



# Edison, New Jersey

## An Indian American Town

Text and Photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

From indoor cricket to a Hindu temple, pan shops, *dosa* and *biryani* stalls, and saris in the store windows, this eastern U.S. suburban area could be an Indian municipality.

**D**riving down Oak Tree Road in Edison, New Jersey, is like going through Lajpat Nagar market in New Delhi—albeit with some key differences. Chock-a-block with sari showrooms, grocery stores selling *curry pata*, and Bollywood music shops...even the mannequins have the same plastic hair. Though the streets are crowded in the early evenings, they are not, however, packed with people jostling for a spot to examine street vendors' wares. Also, parking spots are plentiful, and there are only a few blasts from car horns.

This is “Little India,” and like the Chinatowns and Little Italys that came before it, it is the expression of an immigrant culture that is finally establishing itself in the melting pot of America. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Edison’s population of about a 100,000 was 17.5 percent Indian American. That is the highest percentage of any municipality in the United States, and growing. Edison’s mayor, Jun Choi, estimates that Indians and Indian Americans now make up one-third of the city.

It has come a long way from the small grocery store and video shop outpost that residents remember from the 1980s. Now the Indian section of Oak Tree Road stretches for about three kilometers and boasts a designer clothing mall with brands like Ritu Beri’s. Patrons of all races and skin colors shop for bangles and *halal* meat.

The 40-minute train ride to New York City from the Edison Metro Center station is the biggest reason for the Indian diaspora in Edison. With cheaper home prices and the added bonus of backyards, Indians working in New York flocked to the town

Left: Children play basketball at the Swaminarayan Temple in Iselin, New Jersey.

Above: A practice session at the Dreamcricket facility in Hillsborough, New Jersey.



Mahendra Bohra and his friends sell their own brand of cricket gear.

# TOWN PROFILE

Edison is an 83-square-kilometer township famous as the site of inventor Thomas Alva Edison's laboratory, where he developed the incandescent light bulb and made the first sound recording. The town's Web site (<http://www.edisonnj.org/>) boasts that its "high achieving public schools, central location, vibrant business environment and diverse community make Edison a great place to live, work and raise a family." Edison has three libraries and 17 schools for fewer than 14,000 students. Parks are a big thing. The town has 25 of them, and a "Find the Perfect Park" page on the municipal Web site.

# STATE PROFILE

New Jersey was one of the original 13 American states, and one of its residents, Francis Hopkinson, designed the first U.S. flag, with 13 stars and stripes. The state is the home of Princeton and Rutgers universities, the Newark International Airport, and the entertainment center of Atlantic City.

throughout the 1990s and the last decade.

Indian-centric businesses are flourishing, and not just the *dosa* and chicken *tikka* restaurants. You can buy cricket bats, learn Bollywood dancing and try on wedding saris within a 48-kilometer radius. Big Indian companies like Infosys, Birlasoft and Ranbaxy have offices in the area, a sign of prosperity that is not immediately apparent on Oak Tree Road.

Pradip Kothari, owner of a travel agency and an activist for the Indian community, helped see it through the worst times in the early 1990s, when local prejudices against proliferating Indian American businesses led to his brand new agency office being burned by vandals. Other businesses were destroyed, too, and the community was afraid. Kothari knew that something must be done. "We come in this country like everyone else and want to have the American dream," says Kothari, 61, who arrived in the United States in 1970 and had just moved to Edison at the time the trouble started. First, he helped to get the businesses together and set up a night watch program, which became so strong they started chasing some vandals down so they could be arrested. The community also brought their grievances to the courts and established a successful Navaratri festival for the Gujarati population, attracting thousands of attendees each year.

Though Kothari acknowledges that some tensions remain, he believes the local community has largely embraced the Indians. For instance, Dr. Sudanshu Prasad, an Indian American physician, is a township council member, and Kaizen Technologies, an Indian American-owned firm with offices in both countries, was just named business of the year by the Edison Chamber of Commerce.

"The Indian community has brought in a wealth of diversity to the township of Edison," says Mayor Choi. "The community has several prominent doctors...as well as a large number of professionals in the information technology and finance industries. The increased global trade between our country and India has been partly responsible for the rapid growth of the Indian community in Edison. It will continue to bring more technology-based business to Edison and, consequently, enrich our economy as well."

Kumar Balani publishes *Biz India* magazine, based in nearby East Brunswick, which details success stories of Indian business people in the United States and dishes out investment advice. When pitching to advertisers, Balani has a powerful set of figures behind him. First, he says that the Indian population in New Jersey grew from 170,000 in 2000 to about 270,000 in 2007, according to his research. Also, according to the Indian American Center for Political Awareness, almost 40 percent of all Indians in the United States have a master's, doctorate or other professional degree (five times the national average) and a 2003 study by Merrill Lynch found that one in every 26 Indians in the United States is a millionaire. When he relates these fig-

*Above left: A South Indian restaurant in Edison, New Jersey.*

*Center Left: Raoji Patel at the Mama Pan shop on Oak Tree Road in Edison.*

*Bottom Left: A chef makes kebabs at a restaurant on Oak Tree Road.*



*Above: Indian Americans stroll across Oak Tree Road in the evening.*

*Right: A sari shop on Oak Tree Road, center of the Indian American neighborhood.*



*Right: Leelamma Mathew, an immigrant from Kerala, works as a cashier at a K-Mart department store in New Brunswick, New Jersey.*



ures to non-Indian advertisers, Balani says that 99 percent of them respond, “Wow! Really?” So we ask them, “Is this a market you want to get into?” His business is growing as more advertisers answer “yes”—from 5,000 copies in the paper’s first run in 2002 to 30,000 now.

