

Wedding Season in Little Guyana



It's 4.45 pm on a Sunday, on a sleepy tree-lined block. A fusion of Caribbean dancehall and Bollywood music blares through a speaker duct-taped to a truck door outside a house adorned with bright yellow "Welcome" banners. Women in *sarees* dine on South Asian food in a white tent to the side of the house. Outside, men clad in traditional South-Asian *Kurtas* hold red solo cups.

It's wedding season in Little Guyana.

According to the Indo-Caribbean Alliance, Guyanese people are the fifth-largest foreign-born population in New York, with most Afro-Guyanese people living in Brooklyn neighborhoods like Flatbush while Indo-Guyanese people reside in Richmond Hill in Queens, aka 'Little Guyana', according to the New York Times and NYCgo.

From June to September, the close-knit community in Richmond Hills is packed with weddings due to the warm Summer weather. Last year, the wedding season took a pause as the pandemic devastated [New York City](#). As the pandemic slows down in New York and with the ever-increasing rate of vaccinations, wedding season has returned, much to the delight of shopkeepers in the area that rely heavily on customers shopping for weddings.



A wedding taking place at a home
in Little Guyana

Wedding season carries on, even with the prevalence of the Delta Variant. But shopkeepers report a different story.

Stores selling clothing, jewels, and items for religious wedding rituals line the streets of Little Guyana and Punjab Avenue. Some stores fly "Closing Down Sale" banners outside.

Ghulam Awam sells traditional south-Asian outfits for weddings and other occasions at his store, New East West Fashion. He hails from Islamabad, Pakistan, but has been in New York for 35 years. Awam says the wedding season will continue until the end of September. While business has increased from 2020, with COVID cases decreasing and pandemic-related restrictions loosened, business is not what it used to be, he says.



Ghulam Awam and his shop (from right to left)

“ It [the pandemic] affected our business last year because we rely heavily on wedding season and with the pandemic, there were no weddings,” he says. “Even though business is increasing, freight from India is expensive because of the pandemic. It’s not like how it used to be before COVID-19.” Most of the items in Awam’s shop are imported from India, which is dealing with its own COVID-19 crisis, according to Reuters News.



Shops selling wedding outfits. Many of these are discounted and on sale.

With approximately 33.1 million COVID-19 cases, India has the most reported number of positive COVID-19 cases after the United States, which has had 441,042 deaths, as reported by Reuters News. Now, Reuters reports that India is preparing for a possible third wave amidst the presence of the deadly Delta variant.

Awam says that before 2020, tourists from out-of-state and outside the United States would visit. Since the pandemic, no international tourists have visited.

Meanwhile, just a few stores down from Awam's business is Sai Bridal. Deepti and her husband, Anuj Sharma, opened this store in May of this year after owning businesses selling South Asian formal clothing in Long Island for nearly 12 years.

Deepti Sharma says that opening the business in the pandemic has been difficult. Like Awam, she says it has been costly to import from India. "It costs three times more now to ship items from India," Sharma says.

When asked about how her new business is going, Sharma replies, "It's been okay - 50/50 since wedding season but not 100 percent."

She says that people have been having simpler weddings since the pandemic which also affects business. For now, she says she has been taking all precautions in the business, providing hand sanitizer and gloves for customers to ensure a safer shopping experience.



Pictured left to Right: Deepti Sharma in front of shop merchandise. On the right, necklaces for formal events and weddings are displayed under the store sign,

Across the street is Amrit Textiles Inc. New York where Kawaljeet Kaur works. The store, owned by her brother, Rumpy Singh, has been operating in Little Guyana for nearly 20 years and is one of the oldest South Asian stores in the area. Kaur says the pandemic has impacted business greatly.

She says they've been lucky they have enough store inventory that they don't need to ship from India at the moment, avoiding high freight fees.

Last year, the business closed for almost 9 months. She says that with wedding season now, customers are starting to return but it's not the same as previous years.

"People are coming in again but are buying cheaper clothes as many people are holding simple, backyard weddings," Kaur says. She continues, "Because of the pandemic, we're not allowing people to return or exchange items for safety reasons too".

She also says people are going to cheaper stores in the area, whereas her store deals with more high-end merchandise.

Another consequence of the pandemic has been the increase in online shopping, which kaur says has impacted her brick-and-mortar store.

"Since the pandemic, the main effect is that people are buying [clothes] online but it's not the same quality as buying in store. Even Amazon sells Indian clothing. Many businesses here in liberty avenue [Little Guyana] closed last year," Kaur says.

As for now, Kaur worries about the impact of the Delta variant on her business. She says, "Because of Delta, people are scared to come in and scared to spend their money. I'm very worried about my business because if we have to close, what are we going to do?"

She sighs as she shrugs her shoulders, "What can we do?" she says.

Despite the commotion coming back with the return of wedding season in Little Guyana, an air of uncertainty looms over the future of the shops and shopkeepers in the area who are grappling with the damage of the pandemic on their livelihoods.



An advertisement for matrimonial services in Richmond Hills



Stores in Little Guyana hanging wedding decorations



Sign stating that Anjee's Bridal, one of the most packed bridal shops in the area, was closed from September 8-12 2021. A local informed me that it most likely is due to someone in the shop owner's family getting married.



Sign in Little Guyana asking to buy American-made goods.



Merchandise from Amrit Textiles Inc. New York

Sources:

1. Ghulam Awam

Store: New East West Fashion

Cell phone number: 3478074311

Store phone number: 7188456386

Email address: No email address

2. Deepti Sharma

Store: Sai Bridal

Cell Phone: 3472237224

Store Phone number: [\(718\) 343-1002](tel:(718)343-1002)

Email Address: anujps@hotmail.com

3. Kawaljeet Kaur

Store: Amrit Textiles Inc. New york

Cell phone: 3474761529

Store Phone Number: 7185291106

Email Address: rbindra560@gmail.com

Websites;

<https://www.indocaribbean.org/blog/population-analysis-of-guyanese-and-trinidadians-in-nyc>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/17/nyregion/indian-twice-removed.html>

<https://www.nycgo.com/articles/guide-to-little-guyana-richmond-hill-queens/>

<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/all-eyes-on-new-york-city-as-tens-of-thousands-return-to-work/2451180/>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/the-great-reboot/india-prepares-worst-ahead-possible-covid-19-third-wave-2021-09-07/>

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