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“*Bhat khaiso?*”
**the role of food in a
Bangladeshi
community in the U.S.**

Jinia Meherin, Class of 2023

Swarthmore College, Department of Sociology and
Anthropology

Inflamed

- “Inflammation is connected to the food we eat...”
- “...the hidden relationships between our biological systems and the profound injustices of our political and economic systems”
- “[Inflammation] is connected to the number of traumatic events we experienced as children and to the traumas endured by our ancestors”

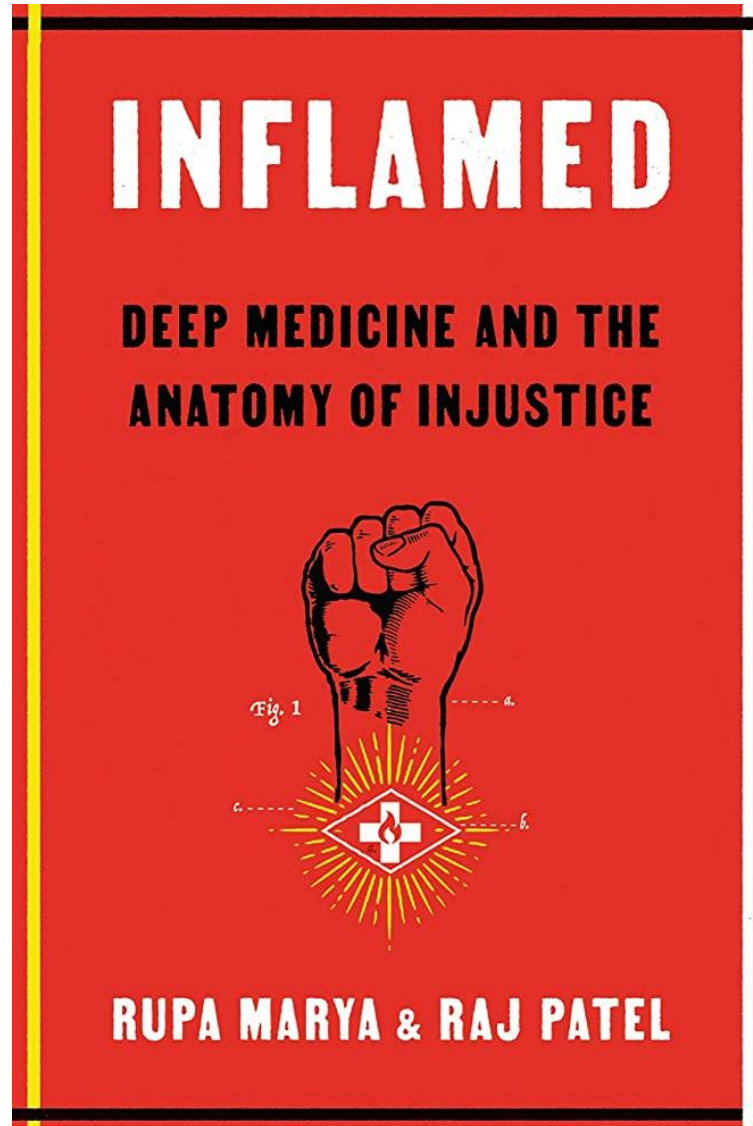


Photo Credit: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Rupa Marya



Photo Credit: Jennifer Graham

Raj Patel

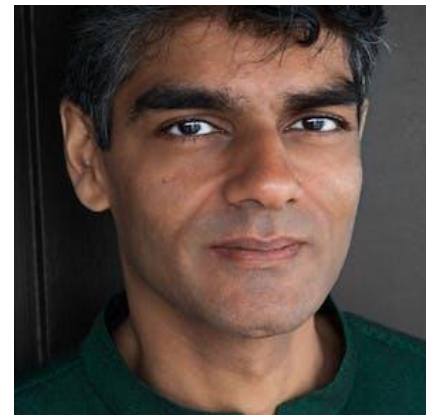


Photo Credit: Sheila Menezes

Amar shonar *Bangladesh: Before* *the Diaspora*

National
Martyrs
Memorial



Photo Credit: istockphoto

Mukti Bahini: Bangladeshi
Freedom Fighters



Photo Credit: Anwar Hossain

2. *Amar shonar Bangladesh* translates to "My beloved Bangladesh"
3. *Muktijuddho* is the Bangla name for the Bangladeshi Liberation War. *Mukti* translates to "liberation" and *juddho* translates to war.

