

KRISHNENDU RAY



# The Migrant's ➤ Table ◀

*Meals and Memories in  
Bengali-American Households*

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Temple University Press  
Philadelphia

Temple University Press  
1601 North Broad Street  
Philadelphia PA 19122  
*www.temple.edu/tempress*

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Published 2004  
Printed in the United States of America

Text design by Kate Nichols

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the  
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for  
Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Ray, Krishnendu.

The migrant's table : meals and memories in Bengali-American households /  
Krishnendu Ray.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 1-59213-095-X (alk. paper) — ISBN 1-59213-096-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Food habits—United States. 2. Food habits—India—Bengal.
3. Bengali Americans—Food. 4. Bengali Americans—Social life and customs.
- I. Title.

GT2853.U5R39 2004

394.1'2'0899144073—dc22 2004046004

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

## Acknowledgments

I must begin by acknowledging the great debt of gratitude I owe to my adviser, Professor Mark Selden, for his untiring effort, encouragement, and guidance through many years. Thanks to my other fabulous teachers: Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins, Caglar Keyder, Dale Tomich, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Thanks are also due to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for her astute comments on early drafts and for pointing me in the right direction through the minefield of cultural studies. I also extend my gratitude to Amy Bentley, James Geshwender, Anthony D. King, members of my dissertation committee, for their helpful comments and willingness to review this text on short notice.

Long conversations and many disagreements with my friends Abye Assefa, Florence Molke, Khaldoun Samman, and Steven Sherman sharpened my perspective and egged me on. I owe much to my wife, Shari Schultz, whose critique of my intolerably long sentences was crucial in developing a more readable style, and to my stepchildren Joey and Stasia for their patience and understanding through all the years when I could not be available for many a fatherly duty. My newborn son, Rudra, in keeping me away from the manuscript, helped me in the task of editing by generating creative distance from the text.

Finally, I am indebted to numerous anonymous reviewers and to Janet Francendese, William Regier, and Andrew Smith, whose encouragement and critiques have improved the final product. Sidney Mintz's appraisal of what was the introduction in the manuscript, a vastly different chapter on ethnicity, and on the concluding chapter enabled me to see my folly and sharpen my perspective while focusing my story. I owe him a deep debt of gratitude. Thanks to Pauline Adema for the last-minute editorial work. Most importantly, I could not have written this book without the patience, participation, and encouragement of numerous Bengali-American respondents and hosts. This is really their work, which I have merely narrated and been credited with. I hope I have not disappointed them.

### *Credits*

A preliminary version of some sections of Chapter 3 was published as "Meals, Migration and Modernity: Domestic Cooking and Bengali Indian Ethnicity in the United States," *Amerasia* 24, no. 1 (1998): 105–27.

A section of Chapter 4 was published as "Why Isn't Irish Food Hip? A Review Essay," *Newsletter of the Association for the Study of Food and Society*, March 2002.

Sections of Chapter 6 were published as "The Nation Betrayed: Or About Those Who Left," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 26 (June 28, 2003): 2722–29.

The map on Indian vegetarianism (p. 33) is reproduced from K. T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (1994), by permission of Oxford University Press India, New Delhi.

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## CHAPTER 1



# Introduction

*"Home" has become such a scattered, damaged, various, concept in our present travails.*

SALMAN RUSHDIE, *EAST, WEST: STORIES* (1995: 93)

*The government has observed that next to rice and water, stories are the most-demanded stuff in daily life. . . . Every moment someone or other is always asking for a story.*

R. K. NARAYAN, *A WRITER'S NIGHTMARE* (1988: 69)

This is a story about "rice and water" and the violations of geography by history. Galvanized by voluntary exile, it is an attempt to read the grain for the encounter between cultures buried in the depth of hearth and home, not simply between East and West but also within ourselves—the colonized and decolonized fragments of our minds and the complicit and resistant practices of cooking and eating. "Immigration often involves dislocation and social demotion," writes Bharati Mukherjee, a Bengali-American author. "Immigrants carry the bruises, and often the scars, from missed signals and misread signs. They've traded their certain place (sometimes humble, sometimes exalted) in a fixed society for a crazy chance at something elusive called personal happiness. I don't say they'll find it; it's enough that they try" (Mukherjee 2003: A8).

Cuisine, like religion, is one of the sites where the migrant turns away hesitatingly from the embrace of the metropole. In the case of most of my respondents, the migrant has come to the metropole at her husband's bidding to partake of its fabled riches, raise Bengali children, maintain the home, and cook Bengali food. It is a difficult task that must be fulfilled with



a certain finesse that balances the needs of maintaining particularity while participating in the universalizing project of capitalist modernity.

Of course, taste evokes, often in a disjointed way, a whole structure of feeling, which Marcel Proust has immortalized. On a cold, wet, wintry day, the narrator's mother in *Swann's Way* offered him tea and "one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines'" (Proust 1970: 34). Soon enough, his childhood memories of Combray burst forth in an inadvertent torrent, triggered by that "inseparable paramour, the taste of cake soaked in tea" (Proust 1934: 35):

And suddenly the memory returns. . . . [W]hen from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (Proust 1934: 36)

Recently, Chitra Divakaruni, reflecting on the specificity of Asian American poetry, wrote: "I think the aim of poetry in general is to recreate in the reader the powerful emotions the writer experienced while in a certain place or situation. . . . One of the things Asian American poetry draws on to achieve this is the writers' rich heritages—the home cultures that are always inside our heads and hearts" (Divakaruni 1994: 35). This book is in that sense a prose poem.

I inhabit three lands: the United States, where I now reside; India, which is in my being and memory; and the kitchen, the desk, and the classroom, which are my active everyday lands. Out of these lands I have fashioned a story. It is peopled with lost and newly discovered tastes, friends, and enemies, too, that I have acquired in my travels through these lands.

Traveling, of course, entails infidelity. It is undertaken with the sly hope of interrupting domesticity. But the search for home reasserts itself like a riptide, drawing us toward the hearth as if it were an elemental force, particularly when we have left it behind, as James Baldwin (1956: 116) knew:

"Why, you will go home and then you will find that home is not home anymore. Then you will really be in trouble. As long as you stay here, you can always think: One day I will go home." . . .

"Beautiful logic," I said. "You mean I have a home to go to as long as I don't go there?"

Giovanni laughed. "Well, isn't it true? You don't have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you never can go back."

Yet behind the dread of homelessness is a desire for it, because the familiar world of our homes can be suffocatingly small. Perhaps it is impossible to know our authentic selves. We are forever mired in polarities of dread and desire for home and homelessness.

This story is in another sense a struggle to come home while fleeing from it. It is a return from Marxist utopia to the magic, myth, and tedium of cooking. It is the whittling down of big dreams into smaller ones. Two decades ago as I was becoming an intellectual, I also became a Marxist. As a Marxist I sought big questions, and in particular as a Third World Marxist I was compelled by the developmentalist promise of the Soviet experiment. After years of activism, I was confronted with martial law in Poland and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. (That feels so long ago now!) That is when my Marxism began to falter, which eventually took me on a route that led to this place—a retreat from the public drama into the private universe.

Nevertheless, big Marxist questions continued to fashion my intellectual interests. I went to graduate school at the State University of New York at Binghamton so I could work with some of the stalwarts of the intellectual New Left, such as Giovanni Arrighi, James Petras, Mark Selden, and Immanuel Wallerstein. I began work on the rise and the fall of the Soviet Union from the perspective of long-term, large-scale social change. But by 1994, I had exhausted my interest in the socialist experiment and was intellectually tired of big questions and the quest for ponderous answers. In part, the shift of interest was a product of changing taste and political climate: I hungered for the concrete detail so valorized by the antipoliticians of the Velvet Revolutions of 1989. I began the recoil toward the quotidian, the small questions of everyday life. I was intrigued by the way people craft much of their identities around the minutiae of everyday existence. That is what drew me to food. Fernand Braudel was the bridge for me between

large-scale long-term change and the details of material culture as elaborated in *Structures of Everyday Life* (1981).

This book attempts to get out from under the structural flows of long-term, large-scale social change. Instead, it looks at how some people try to come to terms with social processes such as migration, modernity, and globalization. It is a view of social change as a lived everyday experience. The scale is intimate rather than monumental, yet it belongs to the same spiritual world.

In part, my story has haltingly poured itself into an inadequate container. In part, like the quotidian, it has been carried by sheer inertia. There is no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, rather the steady accumulation of a thousand anecdotes and observations. I am after small truths rather than lumbering ones. Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson would have said, “I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me.” I have tried to remain true to that process in the following pages. At the end of large, apparently empiricist tracts I have sought to give meaning—to read a symbol and give it significance. In some sense, this is my groping for meaning in the quotidian.

I have sought plausible readings of sociological facts without self-destructing my story in a frenzy of interpretation and overinterpretation. Further, I have tried neither to resolve all contradictions accepted by my respondents nor, at the other extreme, to read a mundane fact necessarily as a conundrum. Whether I have strayed into the limits of empiricism or into those of unconstrained interpretation is left to the reader to decide.

## Central Questions

What are the changes wrought by immigration in the deep structures of everyday life, especially in the realm of food practices? What do these transformations tell us about the processes of globalization and modernization? These are the two questions that animate this work.

My attempt is to make cuisine speak to the experiences of migration and show the resultant transformations of taste. What can the eating and cooking habits of migrants tell us about assimilation and accommodation? How does food relate the native to the migrant, and the ethnic to the universal? In the end, we arrive at theory, which takes as its central theme the problem of what to eat.

Through much of the twentieth century, anthropology—especially cultural anthropology—stood almost by itself among the social sciences, seeking to think systematically about the “blinding fetish” that is food (Douglas 1977: 7). Nevertheless, anthropological studies of food remain rooted in a place, a locale, usually the “original” site of a cultural system in isolation from any other place. In keeping with these anthropological impulses, researchers of South Asian food practices have ignored the diaspora. Ravindra S. Khare, the preeminent anthropologist of South Asian cuisine, concentrates almost exclusively on the Kanya-Kubja Brahmins of the Rae Bareilly region of India, drawing an exquisitely detailed portrait of a “traditional” culinary culture. Khare (1976b: 7) has warned that, “if the orthodox culinary pattern is not studied now, one may lose an opportunity to record a vanishing segment of culinary culture, and to examine its systematic significance.” But the more interesting question for me is: What are these orthodox practices vanishing into and why? In trying to answer that question, Arjun Appadurai has initiated work on the practices of the urban middle classes that are beginning to overwhelm what Khare calls the “orthodoxy” (Appadurai 1988). Appadurai expands the scope of his inquiry to include the *intra*-national diaspora within India. I follow his lead in taking one more step to include the culinary practices of the *inter*-national diaspora.

My work deals with food as a place-making practice. Nobody has written more presciently on space and place than Michel Foucault, who contended in a 1967 lecture that “the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history; with its themes of development of the ever-accumulating past, with great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. . . . The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” (Foucault 1986: 22).

After describing various kinds of spaces, such as places of temporary relaxation (cafés, cinemas, beaches) and sites of rest (the house, the bedroom, and the bed), Foucault settles on an analysis of sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. These spaces . . . are of two main types” (Foucault 1986: 24). They are “unreal spaces” such as utopias, which are often inverted analogies of the real space of society, and heterotopias, which are real spaces but counter-sites that, among other things, “juxtapose in a single real space several spaces that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986: 25). In my case, one place, such as a suburb of Chicago, can be many

places: Bengal, America, India—and, of course, a suburb of Chicago, too. Migrant cuisine has a heterotopic effect insofar as the practices of a local peripheral people, such as Bengalis who were made global through British imperialism, are then relocalized in an American suburb. What I mean is that the local and provincial (in my case, Bengali food practices) penetrates the global (America) and reconstitutes the latter. It brings the Orient home and in the process disorients the Occident (cf. Hall 1997). It is not a very assertive reorientation yet, but a slow, seeping corruption of Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the world.

In some senses, such practices are destabilizing because these particular “Orientals” come with all of the meritocratic qualifications of the Occidental world. The Bengali Americans under discussion are mostly doctors, engineers, and academics. In another sense, these particular “Orientals” are much less a threat to bourgeois conceptions of the world because they come fully socialized into global middle-class values and prejudices. Hence, they easily become model minorities who are counterposed to domestic classes and races that will not assimilate into middle-class oblivion. In that sense, this local protagonist (the Bengali middle class) is complicit in the global imperial claims of the metropole. It is globalization with a brown face. The protagonist is Nietzsche’s “state nomads without home”—a new kind of man, arrogant and servile, corrupt and resilient at the same time.

