

## 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 Bareli 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.

At the most general level, my thesis is that globalization is neither the Americanization of the world nor the Westernization of people. I show, by looking at the food practices of Bengali-American migrants, that there is no one-directional change toward *Homo occidentalis*. Migrant food practices illuminate the ambivalence of modern actors toward locality, community, and authenticity and toward the home and the world.

## Organization of the Text

In Chapter 2, “West Bengali Food Norms,” I draw the pre-immigration baseline to prepare the ground for the post-immigration comparison. I begin with an outline of the geographical characteristics of West Bengal and their resultant influences on food choices. Next, I use a 1970 study of food habits in Calcutta conducted by the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID 1972) to identify the dietary norms of typical urban, middle-class Bengalis in terms of calorie intake, food budget, and daily and weekly cycles of meals. Then I describe the foundational principles of Bengali cuisine, such as the Core-Fringe-Legume Pattern, the spice repertoire, and cooking techniques. Finally, I discuss some of the binary oppositions that Bengalis identify with their cuisine, such as vegetarianism and non-vegetarianism and modern versus traditional foods. I conclude with some sociological generalizations on Bengali food.

In Chapter 3, “Bengali-American Food Consumption,” I identify the daily, weekly, and seasonal cycles of consumption. In the process, I highlight some of the more intriguing changes and seek to explain why they have come about and how Bengali Americans explain them. This and the following two chapters contain the most detailed empirical descriptions in the book and attempt to draw larger conclusions and connect them to the themes introduced in this chapter.

In Chapter 4, “Gastroethnicity: Reorienting Ethnic Studies,” I grapple directly with the problems of identity and cuisine. I address the question: What makes a food Bengali—or, for that matter, what makes something “authentic” to a culture? Much of what is considered authentic is defined in opposition to “others.” Bengali Americans construct their cuisine in opposition to the “American.” Then, with the help of ten acutely liminal respondents, I generate a contrast between insider and outsider constructions of culinary group identity.

In the last empirical chapter, “Food Work: Labor of Love?” I identify the distribution of labor in Bengali-American households and compare it with the pattern in Anglo-American households. The chapter begins with such simple questions as: Who works? How much? I then move on to discussions of why this is so, how it can be explained, and what it says about the distribution of power within Bengali-American households. As in the chapter on consumption, I highlight interesting and counterintuitive patterns, such as the impact of migration on the re-gendering of labor. Chapter 5 ends by raising questions about our conceptions of power within the household.

In the concluding chapter, “Meals, Migration, and Modernity,” I draw heavily on the fictional and nonfictional work of the Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and diasporic Indian literary figures such as Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, V. S. Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie to elaborate on the structure of feeling of a migrant and his attempt to create a place for himself in an alien world. The problem is in some ways a quintessentially modern one of finding one’s place—spatially, socially, and temporally. We do that by hanging on to a myth of stability in a world that is perpetually changing. Food, and especially nostalgia about home cooking, plays a crucial role in anchoring us in a world that refuses to stay still.

Finally, a note on transliteration: Because the Bengali alphabet has more letters than the Roman alphabet, it is necessary to approximate additional sounds within the limits of English by adding certain diacritical marks. After much thought, I have decided to forgo the scholarly notation system for two reasons: (1) ease of reading for a nonacademic audience, which is substantial for a book on food, and (2) many of my quotations are from cookbooks and other popular texts that do not use the scholarly notation system, hence using it would create unnecessary confusion between my text and the various quotations.

In most cases I use “a” for the inherent vowel *o* (a short *o* as in *gorom* = hot) and for the long vowel *ā* in Romanized names such as Satyajit Ray, the famous Bengali filmmaker, although the three “a”s in his name are pronounced *o*, *a*, and *ā*, respectively. There is one exception: I identify the long vowel *ā* in *chāna* for farmer cheese to distinguish it from *chana*, which is chickpea.

There is a further source of confusion because the o sound can be produced either by the inherent vowel  $\circ$  or the full vowel o. Thus, the word for hot is pronounced “g $\circ$ rom,” where the vowel between g and r is an inherent vowel (a short o), and the vowel between r and m is a full o. In most places, I have rendered the full vowel as an o and the inherent vowel as an a, which is standard in Romanized Bengali. Yet words such as garam masala (and halvah) that have entered the English lexicon are used in the familiar form. To avoid confusion, I have kept the number of Bengali words to a minimum. I apologize to those who may have preferred a firmer grasp of the pronunciation of the few Bengali words that I do use.

