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City attracts people from around globe

08/14/01

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Editor's Note: This is the sixth part of a 12-part series examining what the 2000 Census reveals about each Hudson County municipality.

Holding his 2-year-old son in his arms, Pravin Hirpara stood outside an Indian supermarket on Jersey City's Newark Avenue one recent Saturday afternoon while his wife bought traditional fare and shoppers bustled down the busy commercial strip known as India Square.

Hirpara, 33, who moved to Jersey City 10 years ago from the Indian state of Gujarat, is part of one of the city's fastest-growing Asian immigrant communities. According to the 2000 Census, the number of Indians residing in Jersey City increased from 7,361 in 1990 to 12,973 in 2000, a 76.2 percent gain.

"In 1980 there were hardly 3,000 Indians in Jersey City," said community activist and former Jersey City Deputy Mayor Mono Sen. "It has been growing every census period since then."

Long considered a gateway to America, Jersey City has been home to immigrants generation after generation. During the last decade, the diversity that defines the city flourished, particularly with growth in the Asian and Hispanic communities.

Census numbers show that the Asian community grew nearly 50 percent, from 25,959 in 1990 to 38,881 in 2000. Likewise, the Hispanic population jumped 23 percent, from 55,395 in 1990 to 67,952 in 2000.

"Whenever you develop the nucleus of a core group in a particular location, where there is infrastructure, there is an attraction to draw more similar people to that area," said Nick Montalto, the executive director of the International Institute in Jersey City, an organization that provides services to immigrants and refugees.

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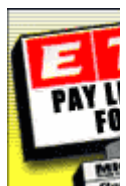
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"There are certain advantages to living in Jersey City."

As the diverse neighborhoods of Jersey City have grown - particularly in the last decade - more and more people from abroad have come here, Montalto said. They have received letters in India from cousins in Jersey City telling them about their jobs, where they live, and why they should come.

It was that way for Hirpara.

Family members came before him and sent letters urging him to come. Now here, he said he cannot imagine leaving.

Putting down roots

"I love to live in Jersey City," said the electrician who just bought a home on Liberty Avenue. "Everything you need is here, and it's comfortable. I want my son to grow up here."

Because it's close to New York and in a nexus of transportation routes, he said, Jersey City is the perfect place to start out. And like many other immigrants who are planting roots here, Hirpara said he has no plan of moving soon.

"I just bought a house here, so I am not going anywhere," he said. "A lot of Indian people, as soon as they settle they start to buy a house because rent is very expensive. They buy a two-family home and rent out one of the apartments."

Sen, who arrived in Jersey City in 1974 and has a street named after him in India Square, said many Indians choose to start out in Jersey City and then later move to places like Edison or to suburban towns in Morris or Bergen counties.

But the growth of Hindu temples in the area has also made the Indian community more willing to remain in Jersey City, he said. There are two temples on Newark Avenue, and another, in Secaucus, was dedicated recently as thousands traveled to Hudson County for a weekend of festivities.

"They love this city," Sen said. "Their hopes are better here and they have their own community. There is a lot of opportunity."

The Asian groups with the most significant increases recorded by the census were the Indians and the Filipinos, who have long been part of the fabric of Jersey City. The number of Filipinos grew from 11,677 in 1990 to 15,860 in 2000.

A testament to their soaring numbers is that in the last Jersey City municipal election, there were three Filipino candidates for City Council - Linda Mayo, Flor Medel and Greg Racelis.

Racelis, the chief fiscal officer in the city's Office of Economic Opportunity, said that since Filipinos first started coming here in the 1960s and 1970s, the community has grown into itself. The largest Asian group in the city, 84 percent of Filipinos who live in Hudson County live in

Jersey City.

"They have all the Filipinos here and we are an established community," Racelis said. "This is where they live."

And alongside the growing community is a hallmark restaurant that meets their culinary needs. A favorite place for Filipinos to meet and enjoy the food of their homeland is the Philippine Bread House on Newark Avenue, across from the Hudson County Administration building.

Glass counters packed with meringues, pan de sal and other baked goods line the front portion of the shop, while hot food is served in the restaurant in the rear. While older Philippine diners can be heard conversing in their native Tagalog, their children and grandchildren banter in English.

Racelis, who moved here 30 years ago and who is also a Jersey City real estate broker, said that while many Filipinos choose to live around the Grove Street area - where there is an avenue named after the Philippine capital of Manila - they have been moving to all parts of the city.

"I have been selling a lot of houses to Filipinos," he said. "Downtown, West Side, and all throughout. They are living in all parts of the city."

And though many have dreams of going back to their island nation someday, Racelis said they make investments, buy homes and become attached.