Bangladeshi
Children during
the Famine



Photo Credit: Raibul H Zaki

- British Colonization
 - From 1858 until Partition in 1947
- Bangladesh Liberation War (*muktijuddho*)
 - March 26, 1971 - December 16, 1971
- The aftermath: economic and political instability
- 1974 flood and famine



Photo Credit: Maps from Banglapedia



(note: this list is not ranked or comprehensive)

-  = countries with the largest Bangladeshi diasporas
-  = relatively large populations of the Bangladeshi diaspora

Pioneering the Bangladeshi Diaspora

4. *Dhak nam* translates to “calling name.” It is more casual. My *dhak nam* is Ridi.
5. *Bhalo nam* translates to “good name.” It is more formal. My *bhalo nam* is Jinia

Ridi: Reflections

- Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Immigrated to the United States in 2003.
- Earliest food memories: preschool in Phoenix, Arizona
- We were different, so we ate different foods.



Photo Credit: Jinia Meherin



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock; Microsoft

“*Bhat khaiso?*” “Did you eat rice?”



Doodh Cha

Milk Tea



Piaju

Lentil Fritters



Jhalmuri

Spicy Puffed Rice Mix



Shingara

Stuffed Vegetable Pastry



Porota

Flaky Flatbread



Murgi diye Jhol

Chicken Curry



Pulao

Aromatic Rice Dish



Shobji

Any Variety of Cooked Vegetables



Ilish Mas

Hilsa Fish



Haleem

Meat & Lentil Porridge



Aloo Bharta

Bangladeshi-style Smashed Potatoes



Goru diye Jhol

Beef Curry



Kichuri

Lentil Rice Dish



Dal

Lentil Soup (eaten with rice)



Biryani

Mixed Rice Dish with Meat



Kalo Jam

Fried dough sweets in syrup



Mishti Doi

Sweet Yogurt



Bhapa Pitha

Molasses Rice Cake



Shemai

Vermicelli Pudding



Rasgulla

Milk-based sweets in syrup

1. *Bhat* translates to “rice” and *khaiso?* translates to “did you eat?” Together, *bhat khaiso?* translates to “did you eat rice?”



What is the role of
food in Bangladeshi
immigrants' lives?

Mythological: The raw and the cooked



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock

Social Analysis – Claude Levi Strauss (1964)

“The Anthropology of Food and Eating”



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock

Communication: Sidney Mintz & Christine M. Du Bois (2002)

“The problem of changing food habits”



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock

Cultural and Social Differences – Margaret Mead (1943)

“Approaches to Food and Migration: Rootedness, being and belonging” in *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology*



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock

Identity - Emma-Jayne Abbots (2016)

Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo



Photo Credit: Adobe Stock

Religion – Mary Douglas (1966)

“Anthropology of food: An essay on food transition and transformation in Brazil”



Photo Credit: vecteezy

Change and Modernization – Luiza Bao Sobreria, Garavellow, Garbiela Bielefeld Nardoto (2018)

Food
Anthropology:
How do we
shape food and
how does food
shape us?

