Asian Middle Class Alters a Rural Enclave

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Body

Sachin and Purvi Shah arrived with their infant daughter at Newark International Airport on a crisp day in February as the newest of immigrants from Barooda, India. But instead of heading to Flushing or Jackson Heights, they slid comfortably into a Nissan Quest minivan steered by Mrs. Shah's brother, Kaushal Desai, and rode west on Interstate 78, away from the shrinking Manhattan skyline.

They drove past the older suburbs, beyond the Garden State Parkway, through a blurry montage of wooded valleys and office parks, before reaching this affluent township, some 40 miles from New York City.

"I thought New Jersey would be like Manhattan," Mr. Shah, a 31-year-old computer programmer, recalled recently at the new house his family shares with the Desais. "But as we were driving on 78, past all these fields, I asked Kaushal, 'Where are the buildings?' "

All told, it took an hour for the Shahs to achieve what earlier immigrants often could not claim for decades, even generations: ***middle-class*** comfort and prosperity in suburban America.

By leapfrogging to the most desirable suburbs, many ***Asian*** immigrants are upending stereotypes about new immigrants' being poor and invisible, tethered to ethnic neighborhoods, desperate to wriggle out of the city. Instead, these newcomers are younger and more economically diverse, equipped with graduate degrees and work visas, gifted in science and technology.

Bridgewater, a rambling township of 38,000 with a median household income of $84,000, is no Monterey Park, Calif., where the population is two-thirds ***Asian***-American. Nor is it like Palisades Park, N.J., where Korean-American businesses dominate the downtown. Rather, it is a subtler example of how even the quietest bedroom communities are finding their rhythms jolted by the greatest wave of immigration since the start of the century.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the southwestern sections of Bridgewater, where in the last decade farms and woods have given way to 3,000 houses in glistening subdivisions. As many as half the residents in some neighborhoods are ***Asian***, led by Indians, Chinese and Filipinos.

During rush hour, people born on the other side of the world line up in gleaming sedans and sport utility vehicles at the intersection of Route 28 and Vanderveer Road, destined for telecommunications, pharmaceutical and computer companies.

At dawn, Chinese grandparents practice qigong breathing exercises on the sidewalks, then tinker with sprinklers as self-appointed lawn tenders. At dusk, families nudge baby strollers past virgin $300,000 houses and converse in their native dialects. There is a new, commodious Hindu temple here, and the local library stocks books in Chinese, Gujarati and other languages.

This does not mean that Bridgewater, once a sleepy, monochromatic Republican ***enclave***, has turned into an oasis of multicultural harmony. The police have recorded more bias incidents, including repeated fires set to a Sikh family's mailbox. Some parents have grumbled about the academic successes of ***Asian***-American students. Old-timers complain about the residential and commercial sprawl that has been stoked, in part, by the new immigrants.

Some natives even seem benumbed that whatever home-field advantage they toiled for years to attain -- in school, at work, in life -- has been erased by upstarts who do not fit the classic immigrant profile.

"The ***middle-class*** white ***enclave*** is being challenged, and they're afraid of what's going to come in," said Paul Richardson, 40, who grew up in Bridgewater, went away to college, then returned to raise his own children. "I just hope the new people coming in will want to become a part of our culture."

Bridgewater Past

From Family Farm To Suburban Lane

Wearing a cherry-colored cap emblazoned with the letter "B," Robert Kiser, a weathered man with fraying copper hair, was trudging through the red shale soil of a treeless housing development under construction when he stopped to point.

Over there, by Route 28, was the endless front yard of his Civil War-era house, where he and his two older brothers used to play football. Over there, closer to the stream, was where schoolchildren once went on hayrides through his fruit farm. But over here, he gestured, was a symbol of the present: a newly paved street named Kiser Lane.

"It's a reminder of how people were uprooted," Mr. Kiser said with a sigh. "Some day, our kids and grandkids can come back and say, 'See, there's our old name.' "

Earlier this year, Mr. Kiser, 49, reluctantly sold his family's 15-acre farm to make way for the 63 houses of the Orchard Meadows subdivision, becoming the latest member of Bridgewater's old, devoted guard to yield, however achingly, to a more developed, more diverse world.

The descendant of Prussian and Danish immigrants, Mr. Kiser grew up in the 1950's and 1960's, when Bridgewater still exuded a soothing, ***rural*** rhythm, one first established by Dutch and English settlers in the mid-1700's. As an entrepreneurial eighth grader in 1965, Mr. Kiser started Bob's Fruit Stand on Route 28, selling peaches, pears and apples. He eventually became an engineer, imitating his father and brothers, but kept the stand as a side business.