"When I immigrated here 30 years ago from Manila, I thought I would go back," he said. "But I invested and am here now. This is my second home."

Voting force

Mayor Glenn Cunningham, who was elected in June as the city's first African-American mayor, said that in the last decade he has seen the Asian community grow and become a strong force in the community.

"The point is that these populations have grown significantly and they will play a significant role," Cunningham said. "The Asian community is about to make strides politically and socially."

Like the Filipinos, another group that swelled in size is the Pakistanis. While the census does not identify Pakistanis as a specific ethnic group within the Asian race, members from the community say it is flourishing.

"The fact is there is a huge number of Pakistanis in Jersey City and Hudson County," said Abdul Malik, an activist within Jersey City's Pakistani community. "In the years between 1990 and 2000, there was a huge influx."

Malik, who moved from Pakistan to Jersey City in 1990, said the growing number of temples and places of worship for Muslims shows that the community is here permanently.

"When I first came here and it was the first celebration after Ramadan, the hall at the Boys and Girls Club was only one-third full," said Malik, who just launched the Association of Pakistani-Americans for Community Organization. "Now we have three places where people can go on that celebration day and at the Boys and Girls Club, we have to have two separate shifts."

The growth of the Hispanic and Asian communities reflects Jersey City's willingness to accept new groups, Montalto said.

Comfort level

"I think we live in an environment that is more comfortable with diversity," Montalto said. "They feel comfortable settling here because everyone is different. They aren't as conspicuous."

Like the Asian community, the Hispanic population of Jersey City has grown significantly in the past decade, jumping 23 percent, from 55,395 in 1990 to 67,952 in 2000.

The Hispanic group that had the sharpest percentage growth was Mexicans, whose population nearly quadrupled, up from 658 in 1990 to 2,495 in 2000, a trend throughout the county and the country.

As in other urban areas in Hudson County, Jersey City's Puerto Rican and Cuban communities dropped, while the number of "other" Hispanics grew, census numbers indicate.

Puerto Ricans went from 30,950 in 1990 to 29,777 in 2000, a decrease of 4 percent, while Cubans dropped 6 percent, from 1,972 in 1990 to 1,860 in 2000.

The Puerto Rican community has in large part moved to more suburban areas, such as Vineland in Cumberland County, Perth Amboy in Middlesex County and Barrington in Camden County, Jersey City Deputy Mayor Anthony Cruz said .

"Our families are looking for schools that will protect our upbringing and our culture," he said. "I guess you could say we've moved on to greener pastures."

Part of the reason some Puerto Ricans have left Jersey City is not so positive, he said, citing rising rents.

"The cost of living here has gone so high in hotbed places like Jersey City and Hoboken that we cannot afford to be as economically competitive," he said. "If you make minimum wage, it is impossible to afford these rents."

The "other" Hispanics census category, which includes people from Central and South America, grew 55 percent, from 21,815 in 1990 to 33,820 in 2000.

Cunningham said he thinks Mexicans and other Latin Americans are being drawn to the city because of economic opportunities as well as the fact that the city welcomes new people.

"Because there are all other minority groups here, the community is accepting and welcomes all newcomers," he said.

And while more and more ethnic groups are calling Jersey City home, the number of people who identify themselves as white has dropped significantly. The census reported that in 1990, 110,263 people identified themselves as white, while in 2000, that number fell 26 percent, to 81,637.

Part of that decline may be due to a change in the census forms, which for the first time allowed people to identify themselves as being of more than one race. In Jersey City, 14,011 people said they have biracial or multiracial backgrounds.

Cunningham said that living in such a multicultural city, and being mayor of one, creates unique opportunities for the residents, and a handful of challenges outweighed by the benefits.

It's especially important for the children, he said.

"The more we get to know each other, the more we learn," Cunningham said. "The kids learn from the neighbors down the street what I had to read about when I was a kid."

The specific challenges Cunningham pointed out are in the school system and the Police Department, where he said the variety of backgrounds and cultures require special sensitivity.

In the school system, Joanne Kenny, executive assistant to state-appointed Schools Superintendent Charles Epps Jr., said the challenges are mostly language-oriented.

At least 52 languages are spoken by Jersey City students, and because English is not always a student's native tongue, there are English as Second Language courses and Port of Entry classes available, Kenny said. She said she would like to see more ESL classes for older students.

"We're very blessed to have such a wide variety of people and languages in Jersey City," Kenny said. "It certainly creates an environment in which teachers and students with other backgrounds can learn from one another."

Dickinson and Ferris high schools hold elaborate multicultural festivals where parents cook traditional foods and display customs of their homelands, Kenny said.

"It's a wonderful opportunity we have here," Kenny said. "In other places in the country they are not so lucky." NEXT TUESDAY: Kearny

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