

Bhale Padharya: From Gujarat to Houston

By Roshni Patel




BIYANI
• photography •

South Asians celebrate Navratri with dancing, music, and traditional Indian cuisine at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston in 2011, sponsored by Gujarati Samaj of Houston.

Photo courtesy of Kaushlesh Biyani, Biyani Potography.

Walking into the George R. Brown Convention Center for the Navratri festival, I am whisked away by the South Asian culture – the vibrant colors, the smell of Indian food, the *garba* music, and conversations in my native tongue. Waiting in line to purchase tickets, I look over the ledge and see my fellow South Asian Americans on the main floor starting the traditional garba dances around the statue of the Goddess Durga. They are barefoot out of respect for the goddess. My family finds a good place to sit and keep our belongings, including our shoes, for the rest of the night. It is 9:00 p.m. on a Friday night, and the festivities have just begun.

The aerial view of Navratri is mesmerizing. Rings of dancers rotate counterclockwise within rings of other dancers in an energetic repetitive routine, spinning, raising their arms, hopping, and dancing with joy. In the final dance known as a *raas*, they use sticks when making contact with their partners. Men, women, and children participate in these dances, which to an outsider may seem crowded and chaotic but are actually very organized, with the younger crowd dancing to the center.

A kaleidoscope of colors can be seen in the variety of outfits and their designs. The women traditionally wear *saris*

or *chaniya cholis*, which are three-piece dresses that have a blouse and flared skirt adorned with beads, jewels, mirrors, and embroidery. Men typically wear *sherwanis*, long-sleeve tops that stretch far below the knees over pants.

If people can pull themselves away from the excitement of dancing, the food satisfies every Indian craving, including the popular appetizer *samosas*; more traditional foods such as *pav bhaji*, gravy eaten with bread; and *papdi lot*, spicy dough made from rice flour. Pizza and nachos appeal to the younger generations.

After hours filled with dancing and eating, exhausted families go home and rest up to repeat the celebration the next evening. Navratri happens once a year, usually at the end of September or the beginning of October depending on the lunar cycle. The festival lasts for ten days and is celebrated for its duration in the local temples and at the George R. Brown for two weekends. This festival is celebrated in honor of the Goddess Durga, who emerged victorious in a battle against evil that was fought for nine days and nine nights. The nine days also represent her nine forms.

A Pioneer's Experiences

In 1980 the U.S. Census reported Houston had an Asian Indian population of just 6,610.¹ My uncle Ghanshyam Patel, at twenty-five years old and having recently received a degree in mechanical engineering from a university in India, came to Houston in search of a better standard of living, but the thing that made the biggest impression on him when he arrived was the freeways. “[They] were too overcrowded. Driving five miles would take me an hour,” he said.

Houston was less culturally diverse than it is today.



Ghanshyam Patel's passport photo. His passport held extreme importance to him when he first immigrated to Houston from India.

Photo courtesy of author.

Ghanshyam recalled the area only had two Indian grocery stores and two Hindu temples to attend during festivals.² That has since changed significantly, with Houston boasting over thirty accommodating Hindu temples. Similarly, the number of Indian restaurants was limited, but today South Asian restaurants and authentic Indian food are in great demand because of the influx of Indians and others who have come to appreciate the culture and food.

In the 1980s before the Internet, Ghanshyam found it difficult to stay connected with his friends, family, and the culture overseas. A letter took fifteen days to reach India, and

he then waited another fifteen days to receive a response. Feeling out of place and lonely for the first three years, he sat in his car during his lunch breaks and cried. Being so out of touch with his homeland and adjusting to life in a foreign country took a certain emotional toll on him. If my uncle wanted to talk to a family member back home it took a day for the two lines to connect. “I had to do that for Daxa's wedding,” he mentioned. Daxa, one of his younger siblings residing in India, came of age to marry while Ghanshyam was away, and in keeping with Indian culture, Daxa sought the blessings from her elder brother.³

Other South Asians in Houston were homesick, too, so they started forming groups. The India Culture Center (ICC) was founded in 1973 where anyone of South Asian descent could feel at home. It catered to people from various regions in India and celebrated the annual festivals. Much like the ICC the Gujarati Samaj of Houston formed in 1979 to make Gujaratis feel at home.⁴ Located in far northwest India, Gujarat is one of the county's twenty-nine states. Gujarati Samaj organizes such events as Navratri and Holi. Having these organizations kept the South Asian culture alive in Houston and gave people like my uncle a chance to interact with other South Asians who were experiencing the same emotional adjustment.