In those days, residents liked Bridgewater because it was far away, but not too far: an hour's drive to the Jersey shore or the Poconos; an hour's drive to New York or Philadelphia. The widest cultural divide was between those who said stoop, lightning bug and sub (New York) and those who said porch, firefly and hoagie (Philadelphia).

But like much of central New Jersey, Bridgewater began to change in the 1980's, especially after the State Supreme Court, in an effort to promote affordable housing, forced communities to change their zoning to allow clusters of smaller lots. A giant mall, Bridgewater Commons, opened in 1988, becoming the de facto downtown for a 32-square mile township that had never had one. Major corporations like A T & T and Johnson & Johnson opened offices, attracted by the confluence of six highways.

Many residents sold their family homesteads and moved deeper into the countryside, leaving behind only their names: Bertran Drive, Sutton Court, O'Keefe Road. New developments and cul-de-sacs sprouted up, particularly inside a 1,000-acre triangle girdled by Route 28, Milltown Road and Vanderveer Road.

Alarmed by the changes around his farm, Mr. Kiser joined the Save Bridgewater Organization, an anti-development group, in the early 1990's. But earlier this year, Mr. Kiser, his wife, Pam, a 48-year-old teacher, and three teenage sons decided to sell.

"Ultimately, we had to make a decision to make way," he said. "This is the vision for Bridgewater. It has totally changed."

In April, they moved to a new house, only two miles away, still in Bridgewater. Bob's Fruit Stand remains, even though its produce must now be hauled in from out of town, not from across the street. The family remains active in local affairs, particularly youth baseball -- the "B" on Mr. Kiser's cap stands for Bridgewater Baseball.

By agreement with the developers, Mr. Kiser's boyhood home, a white Colonial surrounded by magnolia, elm and maple trees, will remain and be rented out. So, too, will the ranch house occupied by Mr. Kiser's 90-year-old aunt, Constance, whose new address, in a bittersweet touch, will be 4 Kiser Lane.

"This area has undergone such a tremendous transformation in such a compressed amount of time, and it's been a challenge dealing with that," he said. "It'll probably hit home when they finish up, and we meet some of the neighbors."

Bridgewater Present

A Thousand Acres, 10,000 Neighbors

On a fall morning, the allegro pace at the Desai and Shah household reached a peak, highlighted by Hindu prayers and the wolfed-down breakfasts of cereal and masalapuri, an Indian snack.

Off went Gati Desai, bundling her two young children to school. Off went Mr. Desai to meet with a computer consulting client in Newark. And down went Mr. Shah to the basement, headquarters of Trinet Solutions, a small computer consulting business the Desais founded three years ago.

Four bedrooms, three small children, two cars, one home-based business: this is the arpeggio of life for the Shahs, who have settled into a comfortable if hectic suburban groove, just 10 months removed from their native state of Gujarat.

The two families regularly inspect crafts fairs and shop for vegetarian groceries in Edison. They worship at either the Swaminaryan temple in Edison or the year-old Sri Venkateswara temple in Bridgewater.

If anything, the Shahs view Bridgewater as a satellite not of New York City, but of Edison, 20 minutes away, with its plethora of ethnic supermarkets and services, primarily for Indian and Chinese immigrants. The Shahs treat New York as a tourist destination. Rockefeller Center, the World Trade Center, the Statue of Liberty? Been there. Jackson Heights? Haven't done that.

"Bridgewater is very peaceful, very clean, very nice," said Mrs. Shah, 28, after attending a free English conversation ***class*** for immigrants at the public library here. "We like it very much."

In India, Mr. Shah was a computer programmer, while Mrs. Shah was a microbiologist. But they calculated that America would be better for their careers, and for their daughter, Shaili, 3, especially because the Desais, like many immigrants ensconced in suburbia, were willing to live indefinitely with their newly arrived relatives.

So the Shahs became beneficiaries of changes in immigration law that have lifted restrictions on Asians and other groups, particularly the highly educated and skilled.

Immigrants are still generally settling in the city. But more are heading straight to the suburbs, led by the Asians, according to a new study in the journal Migration World by Ronald J. O. Flores, a sociologist at St. Lawrence University, and A. Peter Lobo and Joseph J. Salvo, demographers with the New York City planning department.

Between 1990 and 1996, 46 percent of ***Asian*** immigrants -- including 66 percent of Indians -- settled directly in the suburbs, up from 37 percent the previous six years, the study showed. In that time, Bridgewater absorbed about 1,000 immigrants -- 54 percent of whom were Asians, mostly professionals -- nearly doubling the total between 1983 and 1989, Mr. Lobo said.

