

Visualizing the Indian Diaspora



IU Professor Follows Indian Culture around the World

Steve Raymer decided when he was in high school in Beloit, Wisconsin, that he was going to travel the world. At the same time, he discovered he had a talent for getting the right picture. Perhaps it was inevitable then that he would eventually find a place on the staff of the *National Geographic* magazine, where for a quarter century he braved war zones, revolutions, famines, and hostile environments of all kinds to bring his intimacy with these events to readers all over the world.

In 1995, Steve joined the faculty of the IU School of Journalism and has since then been a passionate classroom advocate for photojournalism. When he talks about the demands of that medium, it is hard to imagine that there is anything else that touches the human condition so intimately and so deeply. "Intuition and persistence define what I do," he says. "I take people to places they can't go. If you don't get a good picture, you haven't got close enough. Sometimes the closeness is hard to take, such as the patient hearing the news of her terminal illness." He insists, though, that pictures alone aren't enough: "I push my photojournalism students hard to become better writers. It's the unity of words and pictures that has the impact."

Raymer continues the work he began at *National Geographic*, but with projects grander than the format which that magazine would allow. His latest effort was published last year by the Indiana University Press. *Images of a Journey: India in Diaspora* follows the journeys of a culture finding new homes around the world—only the most recent chapter of a very long story. "I look at what has happened in the last 200 years," he says, "but if you go back a thousand years, you can find other Indian diasporas."

His own journey in search of this diaspora took four years. It began in Trinidad at the funeral of the uncle of a former student and took him all



These Indian women join the rush hour traffic on a water taxi crossing the short river that bisects the center of Dubai. The United Arab Emirates is wary of Western journalists and issues few visas to them. Raymer travelled there on a visitor's visa; he used his small Leica camera and much discretion to capture images of Indian workers in Dubai. What he found was that "although Indians form the backbone of the workforce, they are still visitors with no citizenship protection."



over the world to places that the diaspora has made exotic. To London with the second largest Hindu temple in the world. To the jungles of Vietnam, with a temple stunning in its current decay and its combination of Hindu and Southeast Asian architecture. To prosaic neighborhoods of Leicester, England, which during the celebration of the traditional Indian festival, Diwali, becomes the most brightly lit city in Europe. To the Indian Independence Day parade on Madison Ave.

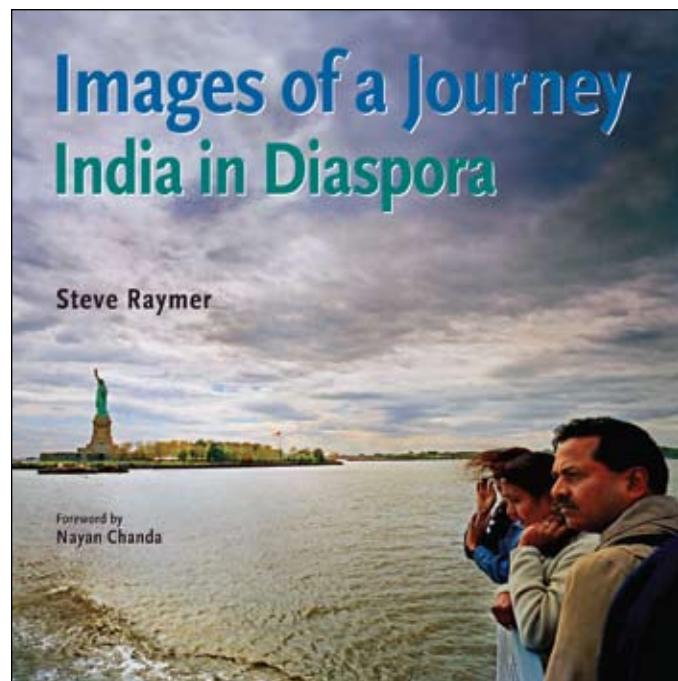
Getting close to one's subjects sometimes requires violating the rules. "If you always obey the rules, you will never get the picture," says Raymer. In an international setting, getting the picture sometimes means transgressing cultural boundaries. Only Jews are usually permitted close to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, so Raymer donned a yarmulke and found his way clear. Gender barriers divide the Sikh Temple in Edinburgh, and a quick peek around the wall did not please the guards. "I don't wait for permission," he says, "but if they object, I stop." The result of these transgressions is not the kind of exposé journalism that gives photographers a bad name. Rather, the viewer sees the private and public moments Raymer offers without ever losing sight of the dignity and humanity, and the individuality and variety, of his subjects.

Links:

- www.steveraymer.com/
- journalism.indiana.edu/
- www.iupress.indiana.edu

Raymer is working on two new books—a cultural history called *In Cortes' Shadow: From Veracruz to Mexico City* in collaboration with Professor Kathleen Myers of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and a second book of his own called *Redeeming Calcutta*, a profile of one of Asia's great megacities at a moment when the great diaspora may be reversing. "Indiana University may be a bit different culture from the rough and tumble of the journalism profession where I came of age," says Raymer, "but its mission to create and diffuse knowledge is the very same one I made my own on my first day as a young photographer at *National Geographic*."

▲ Born in eastern India and educated at Harvard, Mira Nair has been responsible for two decades of prize-winning cinema, much of it painting some of the West's finest images of Indian culture at home and abroad. She is currently at work on a major project starring Johnny Depp and filming on three continents. "Shortly after I arrived at her Manhattan office," Raymer explains, "she got a phone call. Something had gone wrong with a project in Europe. This was followed by another call, and another. I realized my interview would not last long, and I started snapping what pictures I could. Indeed, soon after I took this shot, she had to end the meeting."



Raymer's photo epic on emigration from India to all parts of the globe was published by IU Press in 2007. It follows an effort of similar proportions on Islam in Southeast Asia. In addition to a quarter century of work for National Geographic, Raymer has published books on Russia and Vietnam.



In the shadow of Edinburgh Castle, along the Firth of Forth waterfront in the heart of the Scottish capital, sits a district that has been home to a Punjabi community for more than 60 years. A former Anglican church there, designed by the father of the Victorian Prime Minister William Gladstone, has been transformed into a Sikh holy place. Although women and men are segregated for worship, Raymer was able to capture this fleeting glimpse of women at worship.



The young sharpshooter from Manipor in northeast India had been in Israel just a few months, but as a member of the Israeli army, he was charged with protecting one of Judaism's most sacred sites. This area along the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, with religious connections going back possibly three millennia, has attracted Jews for solemn prayer since medieval times.



Southall, an area of West London regularly buzzed by the air traffic out of Heathrow, boasts the largest Asian shopping area in London. Much of the world knows it as the setting for the movie, Bend It Like Beckham. Immigrants from India and Pakistan have been attracted to work opportunities in this region for many decades. Now, those same opportunities are attracting immigrants from the Caribbean, and new ethnic challenges arise.