Other businesses are growing as well. Mahendra Bohra, 31, is a co-founder of Dreamcricket, which is expanding its Brown and Willis cricket gear brand. It’s a long way from when he made his own Web site, [dreamcricket.com](http://dreamcricket.com), as a hobby when he graduated in 2000 from Syracuse University in New York state. Taking inspiration from the American pastime of fantasy football—in which fans create their own “team” of players from actual football teams and compete on line based on those players’ real-life performances during games—he created a fantasy cricket game. Soon, however, he and his friends realized they could turn this passion into something more.

Now, New Jersey residents can play cricket year-round in the indoor cricket pitch at the store Bohra and his pals set up in Hillsborough, near Edison. It features \$8,000 worth of automatic pitching machines with 25 variations of speed and movement. In addition to running cricket news and the on-line game, Dreamcricket also sells DVDs of World Cups and other famous matches. Bohra, who came from Bombay to attend university in the United States in the 1990s, lives in Princeton, New Jersey, from where he helps run the business. Cricket products are sold on line and out of stores in New Jersey and Fremont, California. Though Bohra and most of his friends in the company still have their day jobs (he works for a technology firm), he believes Dreamcricket will turn into a full-time commitment as America gets more familiar with cricket as a sport.

Atul Huckoo has similar hopes for the Edison Cricket Club, which made it to the statewide cricket play-offs in 2007. A Kashmiri who lived in the United States as a child and returned in 1999 after other stops around the world, Huckoo, 47, directs advertising sales for a syndicated television network, Imaginasian TV, which has programming from India, China and South Korea. Though he used to play cricket, he now spends his spare time managing the club and has roped in sponsors such as Emirates Airlines, which provides general funding, and Kingfisher, which provides free beer. “We either celebrate with chilled beer or drown our sorrows in it,” he says, laughing.

The cricket league for the entire state of New Jersey started in 1994 with 32 teams and has grown to 44. With sponsors, Huckoo has attracted better players, and with support from the city authorities, he has access to a general purpose field large enough to play the game properly, instead of the baseball fields used earlier.

With so many South Asians around, interest in cricket is high and Edison has movie theaters that show India-Pakistan matches. Huckoo realizes it is a challenge to get average Americans interested in the game. Though they don’t usually watch the matches, non-Indians do walk past when a game is on, stop to look and ask questions. Huckoo tries his best to answer, he says, but, “It’s difficult for Americans

**For more information:**

Edison

<http://www.edisonnj.org/>

New Jersey

<http://www.state.nj.us/>



Above: Jagdish Sadana (left) and Padma Khanna at the Indianica Dance School in Edison, New Jersey.

Right: Padma Khanna and her students practice at the dance school.

Below: Kumar Balani at his Biz India newspaper office in East Brunswick, New Jersey.

Below right: A Bollywood concert in East Brunswick.



to grasp how six to seven hours are dedicated to the game.” The shorter Twenty20 form would bring wider popularity, he thinks.

Volunteers of the Edison Swaminarayan temple in nearby Iselin are also familiar with answering lots of questions. Neighbors ask about Hinduism during the annual fundraiser for local hospitals and during the Diwali feast, when temple members invite their non-Hindu friends. The fundraiser, in which volunteers pledge to walk a certain distance in exchange for donations, “allows us and the community to explore one another and understand one another,” says Siddharth Dubal, a second-generation Indian American and a lawyer.

Another second-generation Indian American, college freshman Vinay Limbachia, answers questions about reincarnation in



his role as a leader in the Hindu Student Council at nearby Rutgers University. “There are some misconceptions, but they are few and far between,” he says. He recently organized a discussion of monotheism versus polytheism on campus. Limbachia started attending the temple’s religious and Gujarati

language classes in his early teens. “I became a more aware individual. I felt like I was part of something bigger,” he says. “I’m proud to say I can at least write my name [in Gujarati] now.” Limbachia sees more second- and third-generation Indian Americans becoming involved in the temple, and he’s always pushing for more members of his student organization. One of his biggest dreams is to return to India; but first, he’s got to brush up on his Gujarati.

**LITTLE INDIAS IN AMERICA**

Other “Little Indias” are in these U.S. cities: Jersey City, New Jersey; Jackson Heights in New York City, New York; in Berkeley, near San Francisco, and Artesia, south of Los Angeles, in California; along Devon Avenue in Chicago, Illinois, and in Houston, Texas.

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