For many new immigrants, the suburbs are a symbol of a clean slate, a fresh start. "The more I live here, the more I like it here," said Sharon Wang, 33, a native of China's Hubei province who moved to Bridgewater four years ago with her husband, a statistician, and two sons. "I feel like this is my country. I was born to come here."

Ms. Wang, a librarian, lords over a house filled with plants, a reproduction of Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party" and a glistening Yamaha piano. She invites Chinese neighbors over for dinners of dumplings, bean-thread noodles and squash soup, and an occasional bout of karaoke. She sends her sons to the Huaxia Chinese School, a private weekend school in Hillsborough, to learn Chinese. Her mother, Chai Chunting, is among hundreds of grandparents who shuttle regularly between Asia and Bridgewater.

Ms. Chai, 61, had braced herself at first: she could not speak English, could not drive. But soon, she was playing cards and gossiping with neighbors from all parts of China. She even traveled with other Chinese grandparents to Atlantic City.

"This," Ms. Chai said on a stroll one night, "is like a small Chinese town."

The Schools

Where Cultures Mix and Clash

The stage was set, the audience rapt.

Sitting in the ***middle***, sobbing, was a Japanese-American student, played with flair by Chelsey Tanaka. She told her parents that she had been ridiculed by her new classmates for wearing a kimono. Cherish your heritage, said Jessica Tang, the student playing her mother. Ignore the bullies.

Ms. Tanaka's character marched into ***class*** the next day and swayed the other students with her brio. "Tolerance means not hating people who are different from you, but still respecting their differences," she said.

The juniors in Will Ferry's advanced placement history ***class*** were performing their original skit this June day before a special audience: Scott Petrillo's second-grade ***class*** at Bradley Gardens School.

School officials believe it is never too early to teach tolerance. And no institution has been more affected by Bridgewater's churning population than the schools, which have the potential to become a model United Nations -- or a multicultural tinderbox.

The ***Asian*** population here has climbed to perhaps 10 percent from 1 percent in 1980. In the school district, which includes the tiny, ***middle-class*** borough of Raritan, almost 10 percent of the students are not native speakers of English. The 41 languages represented include 11 from the Indian subcontinent and 4 from China and Taiwan, said Stephen L. Sokolow, the superintendent of schools.

At Bridgewater-Raritan High School, where one-quarter of the students are minorities, the ***Asian*** population is 13.9 percent, up from 3.7 in 1988. At Van Holten Elementary School in southwestern Bridgewater, the ***Asian*** population is 22.2 percent, up from 14.2 percent only two years ago.

And yet, so far, most students, whether they have lived here all their lives or have just arrived from abroad, seem to be handling the changes smoothly.

Rob Kiser, Mr. Kiser's ***middle*** son, was president of the high school's freshman ***class*** last year and said he has no problems with the new diversity. His classmate Yousheng Tang, who lives close to the former Kiser Farm, is just four years removed from a school in Shanghai, but has been trying hard to absorb American pop culture.

At a shade under 6 feet in cleats, and 150 pounds, Yousheng was a reserve tight end on the sophomore football team, one of two ***Asian***-Americans on the Panthers. "He likes it, so we support him," said Tom Tang, his father, a computer programmer at A T & T.

If anything, it is the parents who are struggling with the notion of a multicultural school system. Some ***Asian***-Americans are excelling academically; about half the seniors in the top 5 percent are ***Asian***-American. And so are a quarter to a third of the students in a program that separates the highest-scoring elementary school students from the rest of their age group.

But some parents have criticized the program as being too competitive and top-heavy with ***Asian***-Americans. They have suggested it fosters elitism at an early age.

The whispers have not escaped the immigrants' ears. "Sometimes, people say, 'You Chinese guys are smart. You have well-paid jobs,' " said Sharon Wang, whose older son is enrolled in the program. "You can feel it. It's some sour grapes."

Civic Life

Growth Concerns, Bias Complaints

On a muggy evening in July, 400 people packed a zoning board meeting, glowering at slide after slide of blueprints, statistics and sketches. One by one, citizens denounced a proposed shopping center on Route 28 called Millbridge Village. There would be too much traffic, they said. Too much disruption.

But something was missing. "I think everyone notices, where are all the Chinese, the Indians?" said Paul Richardson, a Bridgewater native. "You look at that crowd, it looks like Bridgewater from 25 years ago. It's the old guard trying to dig their heels in."