The leaders that founded these organizations worked diligently to bring a piece of home to Houston. With their persistence, festivals became more widely celebrated. Ghanshyam recalled garba being celebrated in an elementary school gymnasium in the 1980s.⁵ The gymnasium was so small that the women carried on with the festivities inside while the men stood in the parking lot, where they talked about Indian and American politics as well as available jobs. The South Asian organizations' efforts continue to impact the younger generations by maintaining traditions.

Same Era, Different Generation

Purendra Patel, a family friend, remembers coming to Houston from India with his family in 1980 when he was six, and he has considered himself a Houstonian ever since. Purendra's parents came in search of a better life and a better education for their children. Like Ghanshyam, when first setting eyes on Houston, Purendra was awestruck by the structure of the highways, which native Houstonians take for granted. “It was not like India's roads; everything was organized,” he explained.⁶



Purendra Patel (left) stands with his grandfather and sister at home in Gujarat.

Photo courtesy of author.

One of the few South Asian children at Townwest Elementary in Fort Bend County, Purendra attended Sugar Land Middle School and Kempner High School before enrolling in the University of Houston. He remembers “a lot of Indians on campus” and the Indian Student Association, which remains popular today, bringing Indian students on campus together. A 2014 study conducted by the university showed India ranked number two in students' country of origin, trailing China by only seventeen students.⁷

Having come to Houston at such a young age, Purendra was exposed to American ways of living rather than the traditional Indian ways. Although he did not experience the same feelings of isolation as Ghanshyam, his memories of the community are similar, with the scarcity of Indians, temples, South Asian shops, and restaurants. However, now he feels the community's closeness is gone because so many Indians live in Houston.⁸

Purendra remembers the festivals were celebrated at the two temples but they did not feel as satisfying as celebrating the same festivals in India. In his early days in Houston, the festivals were community events where everyone knew everyone, and now it is nothing like that. Hundreds of people come to the festivals every year, and this has slowly eroded the closeness. "There would always be parties at someone's house on the weekend," he said. "Now everyone is so caught up in their own lives they don't have time to spend with family or friends." South Asians are traditionally very family-oriented people so to have this slowly disappearing is a significant cultural change.

South Asians as a community are evolving to a South Asian/American way of living, causing them to lose touch with traditional values. Though the younger generation still celebrates multiple festivals, the youth frequently do not know the meaning behind the triumphal stories of good conquering evil.⁹ For example, the Ganesh Chaturthi festival, a birthday celebration for the god Ganesha who removes life's obstacles, receives far less attention in Houston.

Ghanshyam and Purendra came here about the same time in the 1980s, but they saw Houston through different lenses



Worshippers are seated at prayer in the Singh Temple in northwest Houston in 1975. Men sat on one side of the temple while women and children were allowed on the other.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1975-1589-101A.

dictated by the differences in their ages when they arrived and the daily obstacles that they faced. Ghanshyam encountered racism in the professional field. At that time, recruiters were not open to placing foreigners in jobs. They did not appreciate him intellectually, which caused him to miss out on jobs for which he was qualified. Purendra, on the other hand, made friends with the local children but always felt the tension of race. He got into fights with children at school because of his skin color or because he was different. The students did not fully understand what was happening as they were introduced to immigrants from across the ocean, but as society started to accept foreigners, the children too began to look beyond Purendra's skin color.¹⁰

Because Purendra came to Houston at such a young age he grew to adulthood in a more accepting society. He was introduced to things Ghanshyam missed, so the two men have different perspectives. Ghanshyam was working and interacting with the older generation, which did not accept change as quickly as the younger generation. He missed out on American experiences that children growing up here only have at school, such as learning about American sports, interacting with multiple ethnicities, and creating a sense of belonging within a diverse group of friends.¹¹

The Millennial Experience

I came to Houston from London in June 1999 when I was six years old and have seen Houston grow significantly from my backyard in Alief, a small southwest Houston community. My family came here for the same reasons as many other immigrants: for educational opportunities and a better life. I respect Houston as a city and the people that populate it. Even though I came to America at about the same age as Purendra, when I started school my class had many South Asians. That soon changed when many started migrating to Sugar Land and the Katy area. Nevertheless, I did not personally experience any racism because I grew up in a time when Houston was changing and accepting people of different races and ethnicities.



