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# 'I don't eat meat': Discourse on food among transnational Hindus

Jennifer B. Saunders

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*Hindu transmigrants use discourse on diet as a way to maintain connections with India, as well as to construct Indian, Hindu and caste identities. In this article, I argue that such discourse on food is a meta-discourse that reframes the symbolic meaning of food in the transnational context. This article examines a transnational Hindu community's discourse on food, and pairs R.S. Khare's arguments about the communicative function of food in a South Asian context with transnational and performance theories, as well as with Arjun Appadurai's argument about the significance of imagination in creating lived realities. Through their narratives involving food, this community is actively engaged in shifting the meanings of what it eats to emphasise their connections with each other, and with India. Thus, a vegetarian diet and the use of 'authentic' Indian ingredients become the symbols of Indian identity through discourse, which is then solidified through the acts of cooking and eating. This article is based on fieldwork conducted with an extended transnational Hindu family and its social networks in both India and the United States between 1999 and 2004.*

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## I

### *Introduction*

**Dr and Mrs Gupta** live in a four-bedroom house in a new subdivision in suburban Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>1</sup> Their immediate family is close by—Arjun and Deepa, their twenty-something children, live about forty minutes

<sup>1</sup> I have changed names at the request of family members to maintain their anonymity. Although Dr Gupta has a Ph.D. and no longer works as an academic, the convention in American English is to refer to all people who have earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree as 'Dr'. In my discussions with the family about possible pseudonyms, Dr Gupta asked that I use 'Dr Gupta' as his name in my writing.

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away in an Atlanta condominium the Guptas bought as an investment. When both children are home, the family often spends time together in the combined kitchen and family room; Mrs Gupta and Deepa stand at the stove making roti, while Arjun sets the dinner table and Dr Gupta chooses a jar of acar to serve with his wife's carefully prepared meal. All the while, the large-screen television in the family room is playing either a Bollywood movie or an Indian serial broadcast on satellite TV. Sitting together and eating around the kitchen table, the Guptas talk about their recent experiences, as well as the news from India. They also talk about the past and the extended family members who shared that past with them.

Often, their conversations turn to food. At the same time that the Guptas express and create meaning through the shared food they eat during dinner (see Khare 1992d), they are reframing and redefining that meaning through their discourse about food. In this article, I examine the Guptas' and members of their transnational community's talk about food to see the ways in which such discourse helps them reinforce their Indian identities, despite the fact they have not lived in India for decades. Eating *and* talking about eating are both communicative acts. Each informs the other, creating new understandings of the ways in which food shapes those who eat it.

In what follows, I demonstrate that, despite their actual eating habits, in their narratives transnational Hindus often equate living in India with a vegetarian diet, and living outside India with a non-vegetarian one. This discursive practice in turn informs the semantic implications of the foods they choose to eat. Framing this dialogue between discourse (talking about food) and action (eating) as performance, I analyse the ways the meanings of both discourse and action shift in response to each other. The larger context of this dialogue includes the displacement that transmigrants encounter while adjusting to life in a new country, which is what prompts them to create a stronger bond and identification with their home country than they would have needed had they never emigrated. Hindu transmigrants use discourse about diet as a way to maintain connections with India, as well as to construct Indian, Hindu and caste identities. In this article, I argue that such discourse about food is a meta-discourse, which reframes the symbolic meaning of food in the transnational context. After reviewing the ethnographic and methodological contexts of my study, I examine the symbolic and substantive meanings of food in the

South Asian milieu. My thesis particularly rests on R.S. Khare's arguments about food serving a communicative function in South Asia. I pair this theoretical understanding of eating with my own data, in which community members talk about food. The use of performance and discourse analysis enables me to show the ways in which members of this community use such talk to strengthen their ties to India.

This article is based on fieldwork I conducted with the Guptas, their extended family and their social networks in both India and the US between 1999 and 2004. The circumstances of the Guptas' immigration to the US are typical of the time in which they migrated. Dr Gupta arrived in the US in the 1970s to pursue an advanced engineering degree. He returned to India for a marriage arranged by his family, and came back to the US. His bride joined him as soon as she was granted a visa. After he finished his Ph.D., Dr Gupta found a job, and he and his wife settled in the south-eastern US, raised two children and became naturalised citizens, returning to India to visit relatives every few years. The Guptas are active participants in their local community of north Indians, who are dispersed throughout the metropolitan Atlanta region. Mrs Gupta regularly conducts a community puja centred around reciting the *Sundarakand*, a chapter from Tulasidas' *Ramcharitmanas*. Members of this puja community generally come from Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh or other north Indian locales. Many participants identify themselves as Baniyas, the jati to which the Guptas belong, while the rest belong to other high castes.

