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Many attribute the tension between Asian-Indian store owners and the Jackson neighborhoods they serve as a byproduct of a crossing of cultures



Joe Ellis/The Clarion-Ledger

K.R. Rao, chairman of the India Association of Mississippi, and his wife, Indira, have created an elaborate back-

yard garden where they frequently host parties at their Rankin County home.

CULTURES COLLIDE

In-state tuition won't go up

■ College Board decides to raise room-and-board rates

By Elizabeth Crisp
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The state College Board will not raise in-state tuition at Mississippi's eight public universities this year, but room-and-board rates are going up.

Tuition has gone up in 11 of the past 12 years, but board members said this week they

more in this economy."

Despite the effort to keep higher education costs down, the board voted 6-4 in favor of increasing on-campus hous-

ing fees at all universities, at the request of the presidents. The increases

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range from 3 percent at Mississippi University for Women to 7 percent at Mississippi Valley State Univer-

CULTURES COLLIDE

Asian-Indian group eyes future in city

By Gary Pettus

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K.R. Rao came from India to America, where he has prospered as a nuclear engineer, worshiped at a

INSIDE

■ Hinduism unites Asian-Indians, 12A

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local Hindu temple, retired and built in his backyard a restful park of murmuring fountains and statues of Hindu gods.

"In our religion, this community has not discouraged us," said Rao, 76, of Brandon.

"That is the greatness of America."



Joe Ellis/The Clarion-Ledger

A section of ceiling inside the new Hindu temple under construction in Flowood is indicative of the fine detail throughout the elaborate structure.

But for some of the Jackson area's estimated 1,200 Asian-Indian families, America also has a dark side that shadows Rao's backyard nirvana: Whenever a Singh, Pannu or Namburi makes the news, often it's because that person was robbed or shot.

It's a by-product, many say, of a

crossing of cultures: Those of the Asian-Indian store owners and the neighborhoods they serve — often on the poorer side of town.

Over the years, it has put the Indian store owners at odds with police and their own customers.

Leaders on both sides do agree on
See INDIANS, 9A

A new Hindu temple is under construction off Old Fannin Road in Rankin County.



going up.

Tuition has gone up in 11 of the past 12 years, but board members said this week they feel the current economic conditions make it unreasonable to support another hike even though universities have asked for further increases.

"We've never faced an economic situation like this," College Board President Scott Ross said. "I just think this is a different time, and we can't expect people to pay

range from 3 percent at Mississippi University for Women to 7 percent at Mississippi Valley State University and tack on as much as \$248 a year for a double-occupancy room. Meal plans also are going up, with plans that include three meals a day running from \$2,150 at Alcorn State University to \$2,498 at the University of Mississippi.

University leaders said the increases are necessary

See TUITION, 6A

Irby wreck trial moved to 2010

By Jimmie E. Gates

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Karen Irby won't come to trial before March of next year for allegedly causing the fiery crash that killed two doctors in February.



Irby

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In her order, Green moved the trial to March 29, saying she was advised there was no objection to the delay. It's not unusual for a case to take more than a year to come to trial in Hinds County.

District Attorney Robert

FAST FACTS

Conditions of Irby's bond require her to give up her passport and she can't leave the state without permission. She is on electronic monitoring and under house arrest. Persons under house arrest normally are allowed to go to work, attend church and perform any child-related duties.

cution can be — and will be — ready for trial before that time."

Irby, 38, faces two counts of depraved-heart murder in the deaths of Dr. Mark Pogue, 35, a third-year resident at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, and his fiancée, Dr. Lisa Dedousis, a resident at Jersey City Medical Center in New Jersey.

Irby also faces an aggravated assault charge because of

Indians: Jackson police, Asian-Indian community want cooperation

From 1A

at least one thing: They need to talk.

"You are dealing with different cultures that have not communicated and have not understood each other before," said Tyrone Lewis, Jackson's interim police chief.

Ward 3 Jackson City Councilman Kenneth Stokes said the clash has led to a volatile situation.

"If we don't do something soon, it may explode. It's like a powder keg."

