

“Really, most of the women’s work is in the kitchen, cooking, you know?”: Gender in U.S. South Asian Food Narratives

GAIL HICKEY

Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne

Women serve as guardians of traditional values in nearly every culture (Lessinger, 1995). This places an undue burden on women immigrants to perpetuate ‘authentic’ ethnic culture for their families (Hickey, 2008). The recent rapid influx of South Asian immigrants into the United States leads one to wonder how U.S. South Asian immigrant mothers negotiate the primarily gendered boundaries associated with food and food preparation. This article provides insights into gendered perspectives about food choices and food traditions of U.S. South Asian immigrants. The author draws upon 85 oral history interviews (54 male, 31 female) to explore emergent themes including acculturation, children’s food preferences, and gendered socialization. For example: (1) [South Asian] Men demand a lot from their wives. Even the food has to be served at the table [to men first]. And if you don’t have a right spoon, the husband can get mad and walk away. It’s considered [the behavior of] a good husband (laughs). (*1st generation female*); (2) The role of women [in traditional South Asian culture] is about sitting at home, raising children, being a housewife, and just cooking food for men. Today, the role of women is not only confined to being at home [and serving men], it’s going out and making a difference – being in the government, being in the place of business, and that’s been all missed in the media [interpretation]. (*2nd generation male*); (3) Last night my dad wanted cookies, so my mom went downstairs at 11 p.m. and baked him some cookies. (*2nd generation female*); (4) Really, most of the women’s work is in the kitchen, cooking, you know? (*1st generation male*)...

Keywords: *South Asian immigrants; food; cooking; gender roles; traditional cuisine; cultural adjustment.*

Introduction

South Asians are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States (U.S. Census, 2000). Composed of individuals from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, South Asians represent great religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity (Kibria, 2000). They are one of the most recent U.S. immigrant groups, having arrived in large numbers only after passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act.

Despite their growing presence, little research is available concerning the everyday lives of South Asians living and working in the United States. Even less is known about their home and family life. More than forty years and nearly two generations after the first young South Asian professionals and graduate students arrived in the U.S., then, their stories of acculturation have yet to be told. This article explores U.S. South Asians' experiences and perspectives with food, and considers the impact children, religion, cultural traditions, and vegetarian diet have on these experiences and perspectives.

Food is a "distinctive feature of immigrant lives, helping to forge communal solidarity" (Rayaprol, 1997: 67). While researchers have noted U.S. South Asians' maintenance of ethnic cultural values following immigration, including food (see, for example, Bhola, 1996; Mehra, 1997; Segal, 1998; Sadowsky & Casey, 1988), studies investigating these immigrants' experiences with and perspectives about food while living in the U.S. are extremely scarce (Srinivas, 2006). Studies by Mukhi (2000) and Khandelwal (2002) peripherally considered dietary traditions of Indian immigrants living in New York City, and Valley (2004) examined intersections between food and identity formation in the Jain diaspora; however, few studies have investigated in depth the everyday lives of diverse South Asian immigrants living in U.S. small cities or suburban areas. This chapter reports the results of one such study.

Eighty-five (54 male, 31 female) South Asian immigrants living in Indiana participated in oral history interviews about their acculturation experiences.¹ Acculturation is defined as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups" (Birman, 1994: 261). Traditionally, research on U.S. immigrants' acculturation has emphasized ways these immigrants move away from their own ethnic culture and toward the mainstream American culture (Rogler, 1994). Some researchers question whether these traditional acculturation models can adequately describe experiences and perceptions of persons who move from traditionally stable cultural settings such as South Asia, to a more diverse multiethnic setting such as the U.S. (see, for example, Berry, 1990; Berry et al., 1992; Birman, 1994; LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton, 1993).

This study is informed by Birman's (1994) acculturation framework, which permits researchers to "capture [the] diversity of experiences of acculturation" present in a multicultural host society such as the United States (275). My analysis also is informed by theories of social memory (Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Geary, 1994) and transnationalism (Portes, 1999; Schiller, 1999). An oral history investigation into diversity in U.S. South Asian food narratives, such as the one reported here allows researchers to consider how South Asian individuals remember food and perceive the past in different ways (Darian-Smith and Hamilton, 1994), as well as the ways food discourse defines and shapes transnational South Asian identities (Saunders, 2007).

Data from transcribed oral history narratives were analyzed using both open and axial coding. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, written narratives may be coded for main themes and sub-categories that intersect with main themes, as well as analyzed for code, concept, and category. Participants who mentioned food, diet, cooking, or vegetarianism were included in this study. Resulting narratives yielded three main themes (adjusting to U.S. food, children's food preferences, and gender issues), as well as various sub-themes.

¹Data for this study are drawn from oral history interviews with 100 South Asians (58 male, 42 female) who live in Indiana. Of the original 100 participants, 85 (54 male, 31 female) discuss food. Demographic data includes age (18-64, mean 38), residence in U.S. (2-42, mean 18), religion (69% Hindu, with Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and Parsi Zoroastrian also represented), country (India 92%, with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh collectively representing 8%), and generation (most are first-generation, with 24 identifying as 1.5 or second-generation). Participants, like the general U.S. South Asian population, are well-educated in that more than 70% have earned at least a bachelor's degree. In addition, the majority of participants come from middle- to upper-middle-class families.

Memories of South Asia

Food “is ubiquitously significant” in South Asia (Saunders, 2007: 209). More than 80 percent of the Indian subcontinent is Hindu, and Hindu philosophy permeates the South Asian culture (see, for example, Fenton, 1988; Hodge, 2004; Kurien, 2001). Hindu sacred literature teaches “the significance of food is greater than that of mere sustenance” since food plays a pivotal role in Vedic worship (Saunders, 2007: 209). South Asian immigrants in this study see food and food rituals as ways to maintain connections with their culture of origin, as well as to construct ethnic, religious and caste identities. “Food is a real big part of our lives,” a second-generation female notes. Based on the contents of their narratives, the majority of participants in this study agree.

Participants also agree dining together is a vital facet of the South Asian family ethos. While South Asian families “express and create meaning through the shared food they eat during dinner ... they are reframing and redefining that meaning through their discourse about food” (Saunders, 2007: 203). “We would welcome Dad [when he came home from work in the late evening],” one male participant recalls, “and from that time [on] it would be family time. You’d have dinner and [the conversation would be] ‘How did the day go?’ ‘What do you need?’ ‘What needs to be done at home?’ ‘How are [your] classes?’ All the different aspects of [our] daily life were covered at the dining table.”

How food is served in India versus in the United States, participants concur, is an important aspect of South Asian family life. Whereas in the U.S., native-born American family members may eat at different times or in front of the television, a male participant recalls that meal time in India was a shared experience: “If you look at the way things are served in America compared to the way things are served in India, in America you get individual dishes. In India, you get a big dish right in the middle. Now, you can scoop it up and put individual things in, but it’s still in the middle because everybody’s going to share it.”

Many people use their hands or bread to scoop up food in South Asia, rather than using forks or spoons. This practice varies by region and religious belief, however, as Tharoor (1997) points out: “[W]hereas northerners confine themselves to the very tips of the fingers, southerners think nothing of dipping their hands into a communal dish, Hindus are careful not to let the hand they are eating with touch someone else’s plate, let alone a bowl others have to help themselves from” (320). A male participant explains, saying: “In [India], there’s a big thing called *chuta*, which means food that’s been touched by someone else. For instance, if it’s already been on your plate and you start eating off your plate, no one else will eat off your plate. Even a mother won’t eat off a child’s plate, or a child will not eat off a mother’s plate.”

Several participants recall their favorite meals. “Everyone packed their own lunch,” a first-generation female remembers when she recalls her school days in India. “Generally [we had] *chapati* (a kind of bread), and vegetable, and little bit of sweet and something a child likes. Yes.” She adds: “Right outside the school there would be a lot of little food stalls that you could buy from, but I wasn’t allowed. My mother never ... she didn’t believe in it. You don’t know how clean [the stall food] is. So, I packed my lunch every day. For dinner [after school], we would have different kinds of bread, rice, couple different vegetables, and what we called *dal*, which is more like a soup [of] lentils or different types [of] beans, then pickles and different kinds of chutney. But, every day, some kind of bread (at least, in my family), rice, *dal*, couple different vegetables, chutney.” Another first-generation female describes what she calls a typical meal in India: “Bread (which is a flattened bread) and plenty of vegetables – a variety of vegetables – and plain rice, and a soup kind of thing which goes on it (*dal*).” A male recalls his mother making “rice, curries ... bread, and vegetables.” Remembering “Mom’s cooking” allowed participants to imagine family gatherings from the past, as in this first-generation male’s narrative excerpt:

“We used to go to my mother’s mother’s house for all the festivals [because my dad’s father had died]. I still remember [my grandmother] the most because of the kinds of dishes she made. I have very nice memories of her.”

We would walk or take the bus [and] she would give us lots of food to carry home. I remember my mom carrying the wicker baskets [filled with my grandmother's cooking]. Even though it's all in my elementary school days, the memory is really vivid."

Adjustments

Food figured largely in U.S. South Asian immigrants' memories of adjustments made in the process of cultural change. Sub-themes in the primary theme of adjustment included "Palate," "Shopping for Food" and "Other Adjustments".

Palate

One of the major differences between South Asia and the United States, according to Saunders (2007), is "the way food is prepared" (214). "Here, you have to get adjusted," a first-generation male immigrant explains. "The food is different." Another first-generation male describes his first experiences with western food:

"Initially, the most difficult thing for me to adjust to was the food. I felt that [western] food was very bland, no taste to it, nothing. If you have eaten Indian food which is spicy, you know we are used to that kind of food. I thought that eating that [western food was] very insipid, no taste to it.... So, to answer your question 'What was your big adjustment?', the most difficult adjustment was food."

"I was used to very spicy tasting food," a first-generation male recalls. "Slowly, we acquire taste for American food." A male who came to the U.S. as a graduate student says: "Food was a major problem [after I got here].... I just didn't like the food at the dorms. It was pretty bland for my taste."

Occasionally, U.S. South Asian immigrants recall circumstances in which individual family members accustomed to mainstream American diet need to adjust to ethnic food. A female first-generation participant recalls her young son's difficulty with ethnic food when the family visited extended family in India. "He had some trouble about the food because he was used to sort of different ... he's never [eaten] just Indian food every day [for every meal]." A second-generation female discusses a similar experience when she says her husband cannot go back to India to stay because "once you are raised here ... he cannot eat that food. My kids cannot, either."

Shopping for food

Approximately half the first-generation participants in this study arrived in the U.S. as graduate students or young professionals in the 1970s. Currently, ethnic markets and even American grocery stores in the suburban Midwest stock ingredients favored by South Asians (Leonard, 1997), but three or more decades ago these ingredients were available only in cosmopolitan areas such as Chicago. "In '72, we couldn't even get ginger root (laughs), you know, ginger and cilantro, which is very staple in much of our cooking," says a first-generation female. "Now, in Kroger, they have a lot of things." Another first-generation female agrees, saying "You never saw mangoes in the supermarket at that time. Now, everywhere ... all the things you need [can be found]."

A first-generation female describes a communal monthly shopping trip to Chicago during the 1970s, explaining: "One person had a car ... and everybody used to [go 200 miles away] to buy groceries and then come back ... all the Indians", while a second-generation male remembers going along on these shopping expeditions:

"We would go to Chicago to Devon Street once a month to go grocery shopping, because that was the only place my mom could get, you know, real Indian groceries. And so, we'd always take this monthly trip and it was torturous for me, because I was just a little kid and we'd just go from grocery store to grocery store to ... it was terrible for me, but my mom loved it. And we'd always get tons of Indian food. It was such a long car drive for me

too, like two and a half hours or [more].”

“More and more things are available locally now,” a first-generation male says. “You can get everything [you need] here,” a first-generation female agrees. “Formerly, we had to go to Chicago, and before Chicago, to New York [by] mail order. So things are changed. More and more things are available locally now,” muses a first-generation male. These comments are in keeping with Saunders’ (2007) analysis of food discourse among U.S. Hindu immigrants. Saunders’ participants believed there “is a difference between the US of the past and that of the present. Implicitly, the present is more conducive to being Indian in the US” (219).

When certain speciality items are desired, participants use the Internet or, in one case, ask a local restaurant to order the item. A number of immigrants combine visits with friends or relatives in cosmopolitan cities with opportunities to buy ethnic food. “If we go to Chicago to visit friends ... we do some grocery shopping,” a male states. “We won’t go to Chicago [just] for groceries.” A female participant purchases ingredients for ethnic meals when visiting family members in Washington, D.C. or Philadelphia.

According to South Asian tradition, individual cooks prefer to create their own spice combinations (Tharoor, 1997). “The Indian way of cooking is that you make your own spices,” a first-generation male explains. While it was initially difficult to find specific ingredients, he says, “you can always get chilies. You can always get onions. You can always get pepper.... You don’t have to have a particular thing; you can make do.”

Other Adjustments

“[When a middle-class woman has a baby in India], in-laws come, servants come, and she gets a body massage and the baby gets a body massage. [She experiences] all kinds of taking care of – the food she likes or any special foods, this, that. I didn't have any of that. My husband tried to do whatever things for me, but it was just me and him.” (1st generation female)

And also:

“We are Brahmins and for us, there are different ceremonies that we do when [our children] are born. Like we when they eat [solid food] for the first time it has to be in front of a priest. So their grandfather came from [out of state], and we took them to the temple and ... the grandfather fed them some sweets.” (2nd generation female)

Children’s Food Preferences

Whether or not one’s children prefer ethnic food is an ongoing issue in U.S. South Asian families. First-generation South Asian participants, in particular, discuss their children’s dietary habits. “Food,” confirms Saunders (2007) is “a marker *and* a shaper of identity” (212). Rudrappa (2002) argues the South Asian immigrant home is a “safe haven ... a private sphere seen as a separate social universe” in which immigrant parents seek to practice their religion, cook their foods, and “crucially reproduce their families in what is considered to be the [ethnic] way” (90). In these immigrant homes, mothers “struggle to find foods that their children will eat, that have what they consider both nutritive and ‘cultural’ content” – whether these mothers reside in the U.S. or in South Asia (Srinivas, 2006: 194).

Most participants linked eating ethnic food at home with maintenance of South Asian cultural traditions. “We are still maintaining our culture in a lot of ways ... we eat Indian food just like [we did] back home,” one female says. “[Our children] like Indian food, and most of the time I cook Indian food ... we enjoy the Indian spices and the Indian cooking,” says a first-generation female. Female participants seemed especially pleased to report their children prefer ethnic food to “American” food. “They love it since they’ve been exposed from the beginning. They love the Indian

food,” one female explains. “I am very proud of [my children]. Although they have come here at a young age, they still like our food and the [ethnic values] we have taught them,” a first-generation female confirms.

In some cases, South Asian children eat ethnic food at home because their parents do not give them a choice. “[Our children] have no choice of eating anything else,” a female participant insists. Her sentiments are echoed by a first-generation male participant: “Largely [what we eat at home is a] traditional vegetarian diet, meaning Indian food.... At home we made a kind of an implied rule that [our children] will eat, once a day, Indian meal. They were not given a choice whether they liked it or not.” In other cases, the “Indian food only” rule is somewhat relaxed – unless South Asian grandparents are visiting. “My mother cooks mostly Indian food,” a second-generation female admits, “especially when my grandparents were there. My grandparents, obviously, [have] always eaten Indian food.” A first-generation male explains: “I haven’t imposed my [vegetarianism] on either of our children so, largely they [eat ethnic food], but they do eat everything else that Americans would do. They prefer [American food], as a matter of fact. Particularly my son prefers American food ... if he’s given a choice.”

“If we had given [our son] a choice, he probably would not have asked for Indian food when he was growing up,” a male participant claims. “All [his American classmates] have grown up with hamburgers and French fries and so on, and [at our house] he’s eating something different.” In other families, western food is eaten at restaurants outside the home, while ethnic food commonly is eaten at home. “When I was little,” a second-generation female recalls, “we used to get McDonald’s or get pizza or burritos ... probably twice a week. And the other five [days] we eat Indian food. The majority of my life, we’ve been eating Indian food.”

South Asian women in the United States “cater to their ... children, who typically prefer more American foods than do their parents” (Leonard, 1997: 87). Female participants in this study confirm Leonard’s finding. “I’m a vegetarian,” one female participant states, but she doesn’t mind cooking “something different” for her family. “At Thanksgiving ... [at] Christmas time,” she explains, “they want a Cornish hen, fruit salad, apple pie, spinach casserole ... I prepare all the traditional things [during American holidays].” Another female agrees, “Most of the time [I cook ethnic] food, but sometimes American food also – because the kids want American food.” Other female participants admit they cook western style food as well as ethnic dishes. “We enjoy [ethnic food at home, but] that doesn’t mean that we don’t enjoy the other. I cook some pasta and some steaks and that kind of stuff, too.”

Pasta and vegetarian Mexican dishes became a part of dietary negotiations in other South Asian families. According to a first-generation female, her husband and children enjoy eating ethnic food at home “but they don’t want it every day ... so they get spaghetti and whatever else.” This participant tends to prepare a few ethnic dishes for herself, and make “mostly western food” for her family. A second-generation female confides, “My parents indulged us [when it came to food],” a second-generation female confides. “Like, when we stopped liking rice, they would take us out to eat, and things like that.” “I eat more Indian food than my children do; so does my wife,” a first-generation male realizes. Another first-generation male discusses his family’s dietary style: “Mostly, we have Indian food at home. But when the kids were home ... it is sort of half and half [ethnic and western cooking]. If you cook too many Indian foods every day, the kids will be missing Western food. So we used to have one day Western food, meatloaf or roast or something, and the other day, Indian.” “We gave them the option,” a male participant says of his children, “[saying] ‘You can eat whatever you want.’ They’re like fifty-fifty ... they like half their meals to be typical [American fare] and half is Indian food. So, the children [are] sort of blending both the cultures as far as food is concerned.”

A female participant rationalizes serving two types of food at home when she says: “[My husband and I] are Indian. We dress differently. We eat differently. We have different social lives”.

“[Our children] are American ... because they were born here.” A first-generation male agrees when he says, “Our children eat American food and Indian food. For them, it doesn’t make a difference [in their identities]. They eat all kinds of foods.”

One female participant regrets that her daughter’s primary exposure to South Asian culture is through eating ethnic food at home. “So she [only] knows India though its cuisine,” the participant mourns. And a young South Asian father indicates he has given up on his children’s enjoying ethnic food when he complains, “[T]he kids hate Indian style food, so we have to feed them pizza or taco or whatever they want to eat.”

Other South Asian parents hold fast to ethnic child rearing traditions, especially those relating to motherhood and food. The image of South Asian motherhood, Srinivas (2006) documents, “is conceptualized as a nurturing relationship between the mother and child, where this dyad is a metaphor for ... caretaking and dependency” (198). Eating and food habits, in the South Asian context, Saunders (2007) states, “reveal messages [about ethics and character] to both the actors and the observers of those actions” (209). A young couple who preferred to be interviewed together comment on these traditions. The mother explains: “[A] child is more dependent on their parents in India than a child is over here.... I still feed [our preschool son]. And you can imagine that is why he is so dependent on me. He is dependent on us in all aspects.” Her husband adds: “We cannot imagine a child in India who is three or four years old eating the food all by himself. [Even an Indian] kid who is maybe ten or twelve years old, the parents tend to feed them. So, those things are very different over here.”

Gender Issues

As has been mentioned, food is at the core of ethnic identity. The concept of food preparation is also “strongly gendered” (Leonard, 1997: 137). Food in the South Asian diasporic experience is essentially gendered as well. Hindu social structures brought to the U.S. by South Asian immigrants identify the roles assigned to individual family members (Embree, 1989). *Dharma*, which refers to the traditional established Hindu social order and describes individual duties (Roland, 1989), establishes the aspects of daily life for which each individual is responsible. Women, Khandelwal (2002) writes, are “in charge of the home, including food preparation and everyday family needs” (117). In addition to being responsible for the family’s meals, South Asian immigrant women also are responsible for what Rayaprol (1997) calls “memory work”, which gives “concrete shape to [South Asian] ethnicity” (Rudrappa, 2002: 99). Rayaprol (1997) found South Asian women participate in these gendered roles voluntarily.

Regardless of class, Indians preferred home-cooked meals prepared by women. (Khandelwal, 2002: 37). While women take responsibility for care of the family inside the home, South Asian men, Khandelwal (2002) affirms, are “responsible for income and duties outside the home” (117). In India, a first-generation female remembers, the male members of the family were responsible for going outside the house to purchase food:

“Men do the shopping, because that was kind of a ... maybe some power ... to do the grocery shopping. My grandmother would give [grandfather] the list, but the shopping, the grocery shopping in the market, [actually] going to the marketplace was [a male] type of activity. Over there, he would meet some of his friends, and they will socialize and exchange their views, and then go shopping. It was done like that. So the male members of the family go for the grocery shopping – especially in the market – like to get the fish and all the vegetables.” (1st generation female)

Other participants agree. “My mom would never go out for groceries and stuff like that – which I (or anyone) would do normally here,” another first-generation female states. “My mother ... women are not to go out,” another first-generation female says. “Even in my case, when the girl [turns] twelve, she has to stay home. She’d have to learn to cook and get ready to get married.”

Other participants documented this is one tradition that has not changed. “My mom never goes to the market to buy stuff,” declares a first-generation male participant. Instead, “she always picks up the phone, orders whatever she needs [while remaining] in the house. The guy is fifteen minutes away, and he will be on his way the minute you put the phone down.”

In some South Asian homes, a woman would send servants to buy the food at market. “The meals are prepared by a maid” in middle-class homes, a first-generation female participant explains. “Most of time [at our house], the maid made the dinner.” Household servants are not happy about modern conveniences such as the instant delivery service described by the male participant above because this makes less work for servants who do not live in: “There is the *dbobi* who comes from outside, takes your clothes, goes and washes them and comes back. Sometimes you do have a cleaning person come in [or else a] permanent in-house cleaning person.... Typically, people [in middle-class India ten years ago] had two in-house and one outside [servants]. Now it’s more like one [living in-house] and one [coming from outside].”

As pointed by Srinivas, “in the diasporic Indian family, the links between motherhood and provisioning are engaged somewhat differently as nuclear Indian families find themselves with no family members, extended kin or servants to help.... Indian women, in the diasporic context, are usually expected both by their families and by themselves, to run the household whether they work outside the home or not...” (2006: 199):

“We had servants who did the cleaning and the outside work, and we basically did the cooking.” (1st generation female)

“When my dad came here [to visit us], he was so surprised to see me working so hard. I’m cooking, I’m cleaning, I’m doing everything. He felt so bad for me, he told me to go back to Pakistan.” (1st generation female)

“I remember that first the children were served. There was a big dining table [with] ten or twelve seats. The children were served first, then [by elder male as in] my grandfather, father, uncles, and ... male members of the family, and then my grandmother and all my aunts and mom would eat.” (2nd generation female)

“The way it worked in our family, because there were so many children, all children ate first and then the adults ate.” (1st generation female)

“I cook [Indian food] regularly, almost every meal. We follow totally Indian food.” (2nd generation female)

“I do [cook Indian style]. Every day we have Indian food at home.” (1st generation female)

“I make Indian food everyday. We eat out American food. I’m feeding [my son] good food everyday [at every meal]. So I’m trying [to maintain Indian culture] with him.” (1st generation female)

“[My mother] always cooks Indian food, and meals take a while to make. By the time I get home she’s exhausted.” (2nd generation female)

“At home, it’s traditional Indian food always.” (1st generation female)

“We cook Indian foods at home because, most of the time, when we got outside we tend to eat a variety of foods.... We also have any kind of cuisine you can think of [ordered] in.” (1st generation male)

“We still eat our Indian [food], and I still cook traditionally. My husband likes to eat Indian food, and I

enjoy it and our kids enjoy it.... I make my food from scratch, unlike the fast fix its [available in local grocery stores]. Those fast fix microwaveable foods are not really very healthy for you either."

"Always, in spite of the busy schedule of my husband, in spite of the busy schedules that the kids kept during their school year, one other thing that I feel glad that I was able to accomplish was every evening we had dinner together. That was one thing that I always wanted to have.... I feel dinner is the time [to] shut off TV and that's the time we communicate with each other. And that's the time everybody talks about their problems, all the fun things that happened and all the not so fun things that happened. It becomes like a group discussion. I was raising my kids in that way before they even started school." (1st generation female)

"The role of women in India is about sitting at home, raising children, and just being a housewife, and just cooking food for men. Today, the role of women in India is not only confined to being at home [and serving men], it's going out and making a difference, being in the government, being in the place of business, and that's been all missed in the media [portrayal of women's role]." (1st generation male)

"Men in India demand a lot from their wives. Even the food has to be served at the table [to men first]. And if you don't have a right spoon, the husband can get mad and walk away. It's considered [behavior] as a good husband (laughs)." (2nd generation female)

"Last night my dad wanted cookies, so my mom went downstairs at 11 and baked him some cookies." (2nd generation female)

Gender Issues: Real Men Don't Cook

[Asian Indian food] traditions are maintained by the women of the family, who, because of still-prevalent arranged marriages, usually come from the same caste as their husbands. In India, preparing meals remains so exclusively the responsibility of women that it is unusual to encounter men in kitchens. This is considered women's space, and cooking appetizing traditional foods is a woman's most appreciated talent (Khandelwal, 2002: 39).

Rayaprol shows in her research that immigrant women are responsible for "memory work," giving concrete shape to Indian ethnicity. Women are responsible for cultured activities such as performing *pujas*, cooking ethnic foods, and wearing ethnic clothes. Since it is the icon of the perfect Indian woman that upholds community integrity, the daughters of the community are disproportionately burdened with the preservation of culture in the form of religion, language, dress, food, and child-rearing. (Das Gupta and Das Dasgupta, 2000: 327)

"Here, I can live almost every day without help of anyone for our household activities. In India it is not possible to do that, in spite of so much modernization. For instance, I ... have a power lawnmower and [mow my own lawn]. In India, generally it is not considered within the status of middle-class family to do those things. Many times they have a cook in the house, who will come and cook the food. Here, we cook by ourselves. So there is a basic difference [between living in India and in the U.S.]. You cannot compare one life to the other. There, you are happy because people come and help you ... you pay for the help, and they help you..... Here, you cannot get that kind of help no matter how rich you are." (1st generation male)

"My mom used to cook everything [at home in India]. And I ... perhaps, I had trouble when I [first came here and] was on my own ... quite a bit of trouble, because I had to cook almost every day. So, cooking Indian food at home or cooking vegetarian food [while living on my own], vegetarian food could be like a cheese sandwich or something. During my college years I lived on cheese sandwiches, 'cause that's the only vegetarian food that I could get. Cheese sandwiches and garden salads...." (1st generation male)

"It was very difficult [when I first got here] just to, you know, have to do everything like food, laundry, things

you don't even think about when you don't do these things [in India]." (1st generation male)

