

Reading

“Berkeley Renames Downtown Street ‘Kala Bagai Way’ After South Asian Immigrant Activist”

After a year-long public campaign, the Berkeley City Council voted unanimously to approve renaming a street “Kala Bagai Way” after a South Asian immigrant who was discriminated against in Berkeley.

“My family and I feel great pride and love that Berkeley would honor my grandmother by naming a part of Shattuck Avenue for her,” Rani Bagai said.

Kala Bagai Way will be located on the two-block eastern area of Shattuck Avenue between Center Street and University Avenue—a block from the Downtown Berkeley BART station and a block UC Berkeley.

“A lot of times we don’t participate in city processes because we don’t know if we belong in a city,” said Barnali Ghosh, a community historian and creator of the Kala Bagai Way campaign, at a live-watch and community celebration late Tuesday evening. “It’s a continuous sort of up and down feeling . . . I see this as a way of grounding us. It allows me to put down my roots—it allows me to take leadership, feel a sense of community.”

Bagai’s granddaughter said her grandmother understood the importance of a welcoming community and welcoming strangers: “I can think of no better person to name a street for, to symbolize a welcoming community and nation . . . no one who better exemplifies generosity of spirit, than my grandmother,” she said.

The street’s renaming is part of a \$10.3 million project called the Shattuck Avenue reconfiguration project. Prior to Tuesday’s City Council meeting, the city of Berkeley collected more than 1,000 name proposals and narrowed down the list to 10.

Kala Bagai was born in 1892 in Amritsar, now India, and moved to the Bay Area with her husband, Vaishno Das Bagai, and their three children in 1915. When they tried to move into a Berkeley home they purchased, racist neighbors blocked them from entering. Bagai was one of the first South Asian women on the West Coast and an early immigrant activist and community builder.

Campaigners remember Kala Bagai, nicknamed Mother India, for her “resilience, leadership, and community activism,” they said in a statement. Activists say Kala Bagai Way brings to light a larger story of South Asians in Berkeley, going back more than 100 years. This will be the first Berkeley street named after an Asian American, and one of the first named after a woman of color.

Bagai’s granddaughter also wrote an opinion piece in *Berkeleyside* in March saying, “My grandmother tried to make Berkeley her home a century ago, only to be driven out of the city because of her race.”

It is unclear if this is the first street in the U.S. named after a South Asian activist, but Barnali Ghosh, who has been actively campaigning for Kala Bagai's name for the street renaming project, said it's unique to have a street named after her because Bagai is a South Asian American historical figure. Ghosh co-hosts Berkeley's South Asian Radical History Walking Tour and wrote an opinion piece in *Berkeleyside* in support of Bagai.

Though Kala Bagai may not have prominent name recognition, South Asian publications and Bay Area historians have discussed her legacy in the South Asian American Digital Archive, and *The Aerogram*. Her voice can be heard in this oral history interview from 1982. She died in 1983.¹

¹ Lakshmi Sarah, "Berkeley Renames Downtown Street 'Kala Bagai Way' After South Asian Immigrant Activist," *KQED.com*, September 15, 2020, accessed September 7, 2022.