Meals, Migration, and Modernity: Domestic Cooking and Bengali Indian Ethnicity in the United States

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Migration engenders complex changes in the deep structures of peoples' everyday lives where in certain respects they celebrate the transformations and in other aspects they desperately seek rootedness. "Home" for migrants is a complex place—they hope to rebuild their homes a new, bring some of the old home with them and also fantasize about leaving their traditional homes. Migrant food practices reflect this ambivalence.

Choices made by Bengali-Americans about different meals of the day thus are a finely choreographed reflection of their multifaceted self. "Traditional" dinners and non-traditional breakfasts are acts on a gastronomic stage on which the American Bengali reenacts larger concerns about ethnicity, patriarchy, and modernity.

Breakfast and dinner sets the Bengali out on different paths.

Breakfast veers towards the stereotype of melting syncretism, and dinner, towards the cliché of ethnic identity. Refusing to choose either of these options in full, the American Bengali emerges as an increasingly heterogenous subject who refuses either to be the simple ethnic other or the assimilated American.

1. Opening the issues

For most of the approximately ten thousand Bengali Indian households in the United States, breakfast eaten at home is milk and cereal or toast. Lunch, consumed at or near the workplace, is a salad, or a slice of pizza, sometimes a sandwich. Lunch for those who eat at home is usually leftovers from dinner or a soup and a sandwich. In contrast, dinner remains the realm of "tradition" where there is still a literal truth to the question asked by a
Bengali: “Have you eaten rice?” when she means “have you eaten?” Rice, curried lentils and fish cooked in a sauce with panch phoron (a Bengali five-spice combination) and mustard oil, is eaten for dinner, more often in the United States than in Calcutta.

In contrast to dinner, lunch has changed in the other direction—that is, towards the appropriation of what are called American foods. That is relatively easy to explain. Lunch is the only meal that is regularly consumed in the public sphere with its associated rules of etiquette—such as the use of silverware—and pressures of assimilation.

Breakfast has changed a little less dramatically than lunch but what is intriguing is that this transformation has occurred at home—the constructed realm of tradition. In contrast, at dinner—another meal consumed at home—the traditional repertoire is insisted upon.

II. Dinner and Breakfast

It is of course an exaggeration to say that dinner remains wholly “traditional” in any meaningful sense. It would be more accurate to argue that dinner is perceived to have remained traditional while in reality it has changed. Dinner has changed in two opposing directions. In some cases new ingredients and processes have been incorporated within an overwhelmingly Bengali paradigm. In other instances the Bengalis of the dinner has been desperately exaggerated.

Take for instance the appetizer for Saturday night dinner (see appendix I) — ground turkey pokara (croquettes) with chopped garlic, ginger, onion and fresh coriander (cilantro). Turkey is hardly a traditional Bengali ingredient. Yet it is cooked in a typically Bengali form—pokara—with ground turkey replacing ground goat meat. Any meat in Bengali cuisine is usually cooked with the trinity of wet spices—onion, ginger, garlic. It is so in the case of the pokara.

The fresh coriander in the pokara provides a glimpse of the syncretic twist in the repertoire. It appears not only in the croquettes on Saturday night but at the dinner table on Monday as a herb in the dal (lentil soup) and on Tuesday in the fish curry (see appendix I again). Although fresh coriander is a popular South Indian herb, it rarely appears as regularly in Bengali cuisine as it does in the food of the household discussed here. Just as the turkey in the pokara hints at a process of creation or on a global scale, the use of fresh coriander suggests the making of a syncretic national Indian cuisine in the diaspora.

Then there is the more explicit intermingling of American and Bengali cuisines on Thursday night when the menu is: roasted chicken legs, steamed rice, American style salad, sauteed bitters
week. Like rice, fish has migrated from lunch to dinner, and dinner has become more important in retaining a Bengali culinary identity in the United States. Further, the portion-size of fish has increased from about four-onces on the outside in Calcutta to about six- to eight-ounces.4

Perhaps a Bengali would not be a Bengali without consuming rice and fish in one of the main meals of the day. As dinner has come to be the only main meal, Bengali-Americans feel compelled to partake of ingredients that anchor their Bengaliness—rice and fish. Thus, we can conclude that dinner has changed in two directions: new ingredients, such as turkey, are absorbed into old culinary paradigms; and the use of old constituents, such as rice and fish, are insisted upon. One absorbs change and the other re-invents tradition in a new context.