## CHAPTER 2



# West Bengali Food Norms

## *Geography, Economy, and Culture*

*Having performed austerity, he understood that  
Brahma is food. For truly indeed, beings here  
Are born from food, when born they live by food, on deceasing they  
enter into food;  
Mankind is food for death; he is nourished and nourishes;  
I, who am food, eat the eater of food!  
I have overcome the world!*

TAITTIRIYA UPANISHAD (CA. 700–600 B.C.)

My intention in this chapter is to provide the pre-immigration baseline for the discussion of Bengali-American foodways in the subsequent chapters. What matters for my purposes are the practices of middle-class Bengalis from Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> I address only the practices of the middle class, because that is the demographic characteristic of West Bengali migrants, and I present data for 1970–80, the period when most of my respondents left India. I consider earlier foodways only when they have a bearing on later generations.

I begin with the ecological factors that continue to shape Bengali food habits, such as the preferences for rice, fish, and tea, and provide a quick sketch of the economic foundations that shape the typical Calcuttan's food budget. I ask a series of questions about Calcuttans' food consumption and patterns of eating. Then I point to what I think is the distinctive style of cooking that can be called Bengali and draw attention to cultural norms such as vegetarianism, life-cycle rituals, and notions of “modern” and “traditional” eating.



FIGURE 1. Map of India. West Bengal (highlighted) lies in the flat floodplain of the Bengal delta.

## Geographical Limits

The Bengal delta, the largest deltaic landform in the world, is a relatively flat, horseshoe-shaped floodplain that opens into the Bay of Bengal to the south. Surrounding its rim is the Chottanagpur plateau to the west, the Himalayas to the north, and disconnected hill systems to the east (Figure 1).

The Bengali linguistic region is divided into two political units. Bangladesh, with about 140 million inhabitants, occupies the eastern two-thirds of the gently sloping delta formed by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers; and West Bengal, with about 80 million people, occupies the western one-third of the delta (population figures from raw 2001 census data). In this study, “Bengali” refers only to people who trace their origins to the Indian state of West Bengal. According to the 1991 Census of India, 72 percent of the population of West Bengal lives in rural areas in about 40,000 villages. The remainder of the Bengali population is urban, mostly concentrated in cities such as Calcutta (about 12 million), Asansol, Burdwan, Durgapur, and Kharagpur.

West Bengal lies in east-central India, between 21 and 27 degrees north latitude and 85 and 89 degrees east longitude. The rampart of the Himalayas that bounds the state to the north blocks polar air, and the sea to the south further moderates temperature ranges. Even the northern extremity of the state is only about 300 miles from the sea.

Temperature and precipitation patterns divide West Bengal into four main climatic regions. The extreme Himalayan north, around Darjeeling, is wet and has the widest variations in temperature. The northern end of the plain, around Jalpaiguri, is wet and moderate. Asansol, on the Chottanagpur plateau at the western end of the state, is relatively dry and warm. Finally, the deltaic south around Calcutta, which is home to most of my respondents, is wet and hot. The main climatic differences within West Bengal are determined by precipitation, and the monsoon rhythm is the dominating characteristic in the state (as it is elsewhere in India). Most of West Bengal, other than the dry western Chottanagpur plateau, receives average annual rainfall of 59–158 inches, with most of the precipitation falling from June to October. Irrigation is available on only about a quarter of the cropped land; agriculture is thus dependent on the monsoon rains.

Major transformations in food production have come to West Bengal in the past two decades, partly as a consequence of policies of the Left Front government—an alliance led by the various communist parties of India—and partly because of the autonomous mobilization of rural classes (Harriss 1993). The Left Front wagered that agricultural productivity would rise if land were returned by absentee landlords to cultivators (Bandyopadhyay 2000). Over the past twenty-five years, almost 1 million acres of land has been redistributed among landless peasants and sharecroppers. Agricultural production has burgeoned.