During my fieldwork I attended a number of community pujas, interviewed members of the community, and spent a significant amount of time with the Guptas in particular, observing their home, their social and religious lives, and recording narratives and semi-structured interviews. These experiences enabled me to understand how this community's narrative performances create an identity that connects them to India and that reinterprets their immediate surroundings to reflect their understandings of who they are. Their narratives concerning food contribute to the process of creating a community that spans international borders.

My interpretations of the community's narratives are informed by transnational theory, scholarly theories on the role of imagination in creating a social reality, and performance theory. With 'transnationalism', the first theoretical concept that guides my thinking, scholars such as Nina Glick Schiller, Sarah J. Mahler and Alejandro Portes propose that we

understand immigrants and their social networks in both receiving and sending sites as being collectively engaged in shaping globalising processes, instead of understanding them as simply subjects of these processes (Mahler 1998; Portes 1999; Schiller 1999). Immigration is not just about adaptation and assimilation in an isolated location, but depends on networks that cross national borders. Bringing such networks to the forefront of my analysis allows me to understand the ways in which a community can exist across borders, and how the acts of members on one side of the border can have consequences for those living on the other side. Thus, if I understand certain movements of people and culture as transnational, I can see the possibilities of the local's influence on the global, and the transformation of both sending and receiving communities because of migration.

Scholars have begun to recognise the transnationality of non-resident Indians (NRIs). Johanna Lessinger (2003), for example, has written about the ways in which nativism and racism in the US have prompted successful NRIs settled there to attempt to wield influence back in India. Although Indian responses to pressure from NRIs can be mixed, the communities on both sides of the border are negotiating various issues transnationally. Other recent works also address the economic transnationalism of NRI communities around the world (see Ballard 2003; Lessinger 1992).

Following this scholarship, by understanding what Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith call 'transnationalism from below', I can see how those involved in global processes are not just subjects of the world's great powers, but are also agents, actively engaged in enabling and challenging these processes as they create a life they can live 'across nations' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Mahler 1998). The pioneering studies that began to address 'transnationalism from below' have focused on the material exchanges between nations (Brown 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Pessar 1999; Portes et al. 1999; Schiller 1999). While economics, communication patterns and habits, social networks and the international flow of capital are crucial aspects of the process of creating transnational communities, they are not the only means by which to do so. A study of face-to-face verbal interactions, particularly the narratives people perform for each other, adds a new dimension to the study of transnationalism and the various exchanges that create and sustain communities across nations by addressing the role of imagination in shaping the transnational process.

Thus, a second concept that shapes my work is the importance of imagination in creating lived realities. I take my cues for understanding imagination from Arjun Appadurai (1996), who draws on three concepts to define what he means by imagination: the image, the imagined community, and the social imaginary. I am particularly drawn to the social imaginary, a translation of the French idea of the *imaginaire* ‘as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations’ (Appadurai 1996: 31). Appadurai explains that imagination, in part newly inspired by mass migration, is an important means by which individuals exercise agency. This agency enables individuals to create and shape transnationalism from below. Imagination has become a ‘social practice’, engaging ordinary world citizens in their everyday lives. Thus far, scholars who have taken seriously the role of the imagination in the lives of NRIs have focused mostly on the literature and films that they produce (Desai 2004, 2005; Oberoi 2003). While such work is a good beginning, this article shifts the focus from written memoir, fiction and film to the imagined realities produced in speech performance.

My analysis of the Guptas and their community’s imaginative practices focuses on the dynamic narrative performances in which they are constantly engaged. Performance theory and indigenous Hindu understandings of the efficacy of recitation provide the framework for understanding the specificities of how imagination can impact social reality. These perspectives on narrative recitation claim that through voicing their narratives, people are actively shaping the world around them. Pairing scholarly and Hindu knowledge about performed narratives, I use ‘performance’ to broadly mean any marked action or discourse that requires an understanding of its context.