Breakfast has changed equally dramatically but in other directions. Most Bengali-Americans have moved from roiti (homemade wheat flat bread) and sauteed vegetables or toast, to cereals. Nevertheless, 75 percent have stuck to tea as the beverage of choice rather than move to coffee. Bengali-American adoption of industrialized breakfast cereal may be explained, first, by the power of persuasion of the American breakfast-cereal industry; second, by convenience for women who do the cooking. A little time saved in making breakfast compensates for the cooking and cleaning that progresses late into the previous night. (Especially because Bengali-Americans tend to have dinner an hour or two later than Anglo-American families). Finally, middle-class Bengali women in the United States have to make do without part-time maids and full-time servants, who were the ones who made roiti for most middle-class Calcuttan families. The “servant problem” adds to the quest for early morning convenience.

Yet, convenience cannot carry the weight of the whole argument. If convenience was the only concern dinner should have changed equally dramatically, because a Bengali dinner is more demanding than breakfast on a woman’s labor. Yet, to serve western food for dinner would be equivalent to serving sandwiches for supper in an Anglo-American household.

With breakfast and dinner, it is as if Bengalis have divided up the day into what they characterize as moments of “modernity” and moments of “tradition,” both perceived as good and necessary in their separate places. This duality towards the “modern” and the “traditional”—the former imagined as embodied in something as mundane as the breakfast cereal and the latter with rice and fish—is central to the identity of the bhadrasamaj (white-collar Bengali middle-class, literally “respectable society”). The Bengali bhadrasamaj has for long been both threatened and seduced by the promise of modernization and they have acted on those concerns in organizing their food practices in the United States.

III. The Modern and the Traditional: The Political Uses of Food

Since the Bengali Renaissance in the beginning of the nineteenth century, food has been an important symbol in the contest between Westernizers and Traditionalists. Many Bengalis have a fond place in their hearts for the iconoclasts of the Young Bengal Movement, such as Henry Vivian Derozio who along with his followers (in the early decades of the nineteenth century), relished beef and downed innumerable “pigs” of whiskey and rum in public to the great consternation of orthodox Hindus.3 Others have been deeply offended by the exaggerated anglophilia of the same students orbiting around the mercurial professor at Hindu College.

Although the task of closely reading the various nationalist contestations around food awaits its historian, here I intend to merely provide a flavor of that dispute.6 The Bengal Renaissance, born in the 1820s, was a complex reaction to the modernist seduction of Westernization and the racist assumptions of British imperialism. The Bengal Renaissance began as an embrace of British Orientalism, which until the 1870s, was sympathetic to Indian “traditions,” and engaged in academic research geared to rediscovering the “glorious” Hindu past. British Orientalists and Calcutta intellectuals such as Raja Rammohun Roy viewed themselves as syncretic modernizers of the Hindu tradition, often attempting to create a monothestic Hinduism. Nevertheless, by the 1870s British attitudes had shifted to a wholesale condemnation of Hinduism and it is only then that the Bengali Renaissance, as represented in figures such as Rajman Bose, took on a distinctive nationalist flavor. The process was remarkably tortuous especially for individuals such as Keshub Chandra Sen who never could abandon their universalism and become a nationalist.7

This trajectory of the initial embrace of the West and the eventual distancing from it may be a universal pattern in the contact between the West and the non-West. Samuel Huntington has recently argued that:

Initially, Westernization and modernization are closely linked, with the non-Western society absorbing substantial elements of Western culture and making slow progress towards modernization. As the pace of modernization increases, however, the rate of Westernization declines and the indigenous culture goes through a revival. Further modernization then alters the civilizational balance of power between the West and the non-Western society.
bolsters the power and self-confidence of that society, and strengthens commitment to the indigenous culture.

In the early phases of change, Westernization thus promotes modernization. In the later phases, modernization promotes des- Westernization and the resurgence of indigenous culture in two ways. At the societal level, modernization enhances the economic, military, and political power of the society as a whole and encourages the people of the society to have confidence in their culture and to become culturally assertive. At the individual level, modernization generates feelings of alienation and anomic as traditional bonds and social relations are broken and leads to crises of identity in which religion provides an answer.8

Withdrawal and reaffirmation of local habits and customs have always been one of the elemental reactions to novelties that threaten established verities and routines of life, especially when the contact with the West takes the form of colonization and predatory racism.

Others, such as, Partha Chatterjee, have inverted the sequence and have elaborated on the same process in terms that are less self-congratulatory than Huntington's. Chatterjee contends that

[Anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains: the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," or the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa.9

According to Chatterjee's reading, everyday practices of food production and consumption were usually considered a part of the "inner," that is, spiritual/private domain. Nevertheless even within this "inner" domain there have been occasional efforts made by urban and elite minorities to borrow foreign ideas and adapt them to local use. Intellectuals of the Bengal Renaissance, as elites whose imaginations spanned both civilizations, sought to creatively appropriate Modernization and established an organization to further that agenda—the Brahma Samaj.

The Brahma Samaj, in its various incarnations, was the prominent organization of the Bengal Renaissance within whose folds the most important debates of reform and cultural resistance were elaborated through much of the nineteenth century. David Kopf has convincingly argued that modern Bengali bhadrak culture was shaped largely in the image of the Brahma Samaj.10 Since Bengali migrants of the bhadrakmunn in the United States continue to draw on the various themes adumbrated by the Bengal Renaissance, let me elaborate a little on their troubled contentions on food.

Members of the Brahma Samaj were buffeted between Deroziens of Young Bengal who argued for wholesale Westernization in education, clothing and diet and members of the Dharma Sabha who sought to retain the influence of Brahmanic Hinduism among Bengali intellectuals. There were at least three sides to the debate: at one corner were the post-Orientalist Christian missionaries who belittled Indic traditions and everyday practices including Bengali food habits, and were aided in their endeavours by the Deroziens of Young Bengal; at another corner were newly reconstituted "traditionalists" who rejected any criticism of Brahmanic Hinduism including upper caste vegetarianism; and at the third corner were the Brahma Samajists who sought to mediate between what they perceived to be the two extremes—of Anglophile meat-eating and alcohol consumption on one hand and xenophobic vegetarianism and puritanism about alcohol on the other.

The intellectuals of the Bengal Renaissance were struggling to create a paradigmatic dietary model for a modernizing Bengali between these two extremes. In an internal polemic the Sadharan Brahmos editorialized against the charge of blindly aping the West, brought on by the "traditionalists," in the following terms: "No doubt our girls dine [at] tables and use spoons and forks but it is because they find it convenient and decent to do so."11 The vital concern about meat was brought up in the same editorial, and defended not as a food that would denationalize the women but as one that "makes them healthy and civilized members of society."

Nevertheless, the habits of Sadharan Brahmos, who creatively appropriated non-indigenous food practices within the paradigm of Bengali traditions, contrasted radically to the practice of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a leading intellectual of the Bengal Renaissance, who was a rationalist social reformer and atheist, and yet, who dressed, ate and acted according to orthodox Hindu norms. Bengali intellectuals developed a whole range of strategies to the problem of what to eat. Some, such as the Sadharan Brahmos, appropriated English etiquette while consum-
ing Bengali food. Others, such as Ishtwar Chandra Vidyasagar rejected everyday customs of the English while appropriating, atheism, while Keshub Chandra Sen sometimes mixed Indian and English etiquette and at other times practised a sophisticated dualism, eating in Bengali style in the quiet of his home and following English etiquette in the presence of Europeans and Americans.

Debendranath Tagore, another prominent figure of the Bengali Renaissance, rebelled against his own anglicized background and gave up meat, wine, and most of the luxurious tastes acquired from his father. He went so far as to purify himself by bathing in the Ganges after dining with Europeans on the occasion of Durga Puja. In 1905, another Brahmo, Brahmoandhab Bhawan Charan, allegedly reconverting to Hinduism by eating cow dung, publicly declaring that “we must preserve the integrity and distinctiveness of Hindu society at any cost.”12 Bijoy Krishna Goswami, one of the most successful Brahmo missionaries in the mufussil towns of East and North Bengal was disturbed about eating meat and fish. Debendranath Tagore consoled him that if he could “kill bedbugs and mosquitoes, why not eat meat and fish?”13

For the Bengali migrant in the United States the dietary issues he or she confronts today were addressed in energetic disputations in the lives of the intellectuals of the Bengal Renaissance. Of course these issues were never really resolved and American Bengalis continue to draw on the great debate between Bengali Modernizers and Traditionalists of the nineteenth century in justifying their conflicting choices between the traditional dinner and the modern breakfast. Further, beef and alcohol continue to be contentious commodities. Most of the respondents consume beef but do so occasionally and they justify it either by drawing attention to the Vedic tradition of meat eating before the alleged Hindu turn to vegetarianism, or by asserting the irrelevance of food taboos within a modern and scientific world view. A few exceptional households are vegetarians. In a few additional households only the women eschew meat consumption. Nevertheless, most argue for moderation in beef consumption for reasons of health. Alcohol appears to be a different matter. Only about 10 percent of the households consume alcohol, usually very rarely (a few times a year), and most never go to bars. It appears that Brahmanic dietary traditions are replaced by a new orthodoxy that allows beef consumption, drawing on a still older Vedic tradition, but proscribes alcohol consumption, especially in public. In spite of this creative re-invention of tradition, in another sense American Bengalis remain largely “traditional,” that is in the realm of food work within the household.

IV. Labor of Love?

As is the norm in much of the world, Bengali women do most of the cooking at home, presumably as a selfless labor of love. What Judith Walsh calls “the discourse of devotion” to the husband and the family seems to be intact among first generation Bengali women in the United States, as evidenced in their exclusive responsibility for cooked food.14 Nevertheless, the justification of such a “tradition” allows the women room to create a realm of relative autonomy.

According to this “traditional” reading, household work is another aspect of a woman’s dharna (“religion”). Traditionalists postulate at least two categories of worship: the cooked-food sacrifice to be offered on the domestic fire; and the oblation sacrifice to be offered on the sacred fires. Fire, water and ghee are essential elements of a sacred sacrificial performance, as is the participation of a male priest who knows the proper words in Sanskrit.15 On the other hand, household offerings of cooked food are presided over by the women of the household, preferably married and fertile. Everyday offerings of food to the deities have come to be managed by women who control the kitchen—the heart of the sacred geography of the home.

According to Pika Ghosh, the preparation of food is regarded as an act of worship similar to but not of the same order as rituals performed by a priest.16 Women assume responsibility for conveying the transfer of divine beneficience that occurs during the offering and blessing of food. The woman who cooks the food serves it to the family members as if she were a priest.

The household rituals that women perform derive their authority from their marital status and fertility. In Bengal, the notion of both sacredness and auspiciousness is intimately associated with women. The newly married woman is introduced to her husband's house as a deity, not just as a wife. Bengali terms for wife are applied to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and the Bengali woman is described as being Lakshmi because she is the embodiment of the virtues of the goddess.17

Through elaborate rituals of marriage and motherhood and more mundane daily ones of cutting vegetables, grinding spices, cooking, fetching water, picking flowers, singing folk songs, stitching quilts, and weaving mats women become important agents in the construction of their family's identity in spite of being located within the larger structures of patriarchy.

Anjali Bhattacharyya identifies the household chores for women in the traditional setting as kuta kota (cutting vegetables), batna bota (grinding spices), rana banna (cooking), jol amna (fetcb-
of Bengali-American women are involved in doing groceries, half of them on their own and the other half along with their husbands. Further, the transportation of food and children to and from the household has also been feminized. In Calcutta, it was the men of the household using mass transit systems who were responsible for the movement of goods and people to and from households. In contrast, in the United States, with private automobiles and multiple car suburban households, Bengali wives have become the primary conveyors of children to and from school, sporting events, doctors and dentists, in addition to hauling unprepared food home. Further, in Calcutta, there were aspects of work shared with other women of the household or with paid help, such as, infant care, baby sitting and cooking. In the U.S. paid help is too expensive and extended family networks rarely exist. Thus, if we were to add it all up, it could be concluded that in all probability, middle-class Bengali-American women end up doing much more work in the United States than they did in India; and that there is an interesting reshuffling of the gendered division of household tasks.

From their work among Italian-Americans, Janet Theopano and Karen Curtis hold that “through the food system, women express and maintain their social positions in the community.” This perspective is derived from a revisionist reading of women’s role as gatekeepers controlling the flow of goods into the household and controlling the channels through which food reaches the table. Although I agree with that impulse and find it predominant around breakfast, I am not so sure that most Bengali-American women have as much power over dinner as this perspective allows them.

Father’s taste takes precedence in designing a menu, probably because of the husband’s economic predominance within the household and perhaps more importantly due to the discourse of devotion around which the feminine self is constructed among Bengalis. The latter is clear in the fact that the taste and health of relatively “powerless” children get even greater priority in a mother’s meal planning than her husband’s preference. Further, it is not only that men and children drive menu planning but also women appear to be doing most of the work at home. In fact women’s pre-eminence in food-related work may express and reinforce their subordination rather than be a sign of their power. Yet, I am not so sanguine about that either, especially because most Bengali women resist such a characterization as too “Western” which presumably fixes all relationships around the axis of power rather than cooperation.

Nevertheless, I do think that by insisting on a female-labor intensive dinner, the Bengali male’s sense of loss and homeless-
ness, engendered by migration, is compensated by reaffirming what he thinks is patriarchal control over the domestic hearth. Dinner has to be Bengali, however inconvenient it may be for the woman. The Bengali “dinner” and “home” become sites of exaggerated enactments of a patriarchal system, where the exercise of male power and the assertion of Bengali ethnicity are thoroughly confused.

Lest we confuse this patriarchal system as an Oriental holdover, let me make it clear that there is nothing peculiarly Bengali in this division of labor. In a study carried out by Charles and Kerr among families in the north of England, the women had the main responsibility for buying, preparing and serving food. A later study carried out in Manchester by Ward and Hetherington underlines the same gendered division of labor for food-related tasks. In the Manchester study women predominate in preparing meals, especially “proper meals” of roasted meats, two vegetables and a dessert, whereas men participate more in recreational cooking such as beer and wine-making and barbeque (see appendix III-B).

M. Devault’s work among thirty households in and around Chicago confirms the same patterns in the division of labor in the United States. According to her, the overwhelming majority of those who do the cooking are women. Nevertheless, DeVault qualifies her apparently simple argument about patriarchal power in contending that women’s work of feeding the family, of creating and staging the family-meal-as-event, can be seen as countering the centrifugal forces which push apart the activities of the individual family members, each with his or her own schedules, commitments, interests and priorities. In this sense, feeding literally produces the family. Not only are food and food-related domestic arrangements central features of family functioning, they also play a crucial role in family breakdown.

Anne Murcott contends that, in effect, the provision of a cooked dinner for her family demonstrates that a wife has been spending her time in an activity appropriate to her status and gender. The extended time commitment and protracted labor involved can be seen as devices tying the wife into the domestic setting, enforcing and expressing her femininity and domesticity.

Yet, as suggested before, it is not only a matter of patriarchal power. We should be careful lest we pour all the meaning of domestic labor into the manichean mould of patriarchy. Overwhelming numbers of female respondents argue that they enjoy cooking for their family and they insist that they do not see it as oppressive or even as an unfair division of labor. Must we dismiss such claims as false consciousness? To understand her motivations, must we destroy the Bengali women’s voice? What if we take her contention at face value. Yet we are left with the question, why? Why does she enjoy working so hard?

First, it must be recalled that Bengali men also work harder in the United States than they did in India. That is in the very nature of what is called a “more efficient” economic system. The very efficiency that drains the body at the end of the day is also what makes it possible to pay for the house, the multiple cars, children’s college education, better food, etc. As the men work harder at work, they have less to give on return home—both physically and emotionally. As two-thirds of adult Bengali-American women are either in part-time employment (one-third) or are full-time homemakers (another one-third), a Bengali-American woman often volunteers to take on even greater responsibilities at home, perhaps more than she can reasonably fulfill. In this context, she sees it as her responsibility to do groceries and prepare the food because her unit of analysis is the family rather than the individual. She understands the immensity of her burden and yet is unwilling to make an issue out of it given the greater material prosperity of the household and better opportunities for her children. Perhaps she even understands that work may have become the great escape for men from the messy emotions and endless obligations associated with domestic labor, yet in a world where most Bengali husbands have better professional credentials she is willing to accept the second best option of “housewifery” in exchange for household wealth.

Further, dinner is a very important meal. She sees a formal dinner as countering the centrifugal forces pulling family members apart. It is the time to reinvent tradition, both by Bengali men and women in the United States. Immersed by the mythology of the collapse of “western” families, she idealizes dinner as the “traditional” family huddle. In a rice-and-jhol dinner she creates a memorable and a quaint tradition. Through the creative consumption of commodities, tamed as food at the domestic hearth, the Bengali woman affirms a ritual that denies the limitations of time and place—limitations that inevitably confront a migrant. The assertion is that the Bengali dinner can be re-enacted any place, any time, as long as she is willing to work.

In contrast to dinner, breakfast draws the Bengali in the other direction. In consuming a decisively American food that is rarely communal, she hedges her total immersion into the “community” and the patriarchal family. A breakfast of cereal is both an embodiment of her homelessness and the inversion of the idea that “home” must always be Indian. Here we see domesticity and ethnicity playing dangerously with non-ethnicity. The
Bengali utilizes an edible “American” commodity, untouched by the Bengali hearth, to constitute new individual possibilities of melting into ethnic anonymity—maybe even prefiguring a post-patriarchal, post-ethnic order.

We can say that the Bengali subject begins to see itself in communion with ethnic otherness and in that mirror develops a notion of her ethnic “community,” retreating to affirm it at dinner. It is because she confronts this ethnic otherness at breakfast and lunch that she must cook Bengali food for dinner. A family dinner is often one of the few spheres left in an American world where a Bengali can reproduce her Bengalihood actually and materially, while only at breakfast she can escape from the drudgery that Bengali patriarchy has trapped her in. To escape from the patriarchal other she must insist on an American breakfast. Thus they can say that a Bengali consumes a part of her identity and in doing so identifies with and reproduces one of her “communities.” In contrast, at breakfast she revels in the manufactured abundance of the First World that envelops everything from the box of cereal to the prefabricated home, the cherry-red car, to individual autonomy. At breakfast, she eases the heavy burden of obligations to the same community she valorized the night before.

Thus, “traditional” dinners and non-traditional breakfasts become a stage for reenacting larger concerns about modernity, masculinity and homelessness that haunt the expatriate Bengali community. Breakfast and dinner set the Bengali out on different paths. Breakfast, towards the stereotype of melting syncretism—in the sense that we are all becoming an impure melange, a hodge-podge. In contrast, dinner sets her out towards the cliché of ethnic culture, that is, our desire for rootedness. Refusing to choose either of these options exclusively, the American Bengali emerges as an increasingly complex subject that refuses either to be the simple ethnic other or the mere assimilated American or for that matter only a woman or even only a Bengali.

“Home” has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for.... They promised to take us home, but are metaphors of homelessness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word? Are we asking, hoping for, too much?

—Salman Rushdie, East, West

Appendix I

The following provides the menu for a Bengali family of five. We have been invited at a friend’s house. Dinner for a number (about 25 people).

7 p.m.: Turkey pokora (croquettes) with finely chopped garlic, onion, ginger and fresh coriander, carbonated drinks and beer.
10 p.m.: Dinner: rice, potato+cabbage, potato+paneer, dal, fish in mustard sauce, goat meat, pineapple chutney, sweets (chickpea)

For children: chicken barbecue, cake, ice-cream

SUNDAY
9 a.m.: Breakfast: omelette and toast or cereal, and tea (the latter for first generation adults)
1 p.m.: Lunch: at Geeta Class at a friend’s house (samosas, pokora, chilli bhaaji)
4 p.m.: Snack: for adults: roasted rice powder with mustard oil, finely chopped onions, cucumber, green chillies and Bengali mixture and tea.

For children: ham and cheese sandwich
9 p.m.: Dinner: lamb curry, rice, Bengali style salad (raw onions, cucumber and tomatoes in fresh squeezed lime juice and salt)

MONDAY
9 a.m.: Breakfast: cereal and tea (the latter only for first generation adults)
1 p.m.: Lunch: cheese and ham sandwiches made by mom on return from work at 1 p.m.
7 p.m.: Dinner: rice, shrimp with onion and ginger, dal with fresh coriander garnish, potato and broccoli other vegetables in mustard sauce, strawberry shortcake, grape juice

TUESDAY
7:30 a.m.: Breakfast: cereal and tea (only for first generation adults)
Lunch: at work
## Appendix III-A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours of cooking related labor per day</th>
<th>Percentage of Bengali-American respondents N = 72</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour and 30 minutes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 hours</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 hours</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 hours</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8 hours per weekend)</td>
<td>5</td>
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## Appendix III-B

Food-related tasks in households containing a couple in Manchester, United Kingdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Percent of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking meals</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing packed lunches</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jam making</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cake baking</td>
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<td>Bread making</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main shopping</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing the dishes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take-away meals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beer or wine making</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barbecue</td>
<td>69</td>
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Source: Adapted from Ward and Hetherington (1994).
Appendix III-C

The division of labor in two-parent families in Sweden

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Agent(s)</th>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>Shopping</th>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Dinner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother alone</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father alone</td>
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<td>Both, mother most part</td>
<td>34</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both, father most part</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults and child</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Child/Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each individual</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=292)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Ekström (1981).