Weddings and other festivities are an important part of the South Asian culture. Author Roshni Patel (right) and her family, sister Devanshi, mother Taxila, and father Hemendrarai, are dressed for a traditional wedding celebration.

Photo courtesy of author.

Like my uncle and family friend, my family had access to two main temples, though not the same two. The temple I attend is still in its original location off of Synott and Old Richmond, but the other has moved to West Bellfort and Highway 59 to a bigger facility to meet the growing demand. At one time I recognized everyone at my temple, but because of an influx of South Asians today I rarely recognize the people seated nearby during prayers.

The festivals are celebrated with all the necessities, but because of their vast size they lack the sense of unity Ghanshyam and Purendra mentioned. Nevertheless, I am very grateful for organizations like the India Culture Center and Gujarati Samaj because if it were not for them, I might not have a chance to experience the festivals. While my parents and grandparents taught me why each festival is celebrated, for the majority of young people, traditional festivals are a place to socialize. They get so caught up in dressing up and meeting their friends that they fail to remember the real reason they are there. Even though I know the basics, a girl my age in India would know the deeper meanings.

The shift in cultural awareness raises the question: is assimilation the reason we are losing traditions, or is this change inevitable? My parents are strict but open-minded when it comes to living an “American” lifestyle. When we go to temple I know how to act, what to do, what to wear, and most importantly, I know the prayers because they have taught me. But living in America makes it impossible to learn everything. Yes, I speak Gujarati and Hindi, but I know how to read, write, and speak Spanish much better than my native tongue.

The Hillcroft area, now the Mahatma Gandhi District, was already well on its way to becoming Little India when I first visited. My family and I go there mainly for the restaurants, traditional clothing, and other cultural necessities. I find myself going there multiple times a month, whether it is for Indian jewelry for an upcoming wedding or going to eat at Shri Balaji Bhavan, one of our favorite Indian restaurants.

With the growth of Houston’s Indian population has come greater acceptance of our culture. People frequently ask me questions about traditional Indian weddings and my culture in general. This reflects their awareness of and curiosity about South Asians in Houston. Though we are making our mark on Houston socially, I still find myself saying my name in an American way when I introduce myself so that a person who is not Indian can easily pronounce it. My name is Roshni, pronounced Roe'-Shnee, but when introducing myself I say Rosh'-nee. Recently I have noticed that more people say my name correctly, and I hope that is connected with the fact that more people are interacting with South Asians and thus, learning our dialects.



Aarti, a religious ritual during worship, at BAPS Swaminarayan Temple. Only men are allowed in the front while the women stay in the back.

Photo courtesy of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, wikicommons.

In the End

A classmate of mine recently asked me whether I think my culture has changed, to which I replied, “Most definitely.” We cannot stop the inevitable. As Houston’s South Asian community continues to grow, we as a culture are falling out of touch with our heritage. My generation is probably the last that can speak and understand the language. New improvised traditions have replaced the old ones and temples have become places to socialize as each generation becomes more Americanized.

A recent trip to India, my first since I was six years old, helped me to appreciate the experiences of the early immigrants to Houston. The only India I remembered came from watching Bollywood movies, which is not the real India. Now I can visualize what my parents are talking about when they tell stories about life growing up in their village, and I can put faces with names of relatives. I saw India’s hospitality, humbleness, and kindness and hope that one day I can share these things with my children, teaching them the older traditions and how to speak Gujarati.

As a city of opportunity, Houston has accepted multiple diverse cultures. The South Asian community has significantly flourished over the years, spreading knowledge of its culture and traditions throughout the city. After interviewing Ghanshyam and Purendra, two men from different generations with different immigrant experiences, I have a better perspective on Houston and how far my culture has come over the last thirty years – starting with barely any awareness of the South Asian community in the 1980s to getting a spotlight in *Houston History* in the twenty-first century.

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