Hindu traditions themselves recognise the creative power of narrative performance. Many written and oral Hindu texts, including the Ramcharitmanas, the version of the Ramayana the Guptas and their community recite, explicitly discuss the transformative powers of telling and hearing stories. For example, the last line of the *Sundarakand* (doha 60) reads: ‘those who listen with reverence to [the recital of the virtues of Ram as described in the Ramcharitmanas] cross the ocean of existence without any need for a boat’ (Growse 1978: 529). Notice the line is ‘those who listen ...’ and not ‘those who read’. The text itself emphasises its recitation—a mode of performance—as being an effective way to gain spiritual merit.

Performance theory also recognises the active and creative power of performances. Most significantly, it acknowledges the interplay between the content and the context of performances, and their shifting interpretive frames. The context includes several variables such as who is performing, who the audience is, and where the performance is located. Performance contexts can shift during performances, changing the performance's interpretive frame. This shifting of frame, performance and interpretation creates new experiences for participants. Both eating and talking about eating can be performative acts depending on their contexts. When the Guptas and their social networks talk about food in a way that defines its connections to India, they are shifting the interpretive frame of the communicative act of eating. Thus, as I will demonstrate later, the community's discourse about food is changing the meaning of eating. These kinds of performative acts allow the community to shape its own identity. As Edward Schieffelin argues, 'performativity is not only endemic to human being-in-the-world but fundamental to the process of constructing a human reality' (1998: 205). Performance is an important site where imagination and reality meet and transform each other. Narratives, products of both imagination and reality, affect the contexts in which they are performed, and in turn shape participants' social realities.

Performances can exist on a small scale—a solitary family member doing the morning puja, a relatively small community gathering of ten families engaged in the ritual recitation of the *Sundarakand*, or even parts of a family conversation in which Dr and Mrs Gupta once again tell their children about the time they tried to bring basmati rice through US customs. These local acts of creativity are one way of negotiating the displacement that immigrants experience because of their unique role in a globalised world, tied as they are to both receiving sites such as the US, and sending sites such as India.

## II

### *Food and South Asian religion*

In South Asia and among those of South Asian origin, food can be involved in performance in multiple ways. The preparation, serving and eating of food are often enacted in heightened contexts that create symbolic meanings for both performers and the audience. Arjun Appadurai (1981), for example, analyses the ways in which transactions involving

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food can define relationships in South Asia. Following A.K. Ramanujan's lead (1968), Appadurai and other scholars such as R.S. Khare (1992d) use a linguistic model that asserts the communicative function of food. This model works because the substance and symbol of the food one eats are clearly defined in the Indian context.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the acts of eating and feeding reveal messages to both the actors and the observers of those actions that simultaneously reflect and shape participants' ethics and characters. Food is understood through multiple classificatory systems in South Asian religions, so that each bite of food brims with indications about how that person understands himself or herself, and how the food will contribute anew to the eater's moral and emotional state (Ramanujan 1992).<sup>3</sup>

Food is ubiquitously significant in India, from a village milieu to those Hindu texts that discuss the ultimate nature of reality. At the level of daily life, for example, ethnographer Joyce Flueckiger noticed that the Central Indian village women, among whom she did her research, commonly greeted each other by asking, 'What vegetable did you eat today?' (1996: xvii). This village idiom replaces a greeting more common in urban north India, the Hindi equivalent of 'how are you?' which literally means 'what is [your] condition?' In this context, the greeting Flueckiger heard makes sense because what vegetable one eats has a significant impact on one's current condition.

Additionally, from the earliest period of Sanskrit literature, the significance of food is greater than that of mere sustenance; it plays a central role in the Vedic sacrifice. According to Laurie Patton (2005), the Rig Veda contains the seeds of the food imagery that connects food and the ultimate in the later Upanishads. Her exploration of Vedic *viniyoga*, the 'application or usage of verses in a ritual' (2005: 63), enables her to

<sup>2</sup> As McKim Marriott describes in his seminal 1976 essay, the symbolic power of food is heightened by its substantive characteristics, which are understood to be involved in the tangible flows of substance-codes (Marriott 1976).

