

# Illegal Tastes and Suspicious Aromas: Negotiating Migrant Selves Through Practices of Everyday Food

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In August 2020, the advice column *Dear Prudence* of the popular American magazine *Slate* featured a controversial piece, an appeal received over their weekly live chat. It was from a disgruntled American parent who shared an unexpected encounter his son had with Indian food.<sup>1</sup> The parent recounted how nine-year-old Chris, after spending the day at his best friend Neil's house, was served a traditional Indian meal of chicken curry, lentils, and vegetables by Neil's family. The transcript expressed the parents' shock and outrage after discovering that Chris had been offered "spicy curries" without their permission. Despite their emphatic explanations of the ill effects of Indian food on the stomach, their concerns putatively "didn't seem to register" with Neil's South Asian parents, both of whom are doctors. The implication of the complaint was twofold. First was that Neil and his parents had violated American values by feeding Chris Indian food and had thereby seemingly disturbed the all-American constitution of the boy. The logic of this complaint further extends to highlight Neil's parents' inferiority, despite their high academic and professional accomplishments, as compared to their American counterparts. The second complaint is that Chris's parents' noble efforts to throw open their "bubble to include the family of Neil" to help the latter assimilate into American society was thwarted by the South Asian American family's insistence on eating and serving Indian food, including food for guests. Upon publication, the story caused quite a furor in print and social media, with Chris's parents being heavily criticized for their infantilizing language and the suspicion they had aimed at "two doctors" who were born and raised in India, and for the overall racist undertones of their outburst.

The sentiments expressed by Chris's parents exemplify a stereotyped and racialized notion of Indian food, and by extension of South Asian people, that is still

largely prevalent in sections of white Western society. South Asians and their food are a somewhat dubious category in Western popular culture, and tropes like curry-odored Indians, stinky lunchboxes, or diarrhea-inducing gravies are often recycled in television programs and comedy gags. While “South Asian” as a category is often imagined as a homogenous collective of citizens from the subcontinent, the lived reality of being a South Asian is heterogeneously regional. India, for instance, is characterized by a vast range of cultural expressions that encompass regional variations of taste, fashion, and language. In reality, not all Indian food is spicy or strong smelling, just like not all Indian attire is brightly colored and blingy. However, popular cultural ignorance compartmentalizes Indian migrants and their foods into a racially homogeneous stereotype. For migrants, food becomes a crucial means of sustaining cultural identity. Their detachment from familiar structures of community, architecture, mythology, and relationships to their homeland adds layers of complexity to their everyday<sup>2</sup> negotiations of cultural selfhood and the recreation of familiar tastes serves to allay the sense of unhomeliness. With their distinctly spicy smells and tastes, South Asian migrant cuisines puncture the comparatively muted flavorscape of American diets, challenging the perceived uniformity of “Americanness.”

This article will examine instances of the gustatory transactions of South Asians in America, particularly from the South Asian Indian community, and will evaluate their impact on the perception of the South Asian Indian migrant community in America. I draw on Arjun Appadurai’s idea of “gastro-politics,” originally used to theorize how food mediates power hierarchies in South Asian society, to explore the politics of identity that unfold the gastronomic experiences of South Asian Indian migrants in America. The main arguments of this article are divided into two sections. The first section addresses how perceived “suspicious” tastes and smells associated with South Asian foods in the American context underscore a unique tension where food items central to migrants’ identities become stigmatized markers of difference. Regulatory restrictions on ingredients like mustard oil and curry leaves alongside broader cultural reservations toward “spicy” and “exotic” flavors highlight how alimentary practices shape racialized boundaries, revealing food’s role as both a link to heritage and a subject of social profiling. The second half of the essay discusses the American appropriation of Indian food, which often entails a disassociation of culturally significant flavors from their original context, reframing them as trendy, premium products while obscuring the heritage and cultural labor of migrant communities. This transformation of migrant tastes into trendy commodities perpetuates a sanitized, market-friendly representation that obscures the cultural heritage and lived experiences of migrant communities, ultimately reinforcing hegemonic narratives within American cosmopolitanism.