Two recent incidents have kept the powder dry:

■ In May, Jackson police officer Deshawn Howard, 28, and Jackson Public Schools security guard Cedric Body, 42, were charged with extortion involving Hardip Singh, the owner of Lynch Street Liquor. A JPD internal investigation of Howard is ongoing, Lewis said.

■ Also in May, a Hinds County grand jury indicted J&S Food Mart clerk Sarbrinder Pannu, 31, on murder and other charges for the Aug. 17 killing of James Hawthorne, 36, of Jackson. Police say Pannu followed Hawthorne outside his store, then shot him after he snatched some beer and fled without paying.

Pannu, who is out of jail on

\$50,000 bond, could not be reached for comment.

In August, protesters outside Pannu's store condemned, in general, Indian store owners' treatment of customers, many of whom are African-American.

"It's good that the owners open stores in these neighborhoods," Stokes said.

"But they don't employ any of the blacks in the stores. We have some very, very good Indian store owners; they are very good to the community."

"But you also have some jackasses. Disrespect is the main issue. Cussing people out, calling them bad words."

"Not all the store owners do this, but a lot of them do."

Disrespect cuts both ways, said Surinder P. Singh, 52, president of Jackson's Indian Store Owner Association, which has about 60 members.

"The young people may believe that, even though I have been here since before they were born, I'm not American. They believe we come from outside and try to take advantage of them."

"For instance, if a minor comes in and we say, 'No, we can't sell you cigarettes,' they start cursing us," Singh said.

"Why should we be abused for just doing our job?"

"We should have some protections from the police."

That protection has been lacking, Singh and others say.

"Every year, I get at least three or four thefts of my property," said Venkata Goli of Ridgeland, a computer scientist who owns commercial real estate in Jackson.

"Police say, 'It happens all the time.'"

Lewis said he wants JPD to reach out to the Indian business community and involve them in coming up with crime-fighting strategies.

"At one of these convenience store shootings, the windows were all blocked. Nobody could see in and nobody could see out," he said. "If we can let them know to remove some of the ads or window clutter, that would help."

The shooting mentioned by Lewis happened Tuesday night at Gas Plus on Medgar Evers Boulevard shortly after 10. Police say two men entered the gas station, shot 52-year-old clerk Harjit Randhawa in the leg and took cash.

In the last five years, at least nine other Indian store clerks or owners have been shot during robberies. Some

of them shot back.

This was not what immigrants envisioned when they came here, swelling Mississippi's Asian-Indian population to about 10,000.

"The reality is a little bit different from what we had in mind," Singh said. "But, overall, we are very fortunate to be American citizens."

Many of these citizens came here to operate businesses — often convenience stores or motels.

"They use their entire life savings to live the American dream," said Hitesh Desai of Madison, past president of the Indian Association.

"Often, they are in debt to their relatives and have sold their possessions in India to make a new beginning."

For many of these new Americans, even university graduates, it was difficult to get a job in India, said Baldev "Bob" Patel of Madison, who operates several Jackson-area hotels and motels.

"This is an opportunity country, no doubt," he said.

Many store owners try to make it, first, in low-income areas, he said. "It requires a

very minimum of investment.

"And there is a built-in clientele. The owners build a business, then move to another location when they're ready to expand."

It's called "geographic mobility," Rao said.

Like Rao, who has edited textbooks on nuclear energy, many Asian-Indians are professionals — engineers, professors, physicians.

Some came to America to study, and stayed. Others were recruited to work here.

But, whether they earn their living in an operating room, or in a convenience store, they're united on at least two fronts — preserving their culture, and easing tensions between themselves and the city of Jackson.

As for tension-easing, their leaders say they have an ally in Lewis, who took over as JPD's interim chief in April. Whether he will remain chief is unclear; Mayor-elect Harvey Johnson Jr. is mum on his plans for key appointments.

"We have great hope in this new police chief, and hope he stays on. As an officer, he developed very good rela-

tions with the Indian and other communities," Desai said.

"What is also needed is a race-relations board. We have talked to the police about establishing a liaison with the City Council as well."