Reflections on the Literature

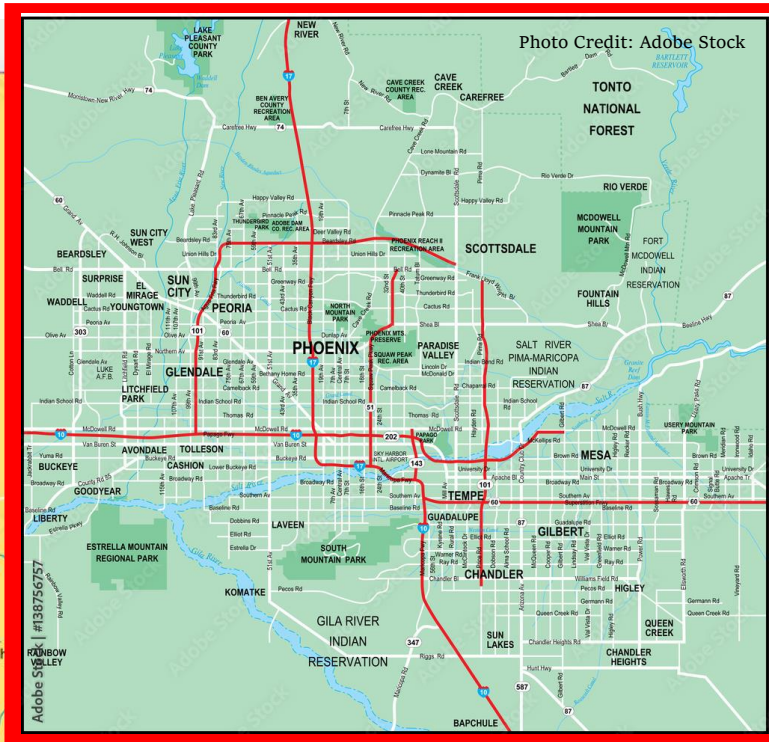
- Many biomedical studies on diet and nutrition; medicalization of food and eating
- Risk of homogenizing Asians as a racial classification
- Most studies done on Bangladeshi immigrants are quantitative and located in the United Kingdom
- Some United States-based studies, but mostly in large metropolitan locations (ex: New York City and Detroit)





What is the role of food in Bangladeshi immigrants' lives?

What relationship do Bangladeshi immigrants forge between food and nutrition?



Methodology: Semi-structured Interviews

- Site: My “Little Bangladesh” in Phoenix, Arizona
- Roughly 2,000 Bangladeshi people living in the area
- 5 semi-structured interviews



Photo Credit: Nadira Sultana

Methodology: Auto-Ethnography

- Identity and Experiences
- Access
- Fluency
- Limitations
 - Age
 - Gender



Data Analysis

- Food as a vehicle for drawing boundaries and making connections
- Defining fresh, tasty, and nutritious food; connecting with each other and the homeland
- Remembering a past shaped by the diasporic experience



Drawing Boundaries and Making Connections



Here vs. There

“People are spoiled from abundance in the United States. In Bangladesh, we could only have truly delicious special food on holidays, but in the United States, we can eat any food we want at any time.” (Male, Early 50s, Immigrated in the late 1990s)

“The culture of eating on-the-go or buying [whole meals] is not in Bangladesh. People came back to eat. They still do.” (Female, Late 50s, Immigrated in the early 1990s)

“You couldn’t have any alternatives [in Bangladesh]. You had to eat what you were given. But here, there is more availability, and you can choose.” (Female, mid 50s, Immigrated in the early 2000s)

“I think [lack of focus on meal time] is a major cause of health problems in this country. The culture of eating here is drive-thrus. It is impossible to maintain a mind-body relationship. Americans talk a lot about how to add to your lifestyle, like doing yoga or being physically spiritual, but they don’t address root issues.” (Male, Early 50s, Immigrated in the late 1990s)

Religion

“Some foods do seem delicious here... like chicken or beef burgers, but I won't eat them for my religion.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“[American food] is tasty, but it's not tasty for our religion.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“A colleague once told me they never see anyone take their religion as intently and seriously as Muslims. I feel that feeling strongly within myself.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“Sometimes I'm hungry, but I don't eat American food because it's not allowed in my religion.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

Urban vs. Rural

“In the village, people can’t really see the doctor, so it’s possible that they just cannot get diagnosed, but I don’t think they have [chronic diseases]. Why? Because they always eat fresh food.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“Doctors in rural areas do not know medical science like [doctors in cities], but they know remedies and treatments that somehow help. They know what foods can help your symptoms.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“My father lived until 100 years old and he lived in the village. He never had any chronic diseases.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“Some foods only people in the village eat, like *kochu shak*. They are so healthy there. They’re rarely ever sick.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“People in the rural areas rarely ever eat much meat or protein, but somehow they’re healthier than people in the cities.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