Food, in South Asian cultures, serves as an “important medium of contact between human beings” and its varied uses in daily life shape much of the moral and social classifications within society.<sup>3</sup> The concept of gastro-politics has been widely applied to explore the role of food in shaping cultural identities across societies.<sup>4</sup> This

framework is equally pertinent to examining the lived experiences of South Asian Indian migrants in America, where their daily negotiations of identity are most acutely felt through “conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges around food.”<sup>5</sup> A migrant’s table bears witness to the micronegotiations of taste and smell that occur daily in response to capitalist strategies like homogenization, suspicion, and appropriation. What the migrant can and does eat at the table, which is often olfactorily and gustatorily unfamiliar to Americans, represents the smallest unit of their cultural transactions—the molecular foundation of the gastropolitics that shapes their identity in America.

In the dialectic of capitalist neocolonialism, migrant food practices transcend mere sustenance and come to signify negotiations with systems of power. State authority—manifested through laws, tax policies, marketing strategies, and advertising—trickles down from legal and economic institutions through the foods stocked in convenience stores and ultimately to the dinner table. Each morsel becomes a negotiation with neoliberal ideology. Discrimination based on taste as experienced by Neil’s family is a problem inherent in the culture of neoliberalism, wherein individual choices are judged through the prism of market logic. Neoliberal governmentality attempts to represent “the population’s wellbeing as intimately tied to individuals’ abilities to make market principles the guiding values of their lives”.<sup>6</sup> The migrants’ embodied tastes, which constitute cultural capital for them, are unviable, illegal, and suspicious in the larger American market, thereby devaluing the status of the migrants in society. As I argue in this article, market restrictions and stigmatization of certain Indian foods operate as systemic forms of intolerance directed at tastes and the cultural identities that these tastes represent. Consequently, the preparation and consumption of Indian food in America fosters negative perceptions of migrant spaces and bodies.

However, the relationship between American society and South Asian food cannot be simplified as one merely of dislike or aversion. It is rather a complex and layered relationship constituted by sociopolitical and economic parameters. The mechanism of neoliberal society functions by creating “figures of alterity” like the migrant, and then in a moment of inversion uses the difference as the foundation of the Self.<sup>7</sup> Indian foods that are perceived as an affront to the American senses are also conversely recontextualised and appropriated by the American food industry so that their cultural significance is inverted to define American modernity. This duality inherent in the consumption of Indian foods that sets the stage for racial politics as the identity of the American citizen is constituted in a system of difference with that of the immigrant. The South Asian migrant who is reduced to the generic, ambiguous identity of a “curry-eater” is ironically constitutive of a diverse, multicultural society, which commercializes South Asian tastes.

## Suspicious Smells and Tastes

Food practices shape our system of shared social dispositions, or as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, our “habitus.” Dietary preference, or “taste,” is an expression of the “deepest dispositions” of one’s habitus.<sup>8</sup> Taste is the “incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation” and establishes social, cultural, and economic class distinctions.<sup>9</sup> In their efforts to allay cultural dysphoria postmigration, many South Asian Indians in America resort to repeating food practices from their past and recreating remembered tastes in their foreign kitchens. As Krishnendu Ray has observed, the cooking of specific dishes from the region of their belonging becomes central to an Indian migrant’s embodiment of “tradition.”<sup>10</sup> West Bengali migrants, for example, often adopt a more pronounced “Bengali” diet, consuming dishes like “[r]ice, *dal*, and fish cooked in a sauce with *panch phoron* (a Bengali five-spice mix of fenugreek, onion seed, fennel, cumin, and mustard seed)” far more frequently than their middle-class counterparts in India.<sup>11</sup> He notes that about sixty percent of Bengali American households serve rice for dinner almost every day, as compared to only thirty-one percent of Bengali households in Calcutta who do so on a typical day. Like Bengali Americans, most other South Asian Indian communities in America follow similar patterns of traditional food consumption in an effort to sustain the remembered tastes of home.

For the migrant, maintaining the cultural distinction of the domestic kitchen becomes especially important in order to allay the distorting effects of migration. The public dining options for “Indian food” in the US are mostly places that offer over-spiced, generic versions of north Indian tandoori meat dishes in yogurt-based sauces served with naan, or simplified versions of south Indian vegetarian dishes like *idli* and *dosa*.<sup>12</sup> These places rarely serve the regional variety of food that is consumed daily in the average Indian household. With the rapid growth that followed globalization in the 1970s, Indian restaurants in the US have increased in number, yet the regional variation remains very limited.<sup>13</sup> In this situation, the unhomeliness<sup>14</sup> of the migrant becomes synonymous with the distress of knowing that one’s personal history has become part of and lost within the public discourse of minority identity. The subtle distinctions lost, the Indian migrant is poised to be labelled as the clichéd, dubious smelling “curry-eater.” In other words, the sense of unhomeliness unravels the cultural distinctions of the migrant subject and exposes them to the pressures of homogenization and racialization. Therefore, the continuation of quotidian gastronomic practices in migrant homes becomes crucial in resisting the threat of homogenization and cultural colonization posed by the globalized public market of “Indian” food dominating American society.

The lack of nuanced understanding of regional and seasonal Indian food leads to a suspicion of certain Indian foods. Suspicion in this context operates as a social mechanism that both constructs and reinforces racial boundaries, stigmatizing certain groups as Other.<sup>15</sup> Critical race theorists Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw and

others discuss how suspicion often functions as a means of social profiling, contributing to the broader system of racial discrimination and criminalization. Crenshaw, through her study of racially distinct legal treatment given to Black victims as opposed to white ones, opines that it is not simply the existence of categories of race or color that is problematic, but rather the “particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies”.<sup>16</sup> The marked difference in the taste and smell of Indian food from that of conventional American foods generates a discourse of suspicion which in turn leads to greater surveillance of migrant bodies. Read through the analytic of Foucault’s theory of governmentality, which he defined as “power that has the population as its target, economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument,” suspicion may be understood as a means of soft social control to reinforce boundaries between the Self and the Other.<sup>17</sup>

For instance, mustard oil, which is the cooking medium for almost all Bengali dishes and the key element in the preparation of the staple Indian American dinner dishes of dal and fish curry, is restricted for consumption by the US FDA.<sup>18</sup> It is labelled as unfit for human consumption since lab tests have linked it to nutritional deficiencies and cardiac lesions in test animals. As a result, the oil is not readily available in regular American supermarkets and is found only in specialized South Asian or Asian stores. Even then, the bottles of the golden oil come stamped with a warning sign that reads “For External Use Only” in bold red font. The health concerns that the FDA cites are new to Bengali migrants from India and Bangladesh alike. The use of mustard oil in the cuisine of eastern India has a colonial history,<sup>19</sup> and subsequently the oil has become a characteristic part of Bengali cuisine. Bengali middle-class families have always depended on mustard oil as a staple in their kitchen and considered it beneficial for the body. Not only is it used as a cooking medium, but it is even consumed in its raw, uncooked form in salad-like preparations called *bharta* or drizzled over cooked fish and vegetables. Bengali delicacies like *shorshe ilish* (hilsa fish cooked in mustard sauce), *macher jhal* (spicy fish curry), and *alu posto* (potatoes cooked in poppy seed paste) attain their ultimate decadence when garnished with pure, pungent, raw mustard oil.

The zesty oil is a core link between Bengalis and their habitus, a distinct “taste of home.” The illegalization, but not a complete absence, of the oil on the market problematizes its use by the Bengali migrant. The consumption of mustard oil that is excluded from the “edible” category by government regulations makes the consuming bodies illegal. This hampers the continuity of the migrant’s association with home and contributes to a narrative of suspicion towards such violators of the law. The mustard oil from the brand Dabur that is sold on Amazon’s Indian website as a healthy cooking oil with the goodness of Omega 3 and 6 is sold as a therapeutic skin and hair care oil on Amazon’s American website. The contradictory statements displayed on the web page reveal the ambiguous and problematic status of the oil. The bottle has a label warning users that the oil is “for external use only”; the product description underscores its use for skin and hair care routine, and there are no mentions of its

culinary uses. However, under diet type, it is categorized as gluten-free and marked as non-returnable “due to food safety reasons.” This paradox implies that the consumers buying the oil cannot cook with it because it is not food, yet they cannot return it because it is food. This play in the oil’s dietary status casts a complex shadow over both the product and its consumers. The incongruence between its intended use and the regulatory language not only destabilizes the oil’s functional identity but also places consumers in an uncertain interpretative position, navigating conflicting cues about its legitimacy as a consumable product.

Conversely, the purpose for which mustard oil is marketed in America, i.e., for body and hair massage, is completely alien to Americans. Users who are unfamiliar with the nature of the oil complain about its strong smell and skin discomfort on application. The unfamiliarity coupled with the FDA warning on the bottles has led many commentators to doubt the genuineness of the product. They suspect that it may contain more than the prescribed amount of preservative TBHQ, or that it is fake and contains additives that cause cancer. Amazon’s clever marketing—positioning it as a therapeutic massage oil under the “cooking and baking oils” category—manages to tactfully make the oil available, at a premium price while also feeding the aura of suspicion that revolves around the oil and the Bengali Americans who consume it.

Another staple South Asian herb, the curry leaf, is restricted for import by US Custom and Border Protection laws.<sup>20</sup> Curry leaf, like mustard oil, is a key ingredient of South Indian cuisine. The aroma of curry leaves permeates dishes such as coconut chutney, *sambar*, *rasam*, and vegetable stews and evokes core alimentary memories of home for the South Asian diaspora. This sun-loving, tropical plant is an exotic species in America and online gardening groups such as UC Master Gardeners, Santa Clara, repeatedly warn on their official websites about the precautions one needs to take if one were to try and grow this frost-tender plant. Since growing it on American soil comes with its own challenges, the ban on the import of fresh curry leaves across the border generates a crisis of the taste. Whatever can be found is often used judiciously to impart the curry flavor to dishes that is typically associated with South Asian food. It is a key material resource which structures the cultural identity of Tamil, Telugu, and Malayali Americans, among others.

Other food items including mangoes, oranges, rice, pulses, some condiments, and snacks are also restricted from entering America due to concerns about pests and parasites that pose a threat to local crops. While these concerns may be valid, the restriction of certain tastes acts as a disciplinary mechanism for the body of the South Asian Indian migrant. Banning Indian food items from regular market circulation affects performative<sup>21</sup> identities such as gender, community, regionality, and religion, and turns the migrant into a contested subject. Foods like mustard oil and curry leaves that were erstwhile constitutive of migrants’ habitus now become constitutive of their mistrusted body. The suspicion lingering around migrant bodies often extends to a general mistrust for South Asian populations in terms of national security. Owing to the sweeping homogenization of the South Asian populace, the suspicion towards

bodies consuming restricted foods is clubbed into a block “brown” identity.<sup>22</sup> Post 9/11, suspicion of Brown bodies has been further conflated with that of non-Western terrorists.<sup>23</sup>

Suspicion of Indian foods and by extension of migrant South Asian Indian bodies is not limited to border security but extends to concerns for the security of the white individual. Indian foods are often consumed with caution and, as the column in *Dear Prudence* revealed, there is still a deeply racist concern over the consumption of Indian food. Its taste and smell are posed as an affront to the delicate American senses. The superlative qualifiers associated with Indian foods—too rich, too spicy—connote negative values for white society. The consumption of such “dangerous” tastes amounts to a violation of the soft, cheese-laden, salt-and-pepper sprinkled American stomach. From cartoons of Indian restaurants with toilet bowls for chairs to reworked, despised recipes published on *Goop.com* and *The New York Times*, fear of Indian food is comparable to the taboo of apartheid, both concerned with avoiding defilement.

### **Appropriating Tastes**

Cultural appropriation has been a focal topic in postcolonial studies, analyzed from a wide range of critical perspectives. The concept has been defined as “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Cultural appropriation encompasses practices ranging from colonial expropriation of tangible resources from colonized societies for the purpose of displaying them in museums or galleries, to adoption of foreign art forms that are then framed as avant-garde, and commercialization of traditional medicinal knowledge by patenting its chemical formulations.<sup>25</sup> The term frequently elicits polarized reactions from postcolonial scholars. Some argue that appropriation may be understood as a process of cultural exchange that can be mutually beneficial,<sup>26</sup> while others underscore the hegemony inherent in acts of appropriation.<sup>27</sup> Despite the diversity of perspectives, what remains central is the concept of culture itself, whose undefined and dynamic nature warrants that discussions of cultural appropriation be approached with specificity and contextual sensitivity. In the context of migrant food, where cultural connotations are at once deeply personal and communal, instances of American appropriations of South Asian cuisine raises concerns regarding the implications for migrant representation and the potential for misperceptions.

In the American imagination, the generalized “curry culture”—shorn of regional distinctions—characterizes the block identity of “Asia Indians”<sup>28</sup> in America. The average South Asian Indian of the American census, medical, and research documentation often translates to a homogenized outsider in popular culture—the curry-eating, ripe-smelling side characters of American entertainment. Two of the most popular depictions of Indian migrants in current American TV have distinct food quirks that mark their character development. Apu of *The Simpsons*, who endlessly attempts to profit by selling expired foods in his convenience store, and Raj Kuthrapalli of *The*

*Big Bang Theory*, who can only talk to women after consuming alcohol (it is implied that drinking is not allowed in his “Indian” culture), are classic representations of the homogenized South Asian Indian outsider with a problematic relationship to food. The distancing of the migrant as the “other” and the homogenization of their food as simply “curry” makes it convenient for the capitalist market to selectively appropriate Indian dishes and ingredients and legitimize a premium price for them. What is scarcity for the migrant becomes exotic novelty for Americans.

An article on the American website *Eater* notes how, even now, migrants are faced with the blatant appropriation of their food in restaurants and public eateries.<sup>29</sup> From her personal experience, journalist Nayantara Dutta writes that Indian foods that were generally shunned in school, college, and office lunchrooms for being smelly became trendy and chic when gentrified by popular magazines and advertisements. She came across people who would hesitate to try her homemade *nimbu pani* (a lemon-infused Indian drink) but would gladly pay \$6 for a cup of filter coffee (a South Indian style of coffee) made by a white chef at the trendy open-air food market Smorgasburg. This strategic dissociation of Brown food from Brown bodies, and the extraction of regional South Asian tastes from their cultural roots to render them marketable as exclusive, premium commodities, encapsulates the essence of American cosmopolitanism. What in theory would comprise the harmonious coexistence and mutual appreciation of diverse cultures boils down to the Americanization of minority gastronomic culture while obscuring the minority bodies.

Turmeric latte is a case in point. Served in pop cafés from Brooklyn to LA, this beverage has become a hallmark of the urban, vegan, health-conscious American lifestyle of the twenty-first century. The yellow-colored drink is variously known as “golden latte,” “moon milk,” and vegan varieties as “golden mylk,” but all varieties contain the common ingredient, turmeric. Mostly served warm, the drink is spiced with ginger or pepper, sweetened with honey, served with a dollop of whipped cream on top, and is priced anywhere between four to eight dollars. The beverage is hailed as a superfood for its inclusion of beneficial herbs, and specifically for the curcumin-rich turmeric. Companies like Nature’s Harvest and Starbucks have popularized this golden drink, but their print or video advertisements have avoided any reference to South Asian Indian culture.<sup>30</sup> In such representations, turmeric latte is a completely American product, being enjoyed by a white citizen in a casual t-shirt. However, the South Asian association of turmeric latte is well established in American society not only through its typical color, which dominates most curries that pass as Indian in America, but also through significant turmeric imports from India.<sup>31</sup> North America is the biggest importer of turmeric from India and the beverage is obviously inspired from the recipe for *haldi doodh*, a traditional turmeric milk recipe from north India. Despite such evident links with India, the cosmopolitan image of turmeric latte subverts any associations with the subcontinent and becomes a contextless, historyless, all-American drink.

The appropriation of minority gastronomic cultures, exemplified in the rebranding of haldi doodh as turmeric latte, is not simply an issue of aesthetic discordance but is part of the capitalist empire's larger hegemonic maneuvers. Turmeric has a long history of use in India and the benefits of its consumption and topical application are well-established cultural knowledge. In north India, turmeric milk is consumed as an adjuvant, a concoction to fight the harsh winters, and all throughout the subcontinent, turmeric is used for topical application for medicinal as well as cultural reasons. Despite there being a rich cultural history of turmeric in India, a patent was filed by and granted to the University of Mississippi Medical Centre in 1995 for using turmeric as a "wound-healing agent." The patent was subsequently challenged by the Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research on grounds of lack of novelty, and in 1997 the patent was reassigned to the South Asian scientists.<sup>32</sup> In the same year, the power of patent was wielded over yet another cultural product of Indian origin, basmati rice. In 1997, the Texas rice company RiceTec was granted a patent for Basmati rice that it was selling under the names Texmati and Kasmati. In 2000, the Agricultural Products Export Development Authority of India submitted a reexamination brief and finally in 2001 the decision was given to change the name of the invention from Basmati Rice to Grains to Rice Lines Bas 867, RT 117 and RT 121.<sup>33</sup>

The problem with the American "rediscovery" of Indian foods like turmeric latte, basmati rice, raw jackfruit patties, and mustard oil is that it propagates cultural hegemony veiled as globalized inclusivity. By popularizing such tastes as eclectic and exotic, American society subtly racializes the Asian Indian community by implying that white chefs alone can salvage palatable recipes from a barely digestible Indian cuisine. Simultaneously, trademark claims to cultural capital of the South Asian Indian community enable the consumerist empire to steamroll cultural differences and assert a homogenized Americanness over its food market. Thus, Indian food in America becomes a contradictory category which is at the same time indigestible and needs to be reclaimed as well as assimilable for maintaining the culture of globalized multiculturalism. The politics of postcolonial consumerism, where even policies in India have their role to play, problematize the accessibility of Indian food items abroad and effect the negotiation of the migrant's cultural identity. The social and legal wars over tastes leave the average migrant susceptible to a discriminatory system which treats migrants as dispensable tools of differentiation.

## **Conclusion**

Practices of consumption are governed by the cultural preferences of dominant social groups and may be experienced as restrictive by migrants and other cultural minorities. To attribute the limited or nonavailability of Indian culinary essentials like oils and spices to difficulty in sourcing is to ignore the ease with which other commodities move across national and local boundaries in globalized economies. India ranks among the top ten contributors to US imports but food ranks much lower in the list of import

percentage, way below textiles imported for Ralph Lauren and electronics sourced for Williams Sanoma and Serena and Lily. The policies and restrictions implemented on the import and distribution of Indian foods cannot be isolated from the cultural reception of such foods.

Eating practices, like other communal practices, are structured around dominant groups, and as such expel the exotic, foreign, or “outside” elements in an attempt to shore up the authenticity of the “inside.” Indian food, which becomes synonymous with South Asian people, constitutes one such imagined category of “the Other” which must be cast aside in order to envision an American foodscape. The lack of Indian food items or the negative labelling of ingredients in regular American food chains contributes to the sense of unhomeliness that differentiates the “migrant” from the “citizen.” Simultaneously, however, Indian food capitalized by the white American restaurant industry becomes a positive association. This process, wherein ingredients and dishes once deemed unpalatable or laden with suspicious aromas are sanitized and repackaged as exclusive culinary innovations, underscores the duality of appropriation. Tastes once confined to migrant kitchens are reclaimed as trendsetting by mainstream, often white, culinary entrepreneurs.

This selective rebranding highlights a strategy of extraction and erasure, where the racialized origins of food are obscured to foreground an ahistorical narrative of discovery and reinvention. The fear of the unfamiliar, compounded by deep-seated cultural biases, disinherits and dehumanizes migrants, leaving them vulnerable to tangible acts of racial violence and discrimination. Although the duality of minority gastro-politics operates subliminally within American society, it needs only a catalyst to erupt into overt xenophobia. The recent COVID-19 pandemic exposed the more severe side of this problem. The pandemic’s onset, marked by widespread narratives about the virus’s origins in China, activated latent xenophobic biases, associating individuals with East Asian features with danger and contagion. The tastes and smells of Asian foods—stigmatized through a long history of culinary discrimination—became a metaphor for otherness and risk, fueling suspicion and hostility. In an NBC article published on December 20, 2020, correspondents Christine Fernando and Cheyanne Mumphrey report how Chinese people have been attacked with racial slurs like “dog-eater” and “bat-eater.”<sup>34</sup> Small-scale Asian businesses were vandalized and people were attacked physically. Despite there being other markers of cultural distinction, it is through food that racial violence often finds its most immediate and insidious expression. From the seemingly innocuous outrage over a traditional Indian meal served to Chris by Neil’s South Asian family, to the pandemic-fueled xenophobia that cast Asian cuisines as symbols of danger, the politics of taste has long served as a battleground where deeper cultural biases and hierarchies are enacted and reinforced. This enduring dynamic reveals that food, far from being an apolitical domain, becomes a potent medium for manifesting racial anxieties and hostilities.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Danny M. Lavery, “Help! I Can’t Believe My Son’s Friend Fed Him Indian Food Without Calling Me First,” *Slate*, August 11, 2020, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/08/parenting-indian-food-bubble-covid-families-judgement.html>
- <sup>2</sup> In his seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), Michel de Certeau has observed that the “everyday” as a critical category is characterized by “multiform and fragmentary” practices that are “insinuated into and concealed within” strategies whose way of usage they constitute (xv). The popular culture of everyday life manifests itself as “arts of making,” as practices where “a way of thinking is invested in the way of doing” (xv). In other words, the everyday is the field for acquiring skills, dispositions, and other such cultural capital that constitutes our social self. Taste in food, like the taste of other cultural products like dress, music, art, etc. is a product of one’s native habitus. Preferences for smells, categories of the edible and inedible, sanctioned and tabooed, are constituted through the microprocesses of everyday practice and become inseparable from one’s sense of the self. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1988).
- <sup>3</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia,” *American Ethnologist* 8, no. 3 (1981): 495, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/644298>
- <sup>4</sup> Mary E. Hancock, “Saintly Careers Among South India’s Urban Middle Classes,” *Man* 25, no. 3 (September 1990): 505–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2803716>; Jon Holtzman, “Politics and Gastropolitics: Gender and the Power of Food in Two African Pastoralist Societies,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8, no. 2 (June 2002): 259–78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3134475>; Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz, “Gastronomic Inventions and the Aesthetics of Regional Food: The Naturalization of Yucatecan Taste,” *Etnofoor* 24, no. 2 (2012): 57–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264046>; and María Elena García, *Gastropolitics and the Specter of Race: Stories of Capital, Culture, and Coloniality in Peru*, Vol. 76 (University of California Press, 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> Appadurai, “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia,” 495.
- <sup>6</sup> Patricia Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture: Living with American Neoliberalism* (Taylor and Francis, 2016).
- <sup>7</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 125–27.
- <sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement of Taste*, transl. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984), 190.