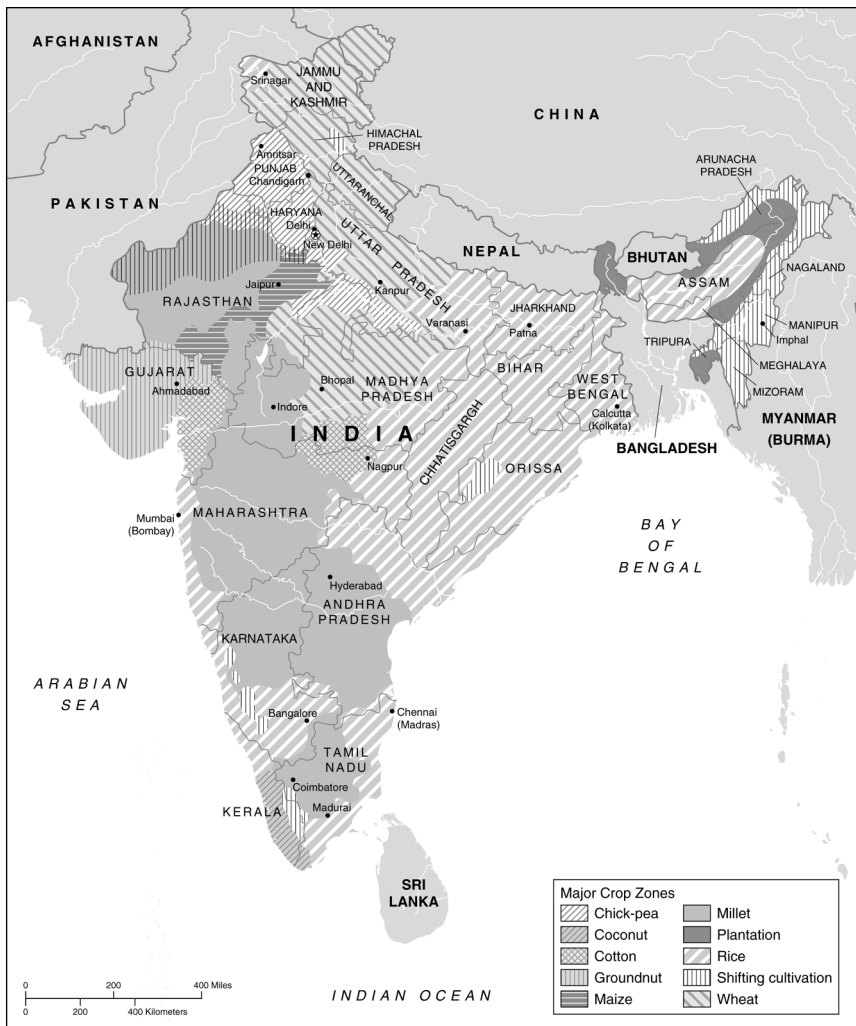


FIGURE 2. *India's Major Crop Zones.*

Rice and wheat are the main food crops produced today in West Bengal.<sup>2</sup> According to the Indian Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (DAC 2000), West Bengal is India's top producer of rice, which occupies 75–85 percent of the cropped area. Legumes such as beans and pulses (*masur*, *khesari*, and *maskalai*) occupy about 8 percent of West Bengal's cropped area (Figure 2). Nevertheless, West Bengal's production of pulses in 1998–99 fell far short of consumption rates. Rice and *masur* dal are

staples of the Bengali diet.<sup>3</sup> But unlike rice, pulses are not an ecological fit with the wet deltaic conditions.

After pulses come oilseeds in order of culinary importance. The main oilseeds produced in Bengal are mustard, sesame, and linseed.<sup>4</sup> Mustard is the chief source of cooking oil today, although competition from heavily subsidized soy oil from the United States is posing a serious economic challenge throughout West Bengal's mustard and peanut belt (Shiva 2002).

West Bengal is the second-largest potato-growing state in India, contributing a third of the national yield. The other major vegetables produced in the state are eggplant, cabbage, cauliflower, okra, and tomatoes (DAC 2000).

About 87 percent of West Bengal's agricultural acreage is dedicated to food crops. However, substantial arable land is also devoted to the two most important cash crops: tea and jute. Tea—particularly high-quality Darjeeling tea—is grown on the terraces of the lower Himalayas, in northern Bengal.<sup>5</sup>

Given the agricultural foundations of West Bengal, it is no wonder that most Bengalis are rice eaters. Potatoes are the most important “vegetable” in the Bengali diet, followed by cauliflower, tomatoes, okra, cabbage, and eggplant. “After the Irish,” Chitrita Banerji (1997: 139) notes, “Bengalis are probably the greatest potato eaters in the world, and yet this is such a relative upstart in the hierarchy of our food. With rice [and, I might add, dal], it is the inevitable daily ingredient in the diet of vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike.” A 1970 survey identified the potato as the second most common item in the Calcuttan grocery basket, after salt (USAID 1972: 108; see Table 1, Appendix 2, for a listing of the top 83 items). The fat base of the cuisine is mustard oil, which is the fifth most common item in a Calcuttan's grocery basket (Table 1). Field greens and fish play a tertiary role, their importance increasing with rising income.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, much of what is typical to Bengali cuisine is a product of the local ecology. But West Bengal is not an isolated economic region. Some of what is consumed on a daily basis is not produced in the state, pulses being one of the most important examples. Urbanite Bengalis, such as my respondents, are particularly dependent on the market both for income and to supply their pantry.