Underpinning much of the discussion of globalization is the assumption that such a process is primarily a matter of Americanization of the world—the thesis of increasing homogenization of the globe under the hegemony of American icons such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Levi’s jeans. Over the past few decades, however, in the work of Appadurai, Stuart Hall, and Ulf Hannerz, a sophisticated counter-argument has developed (Appadurai 1996; Featherstone et al. 1995; Hall et al. 1996; King 1997). It has been shown that even apparently homogeneous and transparent commodities such as hamburgers and Coke acquire complicated local resonance. For instance, what is “fast food” in the United States is often considered elaborated cuisine in Beijing (Watson 1997). So the meanings are not homogeneous, even if there is a certain vector of globalization leading from the West to the East. Sometimes the hypervalorized commodities are themselves materially transformed, as McDonald’s hamburgers in New Delhi are bereft of any beef. Nevertheless, both the theorists of cultural homogenization (such as W.W. Rostow and Samuel Huntington) and their critics have concentrated on empirical work that looks at the dispersal of

Western culture and commodities, even if they concede that the transmission complicates the process.

What if we imagine other trajectories of globalization, such as globalization in the old-fashioned way when peripheral peoples migrated to the metropole? The issue is further complicated when these peripheral peoples are not the working classes of yore but belong to the affluent middle class. West Bengali migrants in the United States provide a particularly interesting window of opportunity for inquiry, because almost all West Bengali immigrants belong to this class. I am particularly interested in this class because it is often a protagonist of globalization; in addition, its members are under tremendous assimilative pressure and yet have the most resources to resist it if they choose to do so. To keep my analysis focused on the middle class, I have excluded Bangladeshi migrants, who are Bengali but also mostly working class. Furthermore, Bangladeshi migrants are predominantly Muslims and bring a sensibility quite distinct from that of the middle-class Hindu protagonists in my story. Eventually, I hope to compare the two across lines of class and religion, but that is not my project here.

It is my focus on the intimate world of middle-class migrants that makes my work distinctive and, I suggest, interesting. Even the most sophisticated discussions of globalization, as in the case of Appadurai, have concentrated on the public sphere, such as restaurants, electronic media, movies, and sporting events (Appadurai 1996; Breckenridge 1995). In contrast, I look at the private sphere of the middle class of these global flows. These social actors are not of the metropolitan core; they were produced by earlier phases of globalization. Today they are the agents of globalization at the most mundane level. I am interested not in their performance in the marketplace of commodities and ideas but in their private worlds. My interest is not in the role of global financiers or state makers or peripheral peasants outside the reach of the market. I focus, rather, on middle managers in their mundane, nonpublic lives—the domestic lives of the unromantic bourgeoisie of global capitalism. My project problematizes the role of professionals as globalizers who nevertheless have to face a personal consequence of that process—disinterring the deep structures of their everyday lives. What do these paragons of globalization do when their deepest routines of redundant habits become inadequate? Perhaps he only likes to build it, and does not want to live in it, as Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* suggests about the Faustian deal between modern man and modernity in *Notes from Underground* (1990 [1864]).

An aspect of this work that is relatively new is the attention to the South Asian diaspora. South Asia has a population base of more than 1 billion people, but it has contributed only about 20 million people to overseas migration. Overseas Chinese, in contrast, number three times as many (Clarke et al. 1990: 1). The lack of attention to the lives of South Asian migrants may have something to do with this paucity of numbers and the migrants' great dispersal. But as a largely professional and highly skilled migrant community in the United States, South Asians have a far greater weight and visibility than their numerical strength of about 2 million may justify.

With Indian migrants counted separately only since the 1980 census, Indian-American studies is in its infancy, still concentrating largely on providing aggregate data about numbers, age, family structure, and income. Ethnographic studies continue to be a rarity. Without ethnographies, we cannot begin to get a sense of the lifestyles of Indian Americans. As a consequence, very little has been written about Indian-American culinary practices (especially non-commodified, domestic ones) and their importance in imagining, affirming, and undermining a sense of community. There is no book-length treatment of the subject, and what exists is overwhelmed by the rhetorical devices of postmodernism, through which we learn very little about what migrants do and much too much about the writer's anxieties about what she or he thinks migrants are trying to imply in doing what they appear to be doing. This work seeks to bring sociology and anthropology to the international South Asian diaspora.

Some of the originality of this work also resides in its multidisciplinary. It draws on concepts and traditions in cultural studies (especially studies of globalization), sociology of taste, anthropology of food, and immigration history. It is marked by an awareness that sometimes we can study a community only by ignoring national boundaries, especially in a world that is an integrated yet differentiated global economy, geopolitical system, and geocultural order.

