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

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

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1. *Bhat* translates to “rice” and *khaiso?* translates to “did you eat?” Together, *bhat khaiso?* translates to “did you eat rice?”
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”
Amar shonar Bangladesh: Before the Diaspora

- 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
Pioneering the Bangladeshi Diaspora

Photo Credit: Adobe Stock

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

(Note: this list is not ranked or comprehensive)
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.
“Bhat khaiso?” “Did you eat rice?”

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?
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
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
“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)

“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)

“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)

“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)

“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)

“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)
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)

“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)

“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)

“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 the 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)
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)

7. *Korola* refers to the vegetable bitter gourd (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)

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

Photo Credit: Lakshmi Vantillu
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References


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