Although most of the economy of West Bengal depends on agriculture, there are three major industrial pockets. One is around Calcutta, where engineering, petrochemicals, textiles, and food processing predominate. The state government and numerous colleges are also located there; thus, the service sector is a major employer. Another industrial region is

around Durgapur and Asansol, where mining is pre-eminent. A third region, although much less important, is the Midnapur district around Kharagpur, which concentrates on industries that play an ancillary role to the railroads. West Bengal's population is only about 7 percent of the Indian national total, but its industrial output is about 20 percent of the total.

Most Bengali migrants to the United States are from families working in the service sector, most often employed by local, state, and central governments. Government agencies and the railroads have been the two greatest employers of the Bengali *bhadralok* (gentlemen) who are the subjects of this study. West Bengali migrants to the United States are highly educated. Almost all of my survey respondents held a bachelor's degree, compared with only 14 percent of Calcuttan men in 1980. Among women, only 6 percent of Calcuttans had a college education in 1980, in contrast to 94 percent of my female Bengali-American respondents.

## Baseline in Food Consumption

In 1972, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) released the findings of a remarkable survey titled *A Study of Food Habits in Calcutta*. Conducted over a one-year period in 1969–70, the study covered a random sample of 2,386 households in Calcutta. Since most (West) Bengalis in the United States are from Calcutta (146 of the 222 adult respondents), having left sometime between 1965 and 1985, the study offers an appropriate surrogate for establishing pre-immigration dietary norms.

### *Food Budget*

In 1970, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation area had a resident population of 3.1 million, comprising 500,000 households, with just over six persons per household. The average household spent about 300 rupees (about US\$38 in 1970 dollars)<sup>7</sup> per month on food, or more than 50 percent of its monthly budget (USAID 1972: 2). For the (economically) top 19 percent of the population, food consumed 40 percent of total household expenditures; in contrast, the bottom 10 percent spent two-thirds of their budget on food.

The average Calcuttan spent 1.58 rupees per day on food in 1970 (USAID 1972: 16). The most important components of the daily expenditure

were cereals, animal protein (fish, meat, and eggs), fruit and vegetables, and milk. These items together accounted for 68 percent of the food budget. The budget of the poorest households differed radically from that of the elite, however. The difference was most dramatic in patterns of consumption of fish, meat, eggs, milk, and fruit. Table 2 (Appendix 2) provides a comparative overview of the daily food budget of the poorest and the most affluent households.

While Table 2 shows each item as a percentage of the food budget, Table 3 (Appendix 2) compares the items by weight, which is more relevant in terms of nutrition. Overall, a Calcuttan in 1970 consumed an average of 909 grams of different foods per day, with individuals in high-expenditure households consuming 1,126 grams and those in low-expenditure households consuming 752 grams. By weight, more than one-third of the average Calcuttan's diet in 1970 was composed of cereals, and the amount of cereal consumed was more or less the same for affluent and poor households. As a proportion of the total daily intake, however, almost one-half of food consumed by poor households took the form of cereals. In contrast, a little less than a quarter was composed of vegetables, with high-expenditure families consuming substantially more vegetables than low-expenditure households. Milk, constituting an average 12 percent of the daily diet, was the most class-segregated item in the Calcuttan's diet, with affluent households consuming twice the amount consumed by poor households. After milk came fish, meat, and eggs, with high-expenditure households consuming twice the amount consumed by low-expenditure households. In contrast, affluent households consumed only about 30 percent more legumes than poor households. This is relevant because after immigration we will see an escalation in the consumption of milk, fruit juices, fish, and other high-value, high-status items.

### *Daily Cycle of Meals*

The average individual in Calcutta consumed two principal and two supplementary meals a day from the household kitchen. The principal evening meal (dinner) was usually eaten between 8 P.M. and 10 P.M., while during the day the wage earner ate breakfast at home between 8 A.M. and 10 A.M., and the homemaker ate lunch between 1 P.M. and 2 P.M. (see Table 4, Appendix 2).