<sup>3</sup> The three *gunas* (qualities), which include *sattva* (purity, calmness), *rajas* (desire) and *tamas* (lethargy), are understood to be possessed by food and people. People whose characteristics are dominated by one of the three *gunas* are understood to be more likely to eat food associated with that *guna*. Alternatively, food can be classified as cooling or heating. Heating foods such as onions lead to desire and are often regulated for certain occasions or avoided completely. These classificatory systems operate independently from each other and may categorise some foods differently (Ramanujan 1992: 229).

understand the development of the role of food in sacrifice from the early to later Vedic periods. She explains that there is a shift from the gods consuming food to the association of food with both birth and the universe (Patton 2005: 115). Patton writes that ‘images of cooking and ingestion in the Vedic world are also compellingly associated with birth: ingestion, digestion, and gestation are significantly linked’ (ibid.: 92).

The Upanishads continue this association of food with creation by linking it with Brahman, the universal principle. A.K. Ramanujan explains that in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, ‘food is Brahman because food is what circulates in the universe through bodies which in turn are food made flesh and bone’ (1992: 223).<sup>4</sup> This is not just the philosophy of the elite, however; Khare found that his informants were aware of the connection between food and Brahman. He explains,

In popular Hindu ideology ... both food and *prāna* remain grounded in that ‘thread-soul’ (*sutrātamana*, Brahman, Hiranyagarbha, or simply the *sutra*—the first manifestation of Brahman in the relative cosmos) which attracts all the relative (the cognitive, affective, and material) diversity of the *samsāra* around itself as ‘the hub’ attracts spokes (1992a: 206).

The connection between Brahman and the human, or the ultimate and the particular, is clearly articulated in multiple scenarios and, although the specific meanings associated with particular foods are fluid and dependent on context, the significance of food as connecting this worldly with otherworldly matters remains constant. Thus, as Khare explains, food is always both gross and subtle (ibid.: 204). At the cosmological level, food unites the particular with the universal—it gives life and connects all living beings with the cosmos.

<sup>4</sup> In Patrick Olivelle’s translation of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* 3, 1–2, ‘Bhrigu, the son of Varuṇa, once went up to his father, Varuṇa, and said: “Sir, teach me *brahman*.” And Varuṇa told him this: “Food, lifebreath, sight, hearing, mind, speech.” He further said: “That from which these beings are born; on which, once born, they live; and into which they pass upon death—seek to perceive that! That is *brahman*!” So Bhrigu practiced austerities. After he had practiced austerities, he perceived: “*Brahman* is food—for, clearly, it is from food that these beings are born; on food, once born, do they live; and into food do they pass upon death” (Olivelle 1998: 309).

As McKim Marriott and, subsequently, K.T. Achaya have demonstrated, food has also historically been governed by social relationships, and has played a role in maintaining relative social status (Achaya 1999; Marriott 1976). Thus, Hindus distinguish between *kacha* and *pukka* (or *pucca*) foods. Although the literal meaning of these terms is respectively 'uncooked' and 'cooked' food, Achaya points out that in terms of food preparation and exchange, *kaccha* refers to food that is 'partly-done or imperfect', and indicates food that is not cooked in ghee (1999: 221–22). The preparation and exchange of this imperfect food is highly regulated, while *pukka* foods are less likely to transfer pollution from one person to another. Thus, a *halwa* cooked with ghee is the *prasad* of choice for the Guptas' community pujas.

Food remains a central substance and symbol connecting this worldly and otherworldly concerns in devotional traditions as well. This is exemplified by the meaning of butter in the *ras lilas* of Brindavan, as analysed by John Stratton Hawley (1979). In this tradition, Yashoda suggests to the child Krishna, her adopted son, that he learn about liberation. Krishna then asks, "Is there bread and butter in *mukti*?"...and when he hears there is not decides he would rather stay right where he is in his mother's lap, where all good things of life are available. He prefers intimacy and a full stomach to transcendent emptiness' (ibid.: 209). Hawley's informants equate butter with love and thus, in the *ras lila*, 'when the *gopis* offer Krishna butter they offer him the concentrate of love itself' (ibid.: 212). Accordingly, butter, one kind of food, connects devotees to God.

Such connections transcend the textual and narrative traditions, and also appeared in the pujas I observed. Even the simplest morning ritual includes some offering of fruit, which is then eaten as *prasad*. Food is a significant part of most rituals of devotional offerings to images of the deities. While different religious lineages have different understandings of why food is offered, the general understanding of worshippers is that offered food is consecrated by the gods, and then ingested by devotees. Food, in this case, connects the devotee to God. In the Guptas' community and in my observations of other rituals, the food offered should always be *sattvik* (pure), and should never include *tamasik* or *rajasik* (passion-inducing) foods such as meat, onion or garlic. