

The Americans

Representations of South Asian American Life

BY ANAR PARIKH |

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Party for Indian Entrepreneurs, Washington DC, 2002. From the series 'The Americans' 2000-2007, by Gauri Gill

On a sweltering summer day last July, I finally found a used copy of Gauri Gill's *The Americans* (2008) at a bookstore in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago. I'd first learned about this collection in a graduate seminar on contemporary Indian art a year-and-a-half earlier. I was developing ideas for a dissertation project on South Asians in the United States, and had been searching, with great futility, for the book in every library and book store I entered. *The Americans*, it seems, is no longer in print. When I found it—finally and serendipitously—I gushed to the clerk at the register, who momentarily withheld the transaction to enviously flip through its pages before I took it in my possession.

There is a great deal to be said, both technically and ethnographically, about *The Americans*. It pays obvious homage to the eponymously named collection of iconic black-and-white photographs taken by Robert Frank during the 1950s. For two years, Frank traveled across the United States to photographically document the vast expanse of American life. With attention to the stratification between high and low culture, Frank's images stand in as iconic representations of American life during the mid-20th century: full of prosperity and promise, but somehow also segregated and

eerily alienating.



Funeral – St Helena, South Carolina, 1955. From *The Americans*. © Robert Frank.

Gill's images are also the product of her extensive travels across the United States spanning the first decade of the 20th century. But while Frank's images are black-and-white, Gill's are markedly chromatic. This, of course, is not only a product of technical innovation; it is also an ironic metaphor for the transformation of the American racial landscape during the late-20th century, one that is no longer black and white, but must also account for the experiences of Latinx, Asian American, and African immigrant communities, among others. (Although Gill specifically captures the lives of Indian Americans in this project, it has the potential, and perhaps intends to, speak to South Asian American experiences more broadly.) If South Asians—and perhaps even Asian Americans more broadly—were invisible on the American landscape during Robert Frank's mid-century road trips across the country, Gill's *The Americans* insists that the viewer take South Asians seriously as consumers, as political players, and as members of the American public.

In her 2010 review of *The Americans*, Bakirathi Mani, a literary scholar, urges viewers not to see *The Americans* ethnographically—which might reinforce dominant narratives of migration and diaspora—but rather as “an aestheticized narrative of personal history.” She argues that doing so can allow us to understand how viewers from different religious, gender, class, and even national backgrounds may have found resonance in Gill's photographs.¹ As an anthropologist-in-training, however, I could not help but instinctively think of *The Americans* as an ethnographic project. In this sense, I do not speak of “ethnography” as an objective or scientific endeavor that strives to essentialize and easily categorize South American people and culture. Instead, by highlighting the specificities of particular

experiences, ethnography has the potential to challenge and add texture to the overgeneralized and stereotypical narratives that dominate popular understandings of immigrant and diasporic experiences. I see *The Americans* as identifying the public and private spaces of the South Asian diasporic experience not as monolithic, but as richly textured by material cultures, transnational connections, and aspirational imaginaries. Gill captures the lives of Indian Americans not only in the bastions of 19th- and 20th-century South Asian settlement in the United States—New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and California—but also in five southern states: Virginia, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina.



Yuba City, California, 2001. From the series 'The Americans' 2000-2007, by Gauri Gill

As a scholar interested in South Asian political participation and belonging in the United States, I was particularly drawn to two images in *The Americans*: “Yuba City, California” (2001), and “Party for Indian Entrepreneurs,” Washington, D.C. (2002) [top]. The first photograph, “Yuba City, California” is a diptych in which we see a Sikh man riding a bicycle adorned with an American flag across what appears to be a major thoroughfare with a QuickStop gas station and political campaign signs in the backdrop. Taken in the aftermath of September 11, we might wonder if the flag is meant to announce that that the turbaned man is not an enemy of the state. The accompanying image zooms in to draw closer attention to the campaign signs, revealing the names of two South Asian American candidates in local political races. The second photograph, “Party for Indian Entrepreneurs,” captures the scale of South Asian American political and economic clout at the national level. Gill captures two Indian American businessmen shaking hands—perhaps they are either networking or finalizing a business deal—while a third man, with his back turned to the camera, looks toward the US Capitol building looming ominously in the background. While much of the current popular discourse about South Asian Americans, as well as existing research in the social sciences, focuses on diasporic South Asians’ investment in politics on the subcontinent—through financial contributions to Hindu Nationalist agenda, for example—these images show how South Asian Americans, as entrepreneurs, as lobbyists, as candidates, and voters, have also built meaningful political projects of their own in North America.

Although the images in *The Americans* are the product of her travels across the United States between 2000 and 2007, in an email correspondence, Gill noted that she first began the project while pursuing a BFA in photography at the Parsons School of Design at the New School in the early 1990s. At the time, Gill was living in New York with close family members who had migrated to the United States. Gill

recalled how, as a student, she never saw her desi family or friends represented in her coursework. As such, she became interested in photographing her family and from there moved outward to friends and to the larger South Asian subculture.

Gill's rationales for pursuing this project resonate with me deeply. They are the same reasons why I felt so compelled to find a copy of *The Americans*. As a South Asian American growing up in the American South, I spent much of my adolescence and early adulthood desperately searching for representations of myself and people like me in the US popular and cultural sphere. If South Asians have heretofore been invisible in the spaces of American fine arts, popular culture, and academia, their presence in the American South has been rendered even more invisible. As a southern South Asian American, Gauri Gill's images remind me that the makeshift Indian beauty parlor in an Econolodge storage closet in the rural suburbs of Jackson, Mississippi, is not only the beginnings of an absurdist short story, but also an instance of entrepreneurial creativity.

This invisibility, and these stories, are also what inspired me to now pursue a PhD in cultural anthropology. Anthropology has offered me a vocabulary with which to articulate how traces of colonialism are manifested in everyday life, taught me to take Bollywood and popular Hindi film seriously, and helped me understand the South Asian diaspora as a historical and cultural phenomenon. In my graduate work, I want to bring South Asians in the United States out of the privacy and obscurity of our homes, temples, and cultural centers into the American public sphere.

Cultural isolation and loneliness are pervasive to the diasporic experience—not only for immigrants, but often for generations thereafter. *The Americans* and projects like it, then, offer a double purpose. On the one hand, they serve as reminders that we are not alone—that there are others who share our experiences. On the other, and perhaps more importantly, they tell us that our stories are worth capturing in images and in words; that they are worth being read and seen not only by our friends and family but also by the world.

1. Bakirathi Mani. Viewing South Asia, Seeing America: Review of "The Americans" by Gauri Gill. *American Quarterly* (2010): 140.

Anar Parikh is a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at Brown University. Her work is interested in questions of belonging and citizenship in the South Asian diaspora in the United States.