- <sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 190.
- <sup>10</sup> Krishnendu Ray, “Indian American Food,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Oxford University Press, 2013), 331.
- <sup>11</sup> Ray, “Indian American Food,” 329.
- <sup>12</sup> Ray, “Indian American Food,” 327–331; and Taylor Sen, “Indian American Food: Recent Developments,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Oxford University Press, 2013), 331–334.
- <sup>13</sup> Sen, “Indian American Food,” 332.
- <sup>14</sup> The distancing from native habitus coupled with the juxtaposition of new cultural modes of behavior result in an unsettling effect, an “estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place” that Homi Bhabha called “unhomeliness” (Homi Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text*, nos. 31/32 (1992): 141, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466222>). According to Bhabha, to be unhomed “is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres” (141). For the unhomed, “the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions, [and] the private and public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 141).
- <sup>15</sup> Rachel L. Finn, “Surveillant Staring: Race and the Everyday Surveillance of South Asian Women after 9/11,” *Surveillance & Society* 8, no. 4 (2011): 413–26, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v8i4.4179>; Katy P. Sian, “Surveillance, Islamophobia, and Sikh Bodies in the War on Terror,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (2017): 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.4.1.0037>
- <sup>16</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1297, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- <sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, ed. Michael Senellart (Palgrave, 2007), 108.
- <sup>18</sup> According to the official website of the FDA, the Import Alert titled “Detention Without Physical Examination of Expressed Mustard Oil” is predicated by the following reasoning: “Expressed mustard oil is not permitted for use as a vegetable oil. It may contain 20 to 40% erucic acid, which has been shown to cause nutritional deficiencies and cardiac lesions in test animals. Expressed mustard oil is reportedly used by some cultures as a cooking oil. NYK-DO has documented entries of this product for cooking or other general use.”

- <sup>19</sup> Mustard oil gained popularity in Bengal as the cooking medium for everyday food during the early twentieth century when British colonizers constructed a line of oil mills on the banks of the Ganges.
- <sup>20</sup> The citrus psyllid that the leaves sometimes harbor is considered an infestation threat to citrus trees in the US, and hence the herb is a restricted substance. The official website of US Customs and Border Protection carries an article dated July 27, 2017, describing how a passenger was caught carrying curry; “Pests found in luggage do not curry favor,” US Customs and Border Protection, July 27, 2017, modified Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/local-media-release/pests-found-luggage-do-not-curry-favor>
- <sup>21</sup> Everyday food acts are performative both in the sense of being a “performance” as well as in the Butlerian sense (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [Routledge, 1999]). As performance, acts of cooking and eating are coded bodily actions. They follow a cultural code of behavior that structures specific combinations of ingredients and corporeal movements into meaningful acts. The domestic kitchen serves as the physical confine within which the performance of everyday cooking is organized. As performative acts, culinary practices often constitute meaning by “doing” something instead of just describing it.
- <sup>22</sup> Ronald R. Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (State University of New York Press, 2008); Gargi Bhattacharya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).
- <sup>23</sup> Tina Girishbhai Patel, “Surveillance, Suspicion and Stigma: Brown Bodies in a Terror-Panic Climate,” *Surveillance & Society* 10, nos. 3/4 (2012): 215–34; Katy P. Sian, “Surveillance, Islamophobia, and Sikh Bodies”; and George J. Sefa Dei and Asna Adhami, “Educating for Critical Race and Anti-Colonial Intersections,” in *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*, ed. Ali A. Abdi and Greg William Misiaszek, 81–95 (Springer International Publishing, 2022).
- <sup>24</sup> Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, eds., *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Ziff and Rao, *Borrowed Power*; Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture/Decolonization* (Thames & Hudson, 1999); Sari Sharoni, “The Mark of a Culture: The Efficacy and Propriety of Using Trademark Law to Deter Cultural Appropriation,” *Federal Circuit Bar Journal* 26, no. 3 (2016): 407, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3342567>
- <sup>26</sup> George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974); Naomi Mezey, “The Paradoxes of Cultural Property,” *Columbia Law*

