

The Dawning of the Age of “a Curry and Us”

by Sandip Roy



I remember the age of the underwear-smugglers.

When I left India almost two decades ago to come to America, my mother folded every spice I could possibly need into my underwear. Turmeric, cumin, little green pods of cardamom, packed carefully between layers of underwear, socks and computer science textbooks. I wasn't the only one. Over the years I met Indians who smuggled in mangos, homemade pickles and ready-to-fry puris stuffed with peas. In those days before 9/11, customs officials were not very interested in me – a young single brown man from a turbulent part of the world. They (and their sniffing dogs) were much more preoccupied with middle-aged Indian women visiting their sons. They were rifling through their luggage, searching for contraband mangos and gourds.

Flash forward twenty years.

My friends and I wander out of an Indian movie theater in Fremont on a mellow California evening. The latest Bollywood release opened here the same day it did in Mumbai. At intermission (for Bollywood films *must* have an intermission) you can get samosas and chaat along with your popcorn and soda. We go shopping at an Indian market off the main drag. It's Sunday evening. All the other shops in the strip mall are closed except for this one. Lit by unflattering fluorescent lights, its shelves are piled high with all kinds of things - lentils, ready-to-cook packages of saag paneer, ayurvedic hair ointments, even the chocolate Bourbon biscuits (no real bourbon in them) that I remember from my childhood in India. Then we squabble over which Indian restaurant to go to for dinner. Do we want North Indian? Or South Indian? We settle for a buffet with both.

What happened?

Well, we did. There are now 2.57 million Indians in America according to the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau. That makes it one of the fastest growing ethnic groups. Indians are well-off. Median family income is over \$69,000. Indians are educated. 76 percent have at least a college degree. The post-1965 immigrant boom was followed by the dot-com boom. In her novel *The Tree Bride*, Bharati Mukherjee describes how "an immigrant fog of South Asians crept into America." When the chronicle of Silicon Valley is written by some 21st century Scott Fitzgerald, it might well be called, she writes, "The Great Gupta."

India is everywhere. It's in Booker Prize lists, spelling bees, and specially-for-you nuclear deals. It's in Sukhi's homecooked chicken tikka masala paste at Whole Foods. It's in Bhangra aerobics classes and Britney remixes. Newsweek called South Asians the "new American masala." 500 years after Christopher Columbus thought he had discovered Indians, we are truly found.

And I am not sure how I feel about that.

When I first came to America, Americans asked me about that "dot on the forehead." Now Madonna wears a bindi. Bollywood would borrow Hollywood plotlines (well, two or three for one 3 hour film). Now the Kronos Quartet reinterprets Bollywood composer R.D.Burman. Birthday cards are reproducing old kitschy Indian matchbox covers. Tight body hugging t-shirts worn by gay boys in the Castro say San Francisco in Devnagari script. There are even Bollywood appreciation classes in American universities. My kitsch has become their cool.

Of course not everything has been alchemized into cool. My big fat Indian wedding might be hot ("I want one," a gay man with a Southern accent told me in my neighborhood lesbian bar while sipping a sweet cocktail) but it doesn't mean the Indian cab driver, the 7/11 clerk or the Gujarati storeowner are remotely exotic.

Our Krishnas and curries are now public property to be sampled, remixed, chewed up and spat out as millions of cookie-cutter lunch boxes. (Probably Made in China.)

It almost makes me nostalgic for the old days when people came up to me and said "You are from Calcutta? My doctor is Indian. Dr. Harry Patel. I think he's from that other big city - Bombay?" And they would pause expectantly as if waiting for me to recognize Dr. Patel. Now

they want to know what restaurant I would recommend in the Bay Area – for “authentic Indian food, you know, a hole-in-the-wall place where Indians go, not your white-people-Maharaja-Thali stuff.”

And I am wondering, do I want to tell you?

But it’s too late. In San Francisco’s Tenderloin, in streets that still smell of piss, where homeless men shuffle around at the street corner, the clutch of Indian and Pakistani restaurants are brimming with hipsters. There are at least half a dozen Indian restaurants within a couple of blocks. Shalimar was the original-hole-in-the-wall, in a rundown neighborhood of junkies and musty SROs. It started out as a place where cabbies could run in for a quick bite. Nothing fancy, no tablecloths, just a bustling kitchen and tandoori chickens turning on the spit. Now the homeless man standing outside trying to sell a street newspaper greets me with a “Namaste.”

Across the bay in Berkeley, Vik’s Chaat House served up Indian street food in a nondescript garage in the back of a grocery store. Now they’ve taken over a warehouse. On weekends it’s hard to find a table. They need a loudspeaker to announce your order is ready, your name bouncing off the warehouse walls – the Sandips and Sanjeevs and Mandeeps all blurring into one. “Why don’t we give your name?” I told my friend Greg as we gave our order. Turns out there were at least two Gregs there as well.

Isn’t this what we always wanted? Isn’t this what we demanded? For other Americans to understand our culture? Acceptance? A place at the table? I guess we didn’t fully realize we could also become part of the menu.

Fifty years ago my parents emigrated to England by ship. My mother pretended to the fishmonger that she had a cat, so she could take fish heads home for a good Bengali fish-head curry. When I moved to the United States three decades later she told me stories of how afraid they were to cook fish in their apartment, in case the smell upset the Polish landlady.

In my university in the flat plains of Illinois we also learned that we had a private culture and a public culture. In the grad student apartments, where many of the Indians shared rooms, we could have our tape players on blaring tinny Bollywood songs and watch streaky pirated copies of Hindi films, while giant pots of communal dal and rice and curry bubbled on the stove. But in public we learned to leave that culture at home. Boys didn’t hold hands on the street like they did in India we were told. At the department potlucks we held back on the spices. On Diwali we didn’t have any celebration in the department even though half the teaching assistants were Indian. Being Indian was for after-work. Then we could finally let our guard down and just breathe.

No more. My private culture has become public. At a recent film festival in San Francisco, the theater was packed for Bollywood night. And the audience was very mixed. “Some screenings are 60-70 percent white,” Ivan Jaigirdar, festival director for the Third I South Asian International Film Festival told me once. “Especially the Bollywood films.”

I could see that. My friends and I were cringing even as we were having a grand time. It was a strangely protective feeling. Even as we laughed and rolled our eyes at the excess of it all, we stiffened when we heard the blonde woman behind us sniggering. I’m thrilled that this candy-

color emotionally-charged melodrama was leaping across cultures and entertaining a diverse audience. But the nagging doubt remains – what really does cross over?

Gaudy and outlandish as they can be, Bollywood films are also an intravenous cultural drip for me. I relate to them somewhere deep inside in a way I myself cannot put a finger on. I remember standing in my living room in San Francisco watching an old Hindi movie with my best friend. We oohed and aahed as tragic diva Meena Kumari slowly raised her head as if the weight of all that gold and brocade was crushing her.

My American friends laughed with us then and at us as we stood in our t-shirts and jeans singing Hindi love songs of indescribable pathos in shrill falsettos, towels draped around our faces like veils. We all laughed together. But my American friends had no idea how we longed in our flat-footed way for her languid grace, how we tried to line our eyes with hopeless tragedy. And knowing we could never get there, we butchered it all by shrill impersonation, hiding our longing with caricature

Bollywood is so visually overpowering, so defiant of logic in its Technicolor splendor, that it's just too easy to get caught up in the spoofiness of it all. On screen Shah Rukh Khan's face is quivering with emotion. The blonde woman behind me is chuckling at everything – the painful buffoonery of the comic relief, the little kid with the stagy lines, the syrupy romantic scenes where thundershowers and shooting stars appear on cue. The camp crosses over. The heart stays behind, lost in the subtitles.

As a writer it's a unique quandary. I am both exotic and just-another-Indian. I am flavor of the month. I also face "sorry, Jhumpa Lahiri already did that." The other day I got a call out of the blue from a man who said he was a Hollywood producer and was looking for stories – any kind of Indian story – it could be E.M . Forster, a Raj story, a docudrama, something non-fiction. Just anything Indian, but he said, it must have a good story.

The narrative, I fear, is running thin. A friend joked to me, "The first Indian immigrant story – you missed that boat long ago. You've missed the first Bengali immigrant story as well. Try the gay Bengali immigrant from South Calcutta." A friend who lives and writes in Brooklyn jokes that you can't take the subway there without falling over an Indian writer. As the host of a radio show, I sometimes wonder if I wrote a book would I invite myself on the show? On some gloomy days, the answer is no. Everything I think of writing seems to already have been done.