"I didn't use to cook anything where I [lived in] Sri Lanka – everything was fixed for me and given to me. Here, I had to learn to cook." (1st generation male)

"Growing up in India, you know, I never had to cook, I never had to worry about a job, a paycheck, nothing like that. There was very little responsibility of maintaining a house or, you know, [living] independently. Even though I lived in a kind of a dorm, everything was done for me. You had people who came and swept your room, cleaned everything.... I came here as a hospital fellow [and could not cook]. My wife joined me about six months after I came to the United States. For six months [the hospital cafeteria cook] made sure that at least one meal a day that I have something that I can eat." (Nalin, male)

"One neat thing about my girlfriend is she's very interested in Indian culture.... She loves Indian food [and] she makes it for me all the time. I don't know how to [cook] – but she'll make it and [so I get to] eat Indian food." (2nd generation male)

"When [my mother] came into my grandparents house [after she married], she was expected to cook and clean. She was making three meals for thirty five people. She was expected to take care of the guests coming in and out. My grandfather was a businessman, and we had people constantly coming in and out. So no matter what she was doing, she had to drop everything, and come and entertain everybody. She had to be able to make food and tea, and then clean up afterwards. Plus ... she was raising [us] two kids without [our] Dad there." (2nd generation female)

"My [Filipino] wife loves to cook now. She didn't know any [Indian] cooking when we got married, but she's a great cook now." (1st generation male)

"Typically, women like to [cook]. My wife doesn't make three meals a day; she cooks one. Breakfast is all cereals. Lunch is always sandwich and a piece of fruit. Dinner, three to four times out of seven, is Indian dhal and curried vegetables. We are meat eaters but don't eat meat too much. On the other three or four days it can be anything, it can be Chinese, it can be Italian, it can be Mexican, it can be good old Midwestern, whatever that means, that's how the food is." (1st generation male)

"Really, most of the women's work is in the kitchen, cooking, you know?" (1st generation male)

"My mom would be the person who would run the household, the kitchen, and the food. She would take charge of all that and my dad would be more in charge of the business side, the money matters." (2nd generation female)

"I eat, every day, Indian food at home; my wife cooks." (1st generation male)

"[My wife cooks a] diversity of food. Of course, we are vegetarians so [it's always vegetarian].... Yes, we are vegetarians. Most of the times we have Indian food but two or three times a week we might have Italian or Mexican, vegetarian Italian, vegetarian Mexican or vegetarian Chinese." (1st generation male)

"My son and daughter both have learned to cook. And they cook all kinds of stuff, Indian food, Indian dishes as well as others." (1st generation male)

"I love to cook. At our restaurant, I've even cooked for wedding parties, for five hundred people, but that was when they needed help." (1st generation male)

"During my graduate student days here] my apartment mate from India and I used to have this thing about

shopping and cooking together. We would cook with Indian spices that we used to get at a grocery store.” (1st generation male)

“[At university, after I arrived here], I would go to the cafeteria for lunch. And then in the evenings, I ... three other guys from my school [in India] who came here to do a masters ... we shared an apartment, we used to take turns cooking.” (1st generation male)

“We [three guys] were living in a rooming house [in Canada when I was at McGill University]. We were hungry to cook our own food. There was myself, another Indian guy who was doing engineering and a third guy who was a Canadian. Sometimes I used to cook. Our roster was that I will cook one day, another day another guy cooks, and the third day, the third guy cooks. (Of course, the other guy was Indian, so he was a strict vegetarian, too.) So, we used to take turns. I used to cook chicken curry. This Canadian guy [rooming with me], little by little, he got accustomed to chicken curry and used to ask, ‘Hey, when can we have chicken curry again?’.... I learned to cook some non-vegetarian food too, after a while.” (Nag, male)

“[I came here just to work for this company]. I don’t have any non-Indian friends. Like Monday to Friday, we work from eight to five. In the evenings, we go out and play tennis for an hour or so, come back home, cook and watch some TV. We don’t really socialize with native Americans. There are not many avenues ... it’s not like a college atmosphere ... you work, and you come back.” (1st generation male)

Gender Issues: Acting as Hostess

South Asian women also shape ideas about their homelands as they prepare meals at home and dine out in restaurants. They play hostess to guests from different parts of their homelands and from other countries, so they adjust recipes and menus (Leonard, 1997: 86-87). “Indian men also expect women to prepare food in large quantities for ceremonial occasions and social gatherings.” (Khandewal, 2002: 39)

“When I came to this town in 1971, the Indian community here was very small. But everybody knew each other, you know. They got together and they would have a small program ... they would find a cafeteria or auditorium or this where they can have a program, some functions where they can have it for almost no cost. And people would cook at home and bring the food and everybody can eat together.... It allowed people to be together, you know.” (1st generation male)