Overdevelopment is the hottest issue in suburbia, as evidenced by Millbridge Village, which was ultimately rejected. But in Bridgewater, where taxes are relatively low, unhappiness about development may be a more complicated issue than in other places.

For older residents, the new developments provoke emotions from envy to acceptance. Mr. Kiser, for one, said he did not begrudge the ***Asian*** immigrants their success. But he does sense that the anti-development mood may mask a muted dislike of the newcomers and their unfamiliar customs.

"I think some people are somewhat resentful of some of the foreign people coming in and jumping ahead so quickly," he said.

To improve relations, Mayor James T. Dowden set up a committee this year dedicated to fighting bias. Neighborhoods have organized block parties, while businesses have trumpeted diversity programs.

But there have been more bias incidents recently, ranging from swastika scrawlings to acts of mischief, according to the police. This spring, vandals twice smeared the house of Mahal and Sandhya Mohan, natives of Madras, India, with eggs and toilet paper, and twice set fire to the mailbox of their next-door neighbors, the Singhs, members of a Sikh gurdwara, or temple, here.

Mr. Mohan, a vice president at A T & T, responded to the attacks by installing floodlights and keeping cameras by his bed. He compared the experience to cruising along, then suddenly going off a cliff. "One little incident can do that," he said.

In another case, town officials, prodded by neighbors, have accused an Indian family of illegally operating a temple in their home, complete with a six-foot-high marble statue. A local judge sided with the township in July. The family's appeal is pending.

Apart from these flare-ups, some longtime residents believe that few Chinese and Indian residents care about Bridgewater's civic life. One exception is Michael Hsing, an Internet manager from Taiwan who moved here in 1990.

Like two-thirds of the registered voters affiliated with a party, Mr. Hsing, 44, is a Republican. He was the local party's 1999 campaign treasurer. But he was dispirited when voters narrowly rejected a $22.9 million bond issue this month to expand the high school, which is projected to swell from 1,900 to 2,800 students by 2009. So it is crucial, he said, for more ***Asian*** immigrants, citizens or not, to participate in civic life.

"One day, when the community has an issue, people will say, 'Where were you last time?' " he said. "Or even worse, they'll say, 'Who are you?' "

Bridgewater Future

Old and New Cope With Change

It was a late-summer afternoon, the light fading, as the steel-wool sky wrung out sheets of rain. Inside his new house, Mr. Kiser sat in the kitchen, cherishing some photographs of the old Kiser Farm -- and thinking about the ones to come from the new Kiser Farm.

After much deliberation, Mr. Kiser and his brothers, Franklin and Bill, decided to buy another farm, one of 103 acres, 18 miles to the west in Hunterdon County.

"You have to change with the changes," he said, noting that about half the houses in Orchard Meadows had been bought by people of ***Asian*** descent. "There are a lot of people with foreign backgrounds to make room for."

A few miles away, on a chilly but bright autumn afternoon, the Shahs and the Desais assembled in a guest bedroom and knelt for 10 minutes on the pewter-colored carpeting before a small shrine to three Hindu gods: Swaminarayan the creator, Ganesh, the elephant god of goodness, and Hanuman, the monkey god of religious piety.

In their daily candle-lit prayer, the four adults and three children sang and clapped joyously, then ate almond offerings. "I'm not going to be totally Americanized, but I feel very fortunate to be here," said Mr. Desai, who became an American citizen in August. "In this country, you can do anything."

The Shahs are not sure if they will stay forever. But they are confident that their daughter, Shaili, will benefit from America's technological wonders and Bridgewater's tapestry of new immigrants.

"She can come in," Mr. Shah said, "right from the beginning."

Next: The new immigrants make inroads in New York City politics.

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Graphic

Photos: Gati Desai leading a prayer service in a bedroom of the house her family shares in Bridgewater, N.J. (Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times)(pg. A1); Jessica Tang, left, and Chelsey Tanaka as mother and daughter in a play about ethnic tolerance, performed for second graders at Bradley Gardens School in Bridgewater. (Dith Pran/The New York Times); From left, Sharon Wang, Susan Lin, a neighbor in Bridgewater, and Ms. Wang's mother, Chai Chunting, prepare a meal of turkey and shrimp steamed with rice. (Dith Pran/The New York Times); Yousheng Tang, four years out of a school in Shanghai, is a reserve tight end with the Bridgewater-Raritan Panthers and one of two ***Asian***-Americans on the high school team. (Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times); A procession last summer around the new Sri Venkateswara Hindu temple in Bridgewater. Families can also worship at the Swaminaryan temple in nearby Edison. (Dith Pran/The New York Times)(pg. B9)

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