Past vs. Present: A Sense of Loss and Reconnection

“We always ate together during mealtimes [in the past]. It was a natural expectation.” (Female, Late 50s, Immigrated in the early 1990s)

“I always looked forward to mealtime, because my family would eat together.” (Male, Early 50s, Immigrated in the late 1990s)

“Life is very different in the United States. Family members have different schedules; they don’t align. In Bangladesh, that was uncommon. Even if people had slightly different schedules, people waited for each other so they could eat together.” (Female, Late 50s, Immigrated in the early 1990s)

“Back then, we didn’t have distractions from meal time. We were able to dedicate a lot of time to eating together [with family].” (Male, Early 50s, Immigrated in the late 1990s)

“In Bangladesh, I had a lot of family and people always around me. We all ate together, shared what’s going on in our lives. I wonder if American kids grow up alone.” (Female, mid 40s, Immigrated in the late 1990s)



Fresh, Tasty, Nutritious Food

What is fresh food?

“Here, when you buy fish you never know when it was caught and how long it has been frozen, but in Bangladesh, there’s such a great variety of fish available all the time.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“You have to buy food from the market [here]. You do in the Bangladesh too, but you know that the people selling their meat in the market are selling fresh meat that they produced or cut themselves. It seems unhealthy because there are flies around, but it’s healthier because it’s fresh. When you slaughter an animal it seems very dirty. It’s smelly and the blood goes everywhere, but that is fresh meat.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“The food is never fresh [here], and sometimes even comes from overseas.” (Male, Early 50s, Immigrated in the late 1990s).

“I grew up in a village, so everything we ate was fresh. We cultivated food from their own land or bought items from the market. We ate the freshest food possible, and had food when we needed it.” (Female, mid 50s, Immigrated in the early 2000s)

Kochu shak, or taro leaves pictured cooked (right) and uncooked (left)

Fresh Food is Tasty and Nutritious

“Eating good food and eating well is good for nutrition. *Korola* is not tasty, but I learned from my parents how to make it and how healthy it is, so I still eat it today.” (Female, mid 50s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“*Mora mas* is very good for your eyes. You’ll see in Bangladesh, people just go outside their house to their pond and just catch *mora mas*. It’s a special taste. As long as you can get this taste, you will be eating healthy. It’s 100% fresh.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)

“When food is fresh, the vitamins and nutrients are still in the food. When foods sit for long times in the store, those nutrients are gone over time.” (Female, mid 50s, Immigrated in the early 200s)

“Bengali food, even in the United States, is not inherently healthy, because the ingredients in the United States are not fresh or healthy. At least Bengalis cook at home, but the ingredients are still bad.” (Male, early 50s, Immigrated in the late 1990s)

www.rumkisgoldenspoon.com

7. *Korola* refers to the vegetable bitter melon (pictured in the photo background cooked (right) and uncooked (left))
8. *Mora mas* refers to dried fish. *Mora mas* are used to cook dishes like *shutki*

Home Gardens and Forging Connections

“I have a garden, and the vegetables I grow taste better than the ones in the market.” (Female, mid 50s, Immigrated in the early 2000s)

“I started my garden because I wanted to eat fresh vegetables. It also brings me mental peace, it’s a hobby of mine. But sometimes work becomes so busy that I can’t take care of my garden.” (Female, mid 50s, Immigrated in the early 2000s)

“I also have a garden at home. I love eating the vegetables I grow. I try my best to eat as fresh as I can.” (Male, Late 40s, Immigrated in the early 2010s)



Photo Credit: Andrew Miller; Minara Begum's Backyard Garden

Through backyard gardens, Bangladeshi people in the United States are rooting themselves in their new locations as a connection to the homeland they have left behind.