- Review 107, no. 8 (2007): 2004–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40041756>; and Barış Büyükokutan, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Appropriation: Buddhism, the Vietnam War, and the Field of US Poetry,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 620–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411414820>
- <sup>27</sup> Kathryn W. Shanley, “The Indians America Loves to Love and Read: American Indian Identity and Cultural Appropriation,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1997): 675–702, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1185719>; Thomas Heyd, “Rock Art Aesthetics and Cultural Appropriation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61, no. 1 (2003): 37–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1559111>; and James O. Young, “Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (2005): 135–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700467>
- <sup>28</sup> The US Census has categorized South Asian Indians in many ways since 1820, identifications often shifting with immigration laws. Until 1980, South Asian migrants to the United States were almost entirely identified with the original Punjabi settlers. Eventually, they were categorized as “Asia Indians” after the 1980 rewrite of the census categories; see Christabel Devadoss, “(De)Homogenizing Diaspora: An Analysis of Indian Tamil Identities in the US,” PhD diss., Eberly College of Arts and Sciences, 2018, 66, <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/7173>
- <sup>29</sup> Nayantara Dutta, “Reclaiming Indian Food from the White Gaze,” *Eater*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.eater.com/2020/6/30/21307238/taking-back-indian-food-from-the-white-gaze-cookbook-recipes>
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, Nature’s Harvest advertisement, “Turmeric Latte Mix,” <https://mynaturesharvest.com/products/turmeric-latte-mix-7og-pack>; and “Starbucks introduces a golden twist to your coffee with the new Latte with Turmeric,” *Starbucks*, August 28, 2017, <https://stories.starbucks.com/emea/stories/2017/starbucks-introduces-a-golden-twist-to-your-coffee-with-the-new-latte-with/>
- <sup>31</sup> Lauren Kyger notes in her article that the import expenditure for turmeric increased from \$2.5 million in 2002 to \$35 million in 2017, most of which was imported from India. The sharp increase in the worth of turmeric imports reflects the boost of popularity of preparations like turmeric latte. Lauren Kyger, “Spicy Trade: U.S. and India Turn Up The Heat,” *Trade Vistas*, April 5, 2019 <https://tradevistas.org/spicy-trade-us-india-turn-up-heat/>
- <sup>32</sup> Sanjay Kumar described the historic win of The Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, who challenged the US patent on turmeric, leading to its rejection in August 1997. Kumar claims this to be the first case in which the US patenting of traditional Third World knowledge has been successfully challenged.

- He quotes R. A. Mashelkar, the then director general of the CSIR, who called the event “a significant development of far-reaching consequences for the protection of the traditional knowledge base in the public domain, which has been an emotional issue for not only the people of India but also for the other third world countries.” Sanjay Kumar, “India Wins Battle with USA over Turmeric Patent,” *The Lancet* 350, Issue 9079, September 6, 1997, 724. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(05\)63536-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)63536-2)
- <sup>33</sup> Jairam Ramesh, “India Wins the Basmati Patent Case but the Trademark Issue Remains,” *India Today*, Sept. 3, 2001, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/guest-column/story/20010903-india-wins-the-basmati-patent-case-but-the-trademark-issue-remains-774115-2001-09-02>
- <sup>34</sup> Christine Fernando and Cheyanne Mumphrey, “Racism Targets Asian Food, Business During COVID-19 Pandemic,” *NBC4 Washington*, Dec. 20, 2020, <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/coronavirus/racism-targets-asian-food-business-during-covid-19-pandemic/2515870/>

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