colony. He built a school and a printing press, published a newspaper called the Indian Opinion, and organised a community around his ascetic, non-violent principles. The trust Gandhi established continued its mission even after he returned to India 10 years later, and his style of political activism and passive resistance left its mark on the struggle against Apartheid. In 1985, during a particularly violent period towards the end of that era, poor blacks from a neighbouring settlement laid waste Phoenix, evicting

the Indians and occupying their homes. An historic, prosperous township became a squatters' community, a slum. Gandhi's printing press, house, and school were destroyed. Today Phoenix comprises a collection of settlements, some Indian, some black. Many areas are comparatively well off, with apartment blocks and lighted streets, schools and cricket grounds. Others are shantytowns. The area around Gandhi's site is a black shantytown. This is where the Indian drivers refuse to go. "Where are we going?" I ask my



A young Indian girl on the Durban beach

driver, whose name is Kay. When his companions had asked why I wanted to go to Phoenix, I had told them of my interest in the Indian community. Now he is taking me to Chatsworth, a middle-class Indian neighbourhood.

“You will like it. Very safe,” he says. He reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out a stack of business cards from the fares he driven recently. “All the important people who come to Durban ask for me,” he says, “diplomats, journalists, international businessmen.”

The card on top is from a man from Pennsylvania, the manufacturer of the Striker shotgun, better known as the “street sweeper” for its revolver-like ability to pump shell after shell into an angry crowd. The weapon was developed in South Africa in the mid-1980s to pacify restive townships. The newer version, described on the card, features an optional grenade launcher. South Africa doesn’t ban assault weapons, like the US (where the Striker is specifically mentioned in the legislation), so the American arms dealer must have tapped a fertile security market here in Durban, where crime and rumours of crime dominate

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conversation. Race is the first and the last calculus in South Africa, home to a million persons of Indian origin, NRIs, and investors from Mumbai, Bangalore, and Singapore. Three quarters of South Africa’s Indians live in KwaZulu Natal state, the sugar-growing region, with Durban as its capital and home to one of the continent’s largest commercial ports.

Durban is often considered if not an Indian city then certainly an African melting pot with a heavy dose of curry. It’s a working-class resort town, lacking the cosmopolitanism of South Africa’s top destination, Cape Town, where the Cape of Good Hope sweeps into two oceans. Durban is Zulu markets, Afrikaner surfer dudes, container ships, and bunny chow — veg curry packed in a hole scooped from a half-loaf of white bread. Durban has gated communities (for whites, blacks, Indians, anyone with money), a golf course that has hosted Tiger Woods, and posh hotels along a lovely beach, but it also has decaying industrial facilities, high unemployment, and a reasonable fear of violent opportunity crime — carjackings, break-ins, muggings.

My introduction to Durban came at the airport, where I was met by Sharlene Khan and her father. Sharlene is a painter, well known in South Africa’s small but fractious art world. We had corresponded by email and then spoken by phone when I was in Johannesburg. She offered to pick me up at the airport and take me home for dinner. When she asked how she would recognise me, I described



An Indian family in Phoenix.

myself (bald, glasses). I figured I would be able to spot a young Indian woman and her father, but when I came into the terminal and all the passengers were met, I was left standing alone. Sharlene had passed me by, not figuring me for white (my last name confuses people). Laughing, she found me and we headed out.

“I don’t really consider myself as part of a diaspora,” Sharlene had written me by email. “I am a South African Indian who is very located in this specific country at this specific juncture in time. And while I realise that the sense of ‘Indianness’ is probably a valid one among many migrant communities, in South Africa it was promoted by the Apartheid government to ensure that Indians in this country were made to feel like outsiders.”

Sharlene’s work is not the stylised representations of Hindu gods that usually define Indian art in the galleries in New York and London. She paints contemporary African scenes, often from Durban — black street musicians, women lining up to make calls from a row of pay phones, well-dressed men barbecuing meat on a grill. Her figures are noble, her palette rich but muted. An earthy brown tone overlays the blues and reds, stylising and grounding at the same time. There is a journalistic component to these scenes, which are human, dig-

nified. Her lines have the authority of compassion. At dinner, she showed me images on her laptop of a fashion show she had mounted as an art project in Johannesburg. The models wore clothing she had designed, but the garments were embellished with text and paint, along with materials common to street vendors — steel wool pot scrubbers and sewing threads, scraps of castoff fabric. The dresses had the cut of haute couture and the soul of a hawkers’ market. In the show, Sharlene herself had been one of the models, a diminutive brown girl, daughter of a Muslim sugar mill-working father and a Christian mother in Durban. She was the image of a gritty new urban Africa — polyglot, entrepreneurial, humane.

South Africa’s trajectory from racial Apartheid to democracy, reconciliation, and economic growth is complicated. The African National Congress, the party of Mandela and Tutu, which easily won its mandate in the first non-racial elections in 1994, implemented policies to redress historic racial inequalities, but Indians are an afterthought. The government’s business incentives favour black-owned companies and promote the hiring of black workers. Indians have been designated as black for these purposes and have made significant progress, but large numbers are still poor. Historically, Indians faced dis-

crimination (though not the full horror of Apartheid). The Group Areas Act in 1950 forced them into Indian townships and restricted their freedom of movement. Later legislation placed limits on their education.

Indians were active in the struggle against Apartheid. Ahmed Kathrada, influenced by Gandhi’s Indian Congress and its successors in the 1940s, worked as political activist. He was jailed frequently, eventually drawing a life sentence, charged with attempting to overthrow the government by violent means. In the famous Rivonia Trial, which ended in 1964, he was packed off to Robben Island, the maximum-security facility off the coast of Cape Town, along with his co-conspirators Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki (father of democratic South Africa’s second president). He was released in 1989 and served later as a member of parliament for the ANC. The Indian government awarded him the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman. Indians have been integral to South Africa’s political and cultural development as a nation.

I did eventually find my way to Phoenix. Sharlene’s sister and her family live there. Sharlene’s teenage nephew Wesley and three of his friends took me around the lower middle-class Indian neighbourhood. We spent an afternoon walking and meeting people.

I also made it to Gandhi’s house, which is in the Black section. After the original buildings were destroyed, the communities worked towards reconciliation, raising money (including donations from the Indian government) and working together to build new structures to serve as a museum which opened in 2000. The replicas gleam in carefully tended gardens of a “Peace Park” while the brush reclaims the ruins. A trust in Gandhi’s name provides further development for the surrounding community, including a clinic, an HIV/AIDS centre, and arts and cultural programmes. At the museum, a black man gives tours, conversant in the ideas, and pronunciation, of satyagraha.