On the other hand, being an Indian writer amidst an explosion of Indian writers can be liberating. It lifts (at least to some extent) the weight of cultural responsibility. You don't have to be the model writer of the model minority if you don't want to be. Sudhir Venkatesh writes about gangs in Chicago, as far away from his South-Indian-in-California-suburbia roots as he can get. Abha Dawesar gets into the head of a white bisexual Manhattan exec in *Miniplanner* for her first novel. I don't have to write anymore about arranged marriage, the caste system or have a mandatory reference to spices (or at least food of some kind) in my title. Hopefully the days of *Chutney Popcorn*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Tandoori Nights* are drawing to a close. That ethnic identifier no longer needs to be attached to a title like a blinking \$7.95 all-you-can-eat-lunch-buffet sign.

But the dilemma as an immigrant writer today is that immigration itself means something very different now. When my parents left for England they had no idea when they would see their

families in India again. They worked the counters of Harrods, ate fish and chips, and scrounged vacations by bus and train. Their only connection to home was irregular letters. Long distance calls were prohibitively expensive and reserved for births and deaths, news that was delivered in raised voices across crackling lines.

Soon they learned how to substitute -- which fish resembled their beloved hilsa, how to make a dessert of sandesh out of ricotta cheese. As they marveled, "Isn't it almost like the real thing?" at the back of their minds there was always a lingering sense of loss.

Even when I came to America, home was still a slim blue airmail letter that often took three weeks to get to Illinois from Calcutta. Nobody needs that anymore. News from home comes daily via e-mail. I can walk into an Indian cash-and-carry in Sunnyvale and get my herbal digestive pills at nine o'clock at night. I can order customized CDs of my favorite Bengali songs online.

Immigration these days means giving up less and less. Many people still risk their lives to cross into America across scorching deserts or sealed in cargo containers. But once you have made it into America you no longer have to abandon the tastes and sounds of home the way my parents once had to in England. Home is just a mouse-click away. What does it mean when, thanks to the marvels of technology, immigration is no longer the sloughing off of one's skin it once was? Our journeys are no longer forged so much in loss and re-invention. Now they're imbued with the cockiness of seizing the best of both worlds.

My mother's fish curry once symbolized the loss of one home and the invention of another. Mine is merely a good copy, its ingredients picked up casually from the freezer of an India Mart in Sunnyvale. Is it only when you re-create your curry out of lies to the fishmonger and stand-in spices, when the news of death in the family comes weeks too late in a dog-eared letter, that you really reflect on the price of immigration?

When I started writing I still felt the loss of home acutely. When I read to an audience of Indians in America they felt that loss as well. The nostalgia for that loss bound both of us with a kind of wistfulness. We looked in each other's words to recognize those common journeys from neighborhoods all over India. Those journeys have changed.

Some Indians have even become bi-continental, setting up companies in Bangalore and homes in Fremont. "I come to America every four or five months," an Indian who moved back to India from America told me. "That way I can satisfy my cravings for a Chipotle burrito." This is not my parents' immigrant journey. They would ride three buses and one train to go see some visiting flute player from India perform in a church basement.

Sure, there is still the immigrant urge to preserve. The Bay Area is bristling with Indian dance schools and music classes. A professor at UC Berkeley quipped that there were probably more South Indian classical dance debut performances in the Bay Area every month than in South Indian state of Tamilnadu, the birthplace of the dance. To be an immigrant is to become a guardian of your culture.

But we don't need to preserve it in the folds of our underwear anymore.

Meanwhile back at the Castro movie theater the clock is pushing 1 A.M. The blonde can't believe the movie is still going strong. As one more hurdle shows up before the lovers can reunite someone groans "We will be here all night." Those not used to Bollywood don't know it's like running a marathon. After all their knee-slapping hysterics in the first hour, they are now petering out in the final stretch. They are eyeing the exit sign wondering how long the queue is at the restroom. They are glancing at their watches. They are laughing less. And I feel a sweet sensation. As they stagger out of the theater clutching their heads, looking like they got off a non-stop flight from Mumbai to San Francisco, sick from all the popcorn they devoured, I can't help thinking somehow in its own way Bollywood has had the last laugh.

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