For their part, JPD officials are trying to drum up interest among the Indian community to take part in the upcoming Citizens Police Academy, something Lewis reinstated.

"The tension has eased," Lewis said.

"More needs to be done."


But Goli, for one, believes the answer is more jobs. "There is no job creation in Jackson to compete with other areas of the metro," he said.

"Even if a small industry comes to Jackson, that will make a lot of difference."

"Once people find the work, they will be too busy making money to steal. ... Without a job, without money, what else can they do?"

Staff writer Kathleen Baydala contributed to this report.

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Hinduism common thread of Asian-Indian community

By Gary Pettus

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For many Asian-Indians in Mississippi, there is a common thread: Hinduism.

"Hinduism is a way of life," said K.R. Rao, 76, of Brandon, a retired nuclear engineer who estimates that 90 percent to 95 percent of Asian-Indians here are Hindus.

"Anybody can be a Hindu if you live a decent, truthful life."

As much as anyone, Rao is trying to hold onto that way of life.

Earlier this month, as they do every year, he and his wife Indira, a retired biologist, held a kind of potluck picnic in their backyard park, which Indira designed.

It was a feast of Asian-Indian culture, including traditional food, and music performed karaoke-style by many of the 100 or more people who attended.

They traveled from as far as Hattiesburg, Laurel and Port Gibson, the women and girls dressed in saris or the salwar kameez — pants with a loose-fitting tunic.

"This is a time for socializing and catch-up," said Hitesh Desai, past president of the Indian Association of Mississippi.

Under shade trees or the gazebo, they caught up with tables laden with naan, a chewy flat bread; alu-chole, a Punjabi dish made with potatoes and garbanzo beans in a spicy sauce; pulao, mixed rice with vegetables; gulab jamun,

pan-fried dough balls soaked in sugar syrup; and more.

The dishes evoked the flavors of a variety of Indian provinces or states.

"If you want a true example of a melting pot, it's India," Desai said.

Although Hindi is the common language, the country has around 40 more, plus 200 dialects "and probably 500 different accents," Desai said with a laugh.

Unlike the Indian Association's annual Taste of India, a cultural event for the public that raises thousands of dollars for charity, Rao's affair is private. It attracts mostly professionals and members of

the Asian-Indian business community and their families.

A sampling: Chandra Pathak, a retired Alcorn State professor of physics; Mangala Maddali of Clinton, a touring, Indian classical dancer; Deven Thacker, who owns Wacky Bear Factory in Flowood; Vidya Veda, who teaches Indian dance; and Dr. Indira Veerisetty, an internal-medicine physician at St. Dominic Hospital in Jackson.

"Many were born here. Many others worked hard to get here," said Rao, who has been in Brandon for 20 years, first coming to America in 1969 to study for his Ph.D. at

the University of Pittsburgh.

To get to his park, his guests followed a pathway of circular stones leading from the front yard through the backyard and over a wooden bridge to a shaded garden inhabited by statues of a Hindu deities, including Shiva, the destroyer/restorer.

They are not true idols, Rao said, because they have not been consecrated by a priest. "They are just stone."

Although most forms of Hinduism recognize a single deity, the various gods and goddesses represent different aspects of the supreme being.

Nearby, in Brandon, the 20-year-old Hindu Temple has

been dedicated to several of these gods and goddesses, including Shiva and Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity.

Next to the temple is a new, more massive building of sand, cement and pilings that will replace it later this year.

Although India embraces millions of Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians and members of other religions, most Indians are Hindu.

An estimated 1,200 families of Asian-Indian extraction live in the Jackson area.

A taste for their culture is spreading, spurred by the arrival of Indian restaurants and grocery stores here, and monthly screenings of Indian

movies at the Malco Grandview Cinema in Madison — a salute to Bollywood.

In their homes, and at gatherings such as Rao's, children of Indian families are taught to remain true to their heritage, to their birthright, without rejecting the country of their birth.

It's a lesson that many learn well. While their parents munched on naan and pulao, a dozen boys played hard at a game on the street in front of Rao's house.

American football.

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