

# Teaching history from **DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES:** Eighth Grade Lesson on Gujaratis & the Motel Industry

## GA Social Studies Standards

**SS8H12 Explain the importance of developments in Georgia since the late 20th century.**

In 2020, Indian Americans became the largest Asian group in the United States. Although immigrants from the Indian subcontinent have lived in the U.S. since the late 1800s, their numbers were relatively small until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Today, Indian Americans are said to own between 40 to 60% of all hotels and motels in the United States - more than 34,000 properties! Out of that, 70% are owned by Gujaratis, most with the surname "Patel" or "Amin."

Kanjibhai Manchhu Desai is believed to be the first Indian motel owner in the U.S. He arrived in California in 1942. After working in agriculture, he and two fellow Gujarati farmworkers leased a 32-room hotel in Sacramento after the owner, a Japanese American, was forced to leave it behind in order to report to a World War II prison camp. Desai then moved to San Francisco, where he and a friend leased the Goldfield hotel. When other Gujarati immigrants arrived in San Francisco, Desai provided them with shelter and taught them about the hotel trade.

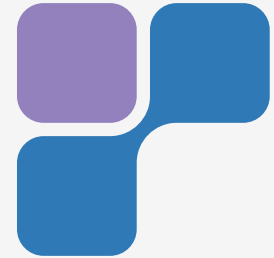
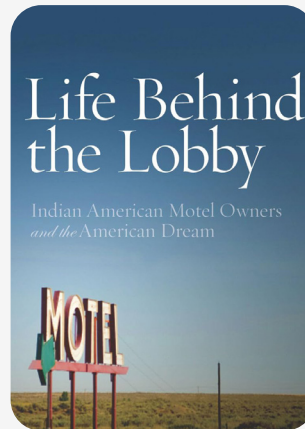
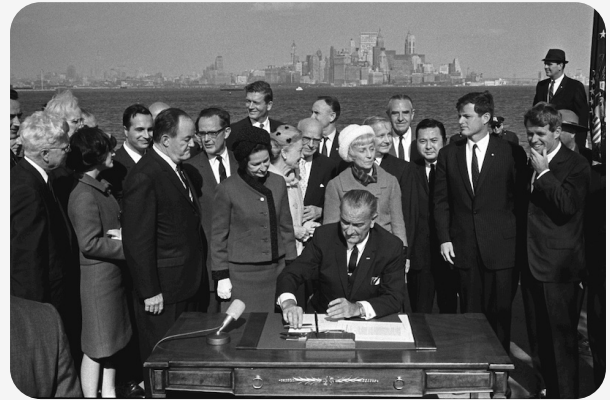
Indian immigrants faced discrimination and racism throughout the 1900s, and were even turned away at the unemployment office. Dahya "D.R." Patel was a Gujarati immigrant who stayed with Desai while he struggled to find employment. Patel decided to try his hand at the hotel business. After an unsuccessful first attempt and with financial support from the Gujarati community, Patel was able to lease a San Francisco hotel with his brother, The Alder, leading to additional hotel leases. The Patels lived in The Alder and sponsored family members to come to the U.S., who also lived and worked at The Alder with them. By the time of Patel's death in 1999, Patel owned 22 hotels and motels.



In the 1960s, there were only 60 or 70 Indian-owned hotels in the United States, mostly in California. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed more South Asians to immigrate to the U.S. than ever before. Their arrival coincided with many white postwar motel and hotel owners nearing retirement and becoming eager to sell their businesses, particularly during the onset of the 1973 global oil crisis. While fewer people were taking road trips and booking stays at motels, this meant lower property prices for hundreds of hotels and motels. Like many immigrants before them, new arrivals pooled their resources with friends and family to make down payments. Gujarati-owned hotels are particularly common in California, Florida, Georgia, and Texas.

To learn more about Gujaratis in the hotel industry, read Pawan Dhingra’s *Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream* and *Surat to San Francisco* by Mahendra Doshi. AJ+’s “Why Do Indian Americans Own So Many Hotels?” on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj92GMVDUzw>) is a short video summary of this phenomenon. Statistics and further information about Asian American hoteliers is available from the Asian American Hotel Owners Association at <https://aahoa.com>, including a 2023 [Oxford study](#) that includes a clickable map of the United States.

For fictionalized accounts of Asian American hotel ownership, share excerpts of *Mississippi Masala* (1991, directed by Mira Nair) or the middle grades book *Front Desk* (2018, by Kelly Yang) with students.



### Complete Article and Lesson Plan



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Part of Bhakta’s photo documentary series “The Arch Motel Project,” which was included in the Smithsonian’s exhibit *Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation*.
2. Chiraag Bhakta via South Asian American Digital Archive  
Part of Bhakta’s photo documentary series “The Arch Motel Project,” which was included in the Smithsonian’s exhibit *Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation*.
3. LBJ Presidential Library/Public Domain (Signing of 1965 Immigration Act)
4. Stanford University Press

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