“On the special occasions [religious holidays], mom would do everything. But if it’s day to day meals, [these are] prepared by the maid.” (1st generation female)

“In the gurudwara ... you have the service on Sunday morning. The service starts at eleven o’clock. I attend the service from eleven to twelve, although the service keeps going to one. At twelve I take the students, most of the kids downstairs and we talk and we do some religious stuff, you know, just like a school, like a Sikh school. And one o’clock it ends and at one thirty or around one thirty or so we eat. The free kitchen, the eating together, is the integral part of the service ... everybody sits down and eats together.... The system is set up in such a way that there is usually one family that takes over cooking for that week. They announce ahead of time that, please this family is cooking next time – everybody please come. So they cook all different kinds of foods to eat. I think some people maybe just come for eating (laughs) instead of services.” (1st generation male)

“When someone dies ... [our] family cooks a huge meal. It’s a tradition. They cook a big feast and invite all the poor people and homeless people nearby and feed them. And they do that every year on the same date.” (1st generation male)

“They have their community halls, each [family] group has their community hall were they can feed thousands

of people. They go to the community hall and say 'We want to feed so many people in honor of old grandpa that died' or whatever. And so you give them a budget and they go get the stuff and cook it there and get the word out that [our family is] feeding 200 today and ... the first 200 that show up, they eat." (1st generation male)

"[Our] wedding went on for two days. It starts in the morning when the bridegroom's family comes to the town. Then in the evening they come to the house, the bridegroom's whole family, and the bride and groom [exchange] garlands. Then there's dinner. Those guests who have just come to visit, who live in the same town, they go home, but the family stays. The actual wedding [ceremony] takes place at night [after dinner]. The priest tells what is an auspicious time to start the wedding – I think ours started around two o'clock [a.m.] ... and might have ended at five [a.m.]. Later there are a couple of other ceremonies [when] regular food is offered to them, not a very elaborate meal, but the kind of food which is eaten everyday. Then the bride goes with the bridegroom's family [to their home]." (1st generation female)

"[I was put in charge of an Indian association program because of where I'm from.] Of course, we had to have dinner. Indian people without dinner don't go anywhere, i.e. without food (laughs). If you want to bring Indian people to some program, always have food, otherwise they won't come." (1st generation female)

"I came here in the 1970s, when there were only 80, 85 Indian families [in town]. At that time everybody knew each other, you know, they got together and, you know, they would have a small program. Everybody had a very, very limited income because they were just beginning [to get settled], so they would ... try to find like places at [a local] cafeteria or auditorium where some functions for almost no cost. And people would cook at home and bring the food and everybody can eat together, more or less like a very modest beginning of the India Association in this style.... But, I mean, it allowed people to be together, you know." (1st generation male)

"In the last [few] years, people [in the local Indian association] are trying to move away from just only eating into some scholarly discussion. We brought [a local scholar] to talk about diversity. And, of course, I had to have lunch there – otherwise people wouldn't show." (1st generation female)

"I eat, every day, Indian food at home; my wife cooks.... When we have a large family gathering, we are preparing ourselves to accommodate everybody the best we can so that everybody has a good time and enjoys it while they're visiting here. Breakfast, we will cook at home. Lunch, we'll probably get catered in an Indian restaurant – we'll just call them and they bring it to you or you pick it up. But everybody's not Indian in origin ... my brother's sons-in-law, one is from Mexico, is a Ph.D.; another is a Ph.D. [in] teaching [and] he is from Virginia. Their kids are all American basically. They like certain items of Indian food but not everything.... So, we are selecting the food item. We are selecting everything accordingly. I hope everybody has a good time when they come in. We have even gone to the extent of calling, 'What do you like to eat? What drink would you like to have? What wine would you like to have?' We have taken special efforts. It's just a good happy feeling for me, you know, preparing. We work hard and finally, we see results and it's wonderful." (1st generation male)

"When my grandparents are [visiting] – especially when my grandparents are there, it has to be something that they like. Otherwise, my mom has to make two different things, and she doesn't like doing that. The majority of [our food] is Indian. When my father, like, when my grandparents weren't with us and my father was gone (because my dad traveled for a while on his job), at that point we were eating a lot less Indian food." (2nd generation female)

"I am a strictly vegetarian. We cook our food at home, and we at home most of the time. Nowadays there are four or five Indian restaurants in town. When I came here, there was none. As a matter of fact, the first Indian restaurant came in town was around 1980. So we didn't have any place to go and eat anywhere. We'd go to Chicago. And we'll still go sometimes Chicago and eat lunch and dinner. We, but we still do everything at home." (1st generation male)

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