

Eighth Grade Lesson on Gujaratis & the Motel Industry By Noreen Naseem Rodriguez

GA Social Studies Standards:

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

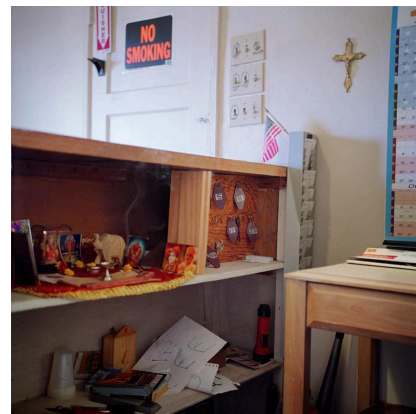
Background Information:

Immigrants from the Indian subcontinent have been arriving in the U.S. since the late 1800s. Most of the first Indian immigrants to the West Coast of North America were from the Punjab region. By the mid-1900s, immigrants from across South Asia began to arrive and the numbers of South Asia immigrants increased exponentially after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was passed. In 2020, Indian Americans became the largest Asian population group (not in combination with any other race) in the United States. Many immigrants from the region of Gujarat have come to the U.S., whether directly from India or by way of other parts of the Indian diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean, and beyond, and have established a niche in the hospitality industry. Although estimates vary, Indian Americans are said to own between 40 to 60% of all hotels and motels in the United States, which includes more than 34,000 properties. Out of that, 70% are owned by Gujaratis and most of them have the surname “Patel” or “Amin.”



In 1942, Kanjibhai Manchhu Desai arrived in California. After working in agriculture, he and two fellow Gujarati farmworkers leased a 32-room hotel in Sacramento after the owner, a Japanese America, 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 his friend Nanalal Patel leased the Goldfield hotel. When other Gujarati immigrants arrived in San Francisco, Desai provided them with shelter and taught them about the hotel trade. Desai is said to be the first Indian motel owner in the U.S.

Dahya “D.R.” Patel was a Gujarati immigrant who stayed with Desai while he struggled to find employment. Indian immigrants faced discrimination and racism throughout the 1900s, and were even turned away at the unemployment office. Patel struggled to find other work for a year before deciding 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 before he purchased the Empress in 1968. 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.



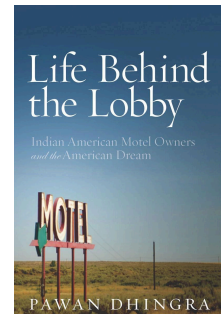
By the 1960s, there were only 60 or 70 Indian-owned hotels in the United States, mostly in California. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed more South Asians to immigrate to the U.S. than ever before. Their arrival coincided with many white postwar motel and hotel owners nearing retirement and eager to sell their businesses, particularly during the onset of the 1973 global oil crisis when few

people were taking road trips and booking stays at motels. This meant lower property prices for hundreds of hotels and motels, and like many immigrants before them, new arrivals pooled their resources with friends and family to make down payments. While the work was hands-on and required long hours, fluency in English was not required



Gujarati-owned hotels are particularly common in California, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. Gujaratis like Desai initially bought and founded “unbranded” hotels and only became involved with franchises like Marriott and Hilton starting in the 1990s. These are just one of many examples of what are called “ethnic niches”—specific industries that typically owned and operated by certain ethnic groups in particular settings, such as Cambodian donut shops in California, Arab- and South Asian-owned gas stations, Sri Lankan-run Montessoris, Korean grocery stores, and Vietnamese nail salons across the U.S. Just as the Chinese in the late 1800s and early 1900s started laundries and restaurants after mining and railroad jobs fizzled out, these ethnic groups are able to start businesses thanks to mutual aid from their communities and by employing and training family members, friends, and recently arrived immigrants.

To learn more about Gujaratis in 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.



Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

- To offer students a summary of Gujaratis in the hospitality industry, share the audio and/or text from [National Public Radio’s “Here To Stay: How Indian-Born Innkeepers Revolutionized America’s Motels”](#). Students can take notes and share 3-5 facts about the experiences of Indian immigrants in the hospitality industry, particularly related to how children helped support family businesses. If you have access to *The Juggernaut*, [this article](#) can spark conversations about differences between first, second, and third generations of immigrants and how their priorities shift over time. The CNBC video [“Hospitality industry becomes gateway to ‘American dream’ for many Indian Americans”](#) is available on YouTube and can initiate the same discussions.
- The CNBC video mentioned above does not address the discrimination faced by South Asian immigrants to the U.S. Fictionalized accounts of Asian American hotel ownership like excerpts from the film *Mississippi Masala* (1991, directed by Mira Nair) or the middle grades book *Front Desk* (2018, by Kelly Yang) can help students better understand the hardships and struggles faced by immigrants working in hospitality and can disrupt meritocratic depictions of Asian Americans as a model minority.
- **For advanced readers:** A 1999 *New York Times* article was published called [“A Patel Motel Cartel.”](#) Some of the language is dated and reinforces stereotypes, but if you are able to access it,

the article offers several accounts from Indian motel and hotel owners and explores how some white hotel and motel owners began putting up “American-owned” signs to distinguish themselves from immigrant-owned businesses in the 1990s. This can generate important conversations around belonging and xenophobia as well as social hierarchies and mutual aid.

Images Used:

1. Signing of the 1965 Immigration Act, Public domain via Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library
2. Chiraag Bhakta via South Asian American Digital Archive. This image is 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* (2019-2020).
3. Chiraag Bhakta via South Asian American Digital Archive. This image is 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* (2019-2020).
4. Pawan Dhingra, *Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream* (Stanford University Press, 2012)