Appendix IV

Framing the Numbers: About the Survey on which this study is based

This is a preliminary report based on a study of about seventy-two households covering 225 individuals. The survey is continuing and I hope to cover about 200 households at the end of it.

First, the survey, on which this paper is based, is skewed in two unintended directions. One, it is biased towards a more mature population where the average age of the female respondents is forty-eight years and that of male respondents is fifty-three years. The most important consequence of this bias is inordinately high incomes for a group whose incomes are higher than the average.

Second, it is more representative of the West Bengali-American population rather than the Bangladeshi-American population. Ninety-seven per cent of my respondents are West Bengalis. Hence when I use the term Bengali-Americans I mean West Bengali-Americans.

Further, in certain points in this essay post-immigration data will be compared to pre-immigration data. For that comparison I will use a 1970 survey of the food habits of over two-thousand households in Calcutta conducted by fifty-eight researchers over a two-year period. Since two out of three of my respondents or their spouses are from Calcutta and the median year of migration is 1970 such an assumption is appropriate.

Notes

1. This article has improved dramatically under the guidance of Professor Mark Selden without whose untiring efforts it may not have been possible. I thank Dr. Fred Mayo and Professor Tom Forsthoefel who provided me with a home base at the Culinary Institute of America, encouraged me to develop my work and arranged for time off from teaching to present different versions of this paper at various conferences. My apologies to Shari Schultz and her children, Joey and Stasia, for suffering my experimentation with various Indian recipes and in indulging me beyond the call of their Irish-Iranian-American palate. To them and my parents, I dedicate this paper.


3. The numbers and proportions are based on two surveys. See Appendix IV.

4. 1 gram = 0.0353 oz.


8. Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). The great difficulty of the second step and its associated insecurities are elaborated upon by Ashis Nandy, who writes: “This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds.” The Intimate Enemy, Loss and


12. Ibid., 213.

13. Ibid., 220.


16. Pika Ghosh, “Household Ritual and Women’s Domains,” in Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal, ed. Michael W. Meister (Newark, New Jersey: The Newark Museum, 1995), 21–25. “As demonstrated by the numerous correspondences between the objects, actions, words, and ideas that constitute the rituals conducted by women and priests, acts by the married kinswomen of the bride and groom must be understood as parallel to those of the priest. The tumeric smearing ritual performed by women on the morning of the wedding, for example, is complemented by the ritual smearing of vermillon sindoor powder on the bride’s hair by the groom during the evening ceremony, led by the priest.”

17. Ibid., 23.


21. According to the Nationwide Transportation Survey 1995 (which covered a sample of 95,000 people in 42,000 U.S. households) about 11% of trips by women are to pick up or drop off someone else. For men the figure is 7%. Cited from The New York Times (September 21, 1997): 18.

22. For a comprehensive argument on the feminization of household labor that has gone hand-in-hand with modernization see Ruth Schwartz Cowan, More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave (New York: Basic Books, 1983).


30. Similar conditions also emerge in Ekström’s work with 348 Swedish families (see appendix 3–C). She divides feeding work under four headings: planning meals; shopping for food; the preparation of breakfast and the preparation of dinner. Planning is overwhelmingly mother’s work. Shopping, though largely a joint activity, is the primary responsibility of women. For the main meal of the day—breakfast—59% of Swedish households rely entirely on the mother. Breakfast is the only activity where fathers and other family members take substantial responsibilities. M. Ekström, “Class and Gender in the Kitchen,” in E. L. Fishe, R. Pritikin, M. Ekström, L. Holm, and U. Kjærns, eds., Palatable Worlds: Socio-Cultural Food Studies (Oslø: Solum Forlag, 1991). Much of the literature on the gendered division of labor is excellently reviewed in Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, Sociology or the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society (New York: Routledge, 1997), 77–87.


32. For a discussion on the variety of meaning associated with consumption see Daniel Miller, Material Culture and Mass Consumption (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).