

LIFE BEHIND THE LOBBY: INDIAN AMERICAN MOTEL OWNERS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Review by James West

This insightful study opens up broader debates into American immigration policy and the continuing resonance of the 'American Dream' for many self-employed migrants, through focusing on the lived experiences of Indian American motel owners - a group increasingly held up as an embodiment of the 'model minority' stereotype. Despite comprising less than one per cent of the total population, Indian Americans own around half of all the motels in the United States. In Ohio, which serves as a key setting for Dhingra's research, the disparity is even greater. Whilst Indian American Ohioans constitute around 0.3 per cent of the total state population, they operate more than a quarter of hotels and motels in the region. Taken as a collective, Indian American motel owners can be argued to have created the 'largest ethnic enterprise in U.S history'. Almost all of these motel owners, many of whom originated from the state of Gujarat in Western India, arrived in the US in the post-civil rights period with limited resources. Their ability to establish themselves as successful and self-sufficient citizens has been used by media sources and high profile politicians alike to champion the meritocracy and tolerance of American neoliberalism, yet at the same time can be seen to obscure continuing racial inequalities and social marginalisation.

Such uncritical celebration of Indian American business success ignores the daily struggles and discrimination faced by many motel owners and their families from the pressure to balance social aspirations and cultural stereotypes against local community hierarchies and the complex terrain of the American hospitality industry. As Dhingra highlights, the majority of Indian American motel owners run lower-budget establishments, and therefore do not fit the dominant depiction of Indian American immigrants as elite professionals. The depiction of Indian American motel owners as a 'model minority' sits uneasily alongside the common association of low-budget motels with prostitution, drug dealing and other illicit activities. Furthermore, the suggestion that Indian American motel owners have achieved full citizenship stands in contrast to more common representations of Indian and other Asian American groups as explicitly 'other'. Dhingra opens up the disparities between the public framing of Indian American motel owners within the rhetoric of the American dream and their varying economic and social realities. Whilst some owners are happy to champion their own status as poster children for American entrepreneurship and the rewards of a neoliberal state, others are more wary of continuing inequalities.

The opening chapter 'Building the Diaspora' adopts a transnational, postcolonial approach to Indian immigrants as racial minorities in the United States. The author focuses in particular on those from Gujarat in the third quarter of the twentieth century – a critical period for immigrants following the elimination of immigration quotas in 1965. Dhingra highlights not just the declining economic fortunes of Gujarat state which may have prompted migration, but also circumstances in the diaspora such as the occupational and social pressure applied to East African Gujarati's after the colonies achieved independence. By developing an understanding of contextual factors affecting Indian migration, Dhingra gives a sympathetic account of Indian migration which more effectively outlines why Indian Americans immigrated to the United States and their often

unwanted reasons for doing so. Chapter 2, 'Reaching for the American Dream', explores how Indian Americans became so prolific as business owners compared to other ethnic immigrants. Whilst Indian Americans turned to entrepreneurship as a result of factors that affected other ethnic entrepreneurs – primarily frustrations at continuing disadvantages in the labour market and the ability to take advantage of new opportunities in the business field through the pooling of personal and family resources – Dhingra suggests that the predominance of Gujarati's amongst Indian American motel owners is also significant, citing a strong belief in self-employment stemming from Gujarati class culture.

The text's core chapters 'Business Hardships and Immigrant Realities' and 'Professional Appearances and Backstage Hierarchies' document the everyday challenges faced by Indian American motel owners, both on a personal and professional level. Focusing on acts of everyday struggle and resistance, Dhingra examines some of the cumulative problems of working in the motel industry; from getting a foothold in the industry and establishing a franchise, to individual tensions with customers, rival motel owners (both Indian and non-Indian), and paid employees. It is here that the in-depth interviews, which form the core of Dhingra's study, most benefit the text and allow the author to ably document the multiple ways in which the day-to-day experiences of an Indian American motel owner or employee differ from the unproblematic 'model minority' image of motel ownership. Dhingra contends that far from committing themselves to fully overcoming racial, economic, cultural and gender-based inequalities, many owners instead took the more realistic option of working within these concerns. As a result whilst moteliers often became successful enough to stake a claim on the American dream, in doing so they 'did not fully challenge, and at times inadvertently sustained, the basis of their subordination'.

These central chapters are perhaps the most impressive, with Dhingra demonstrating his ability to connect a host of expansive concepts including race, neoliberalism, postcolonialism, gender and class with the human side of the story. Whilst acknowledging the overarching factors that played a major role in the emergence of a specific group ownership model, Dhingra pays close attention to individual accounts and documents the day-to-day struggles and challenges faced by many Indian American motel owners in a sensitive and nuanced way. As Dhingra rightly acknowledges, how ethnic entrepreneurs manage their businesses has received far less attention than how they start them. However, a focus on the everyday balance of social, economic, and cultural pressures in a business can tell us a great deal - firstly how motel owners view themselves, and secondly how they may fit into, or problematise, the notion of the 'American Dream'. This is expressed most successfully in his fourth chapter, where Dhingra posits the question – 'how can an ethnic group simultaneously be honored as representing the American dream yet experience sustained hierarchies?' The constraints of racial, gender and class hierarchies are evident in the way owners deal with their own status as minorities in relation to a predominantly White clientele, for example through a 'whitening' of the motel lobby. This relationship between ethnicity, race and space within the motel setting is fascinating, particularly when linked to other cultural and linguistic factors. One owner remarks that early Indian migrants found themselves drawn to the motel industry as their inability to speak English would not inhibit motel work where entry into the motel is facilitated by the 'front desk', and the loss of language mirrors the physical silencing and removal of non-White features of the motel landscape. The sensitivity of motel owners to the 'front stage' as a place of ritual interaction between guest and owner points to the enduring relationship between race and space. It would have been fruitful to balance this against the thoughts of both motel guests entering what is increasingly seen as a minority owned space, and the feelings of the local residents to the place of Indian American motel owners within the community. In many ways motel and hotel owners form important first contact points for visitors and travellers to a region, yet Indian American motel owners may be expected to provide a suitably 'American' (read 'White') introduction through the 'front stage', whilst at the same time struggling to integrate themselves into the same community.

In Chapter 5, 'The Possibility of Belonging', the author examines one of the central tensions between professional motivation and personal happiness that affects many Indian American motel owners and a question that is particularly pertinent regarding Ohio, where Dhingra conducts the bulk of research for his study. In moving further and further away from immigrant enclaves, motel owners must balance the need for business and therefore the demand to move to increasingly rural and White dominated areas in the American heartland against their desire to form a sense of attachment to their locality and community. This question points to the heart of Dhingra's study – not just a reflection on the impact of Indian American motel monopolisation but more broadly the conflict between the quest for full citizenship and the way in which relationships with the local community are formed 'within a capitalist enterprise that hovers over interpersonal dynamics'. It is here that Dhingra's focus on Ohio as a source for motel case studies and interviews also serve to limit the scope of his study. Whilst he is able to offer a detailed and sophisticated analysis of the success and failures of Ohioan Indian Americans to integrate themselves into their local community, there is little scope for a comparative model against the experiences of motel owners in other regions. It would be of analytical value to contrast the attitudes of motel owners in the Midwest, an area often romanticised as America's 'heartland', with a more racially diverse location such as California (the origin of Indian Americans in the hospitality industry), something Dhingra touches on in his conclusion but does not develop. Similarly, by focusing on the experiences of budget motel owners there is little opportunity to discuss the gradual entry of Indian Americans into the higher-end motel market and how their experiences may differ, or indeed support some of the challenges faced by budget-motel owners. However, such mild criticisms should not detract from a well-written and thought-provoking text which for the most part successfully connects the continuing duality of accomplishment and marginalisation for Indian Americans within the motel industry.