## Method and Technique

This work mines four kinds of data for meaning. One line of inquiry is based on a sociological survey of food practices completed by 126 Bengali-American respondents representing households with 436 individuals. This line of inquiry includes a perusal of the ethnic press, cookbooks, and

food-related websites. The second line of inquiry is an ethnography produced by directly observing the daily food practices of three Bengali-American households through three summers over a three-year period. The third vector is a synthesis of the secondary literature in anthropology and sociology. Finally, my own experience as an Indian immigrant in the United States undergirds the whole project.

In the historical section, I tell the story of Bengali culinary culture. Indian historians of food are the main source. What is original here is the comparative view of Bengali and American cooking. The distinctive perspective of this work is that of a researcher who brings his own cultural and biographical history to point out differences and similarities between the two traditions. Thus, the book is in some senses not only a history but also a mythography of what is “American” food and what is “Bengali” food.

As stated earlier, this work draws on the responses of Bengali-American respondents to a detailed questionnaire, their names drawn randomly from the *Directory of Bengalis of North America* (1994). The questionnaire had two sections (see Appendix 1). The general section asked for information about year of immigration, income, family structure, educational level, caste, and so on. The second section dealt with specific questions about cooking and eating that ranged from who does the cooking, the previous week’s menu, and the size of the grocery bill to the serving of beef and alcohol. These surveys enabled me to do two things: (1) construct a profile of food practices of Bengali Americans, including commonalities and idiosyncrasies; and (2) frame the next line of inquiry—the ethnography.

The ethnography is a product of direct observation of the culinary practices of three Bengali households in the United States over a three-year period. I use the term “ethnography” in the generic sense of participant observation, which allowed me to look at things that are often unstated or misread because they are too obvious and hence would not be identified by the sociological survey. Participant observation is a feat of immersion and a product of some experiential distance. Empathetic immersion enables one to catch the nuances and the allusions, and distance makes visible what is often too obvious to be noticed by the insider. Distance also makes a comparative perspective possible (Gans 1968; Geertz 1983: 70).

Of the two—immersion and distance—perhaps the greater danger in my case remains that of being an insider. That is, it is possible that I will not see what would be visible from the outside. It remains to be seen whether I can transcend these limits. I am an insider as a middle-class Bengali-Oriya



migrant to the United States, and an outsider in the sense that I am not an active member of the Bengali community and my milieu is largely one of First World intellectuals. Am I an ethnographer or a native informant? I am probably a “stranger” in Simmel’s sense—an element of the group but not fully part of it. By virtue of this partial involvement in group affairs, I am called on to play a role that others cannot: that of objective confidante (Simmel 1950: 402–8).

There is an additional danger. The closer I get in intensity and depth, the farther I recede on the possibilities of generalizing because of the tension between the general and the particular that social science has to live with. I attempted to overcome this problem in part by using the questionnaires. The questionnaires, then, are a foil to the deep ethnography.

Since this work is one of transcultural interpretation, my position as both an insider and an outsider enables me to reveal nondiscursive knowledge that makes it possible for Bengalis to live in America. Following Pierre Bourdieu, I pay close attention to the practices of ordinary living: the little routines that people enact, again and again, in working, eating, sleeping, and relaxing, as well as the little scenarios of etiquette they play out in social interaction, underpinned by notions of temporal, spatial, and social ordering. Ethnography allows the study of people in their own time and space—that is, it allows me to get closer to the hermeneutic dimension of the social sciences, the dimension of understanding that is constitutive of constructing a plausible explanation for things. Furthermore, as an immigrant I attempt to connect my personal troubles to the public issues of social structure, as suggested by C. Wright Mills (1959: 6), who wrote, “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (see also Laslett 1991).

I began this book not with a hypothesis but with a number of empirical questions. In seeking answers to these questions, I developed theories about certain relationships. As the project matured, I moved from asking basic empirical questions about what are Bengali-American food practices and the mentalities associated with them to viewing these practices through theories of three kinds of overlapping relationships: the traditional and the modern; the ethnic and the universal; and the local and the global. In the process, I came to see food as a place-making practice and feeding as one of the processes by which we structure time and space. I also learned much about the symbolic ingenuity of people in the consumption of things and in the making of their communities through the process of consumption.