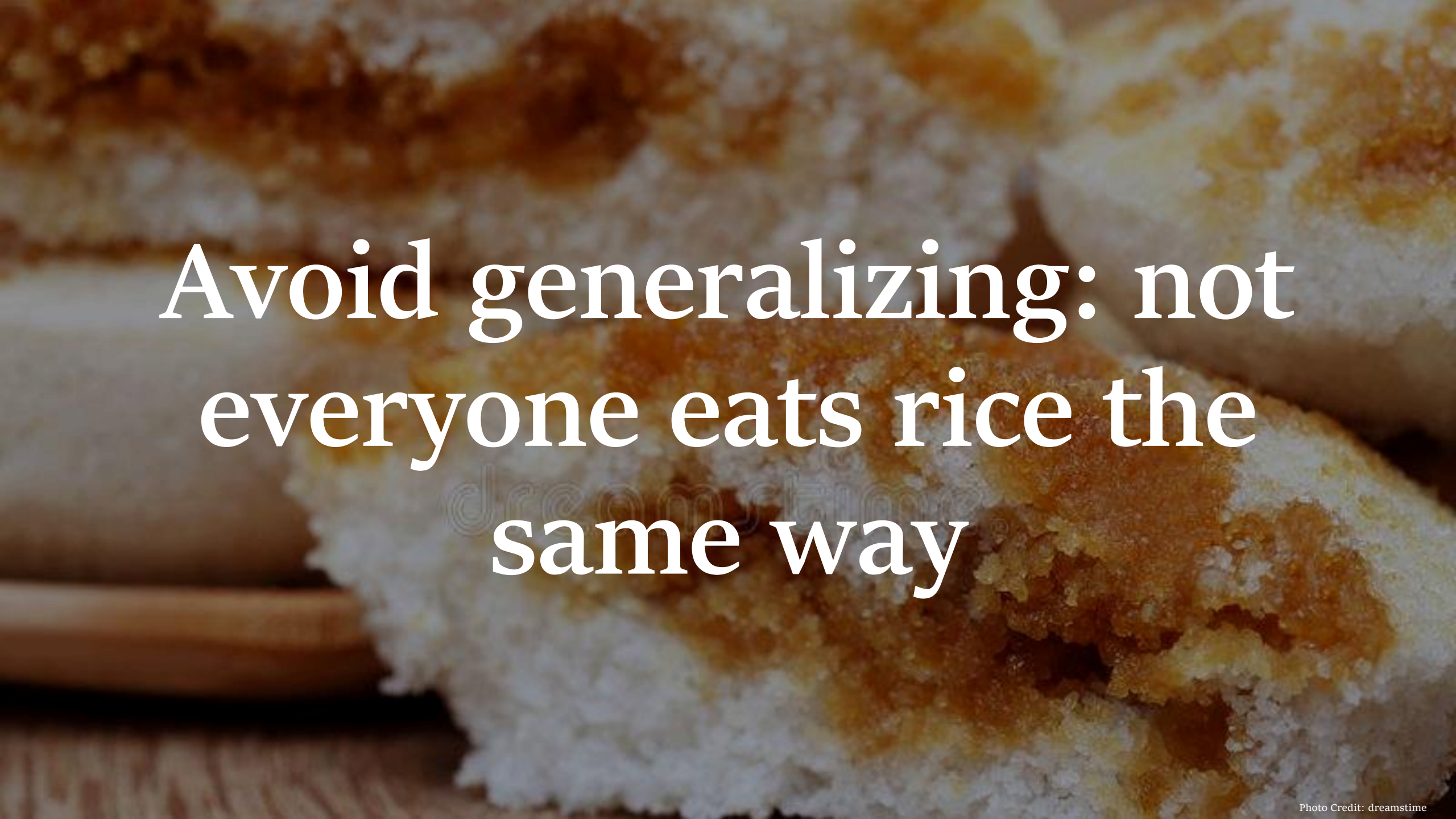
Rose-tinted Glasses: A Nostalgic Past

Longing for the Past

- The way people remember the past is subjective and linked to their experiences and location in social space
- Bangladeshi people living in the U.S. → A past shaped by the diasporic experience and a longing for one's homeland
- Nostalgia, romanticization, and essentialization



Conclusions



**Avoid generalizing: not
everyone eats rice the
same way**

Future Questions

Other factors:
age, education,
gender

Food
Preparation and
Consumption

Impact of
Famines

Chronic
conditions

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Cooking Basket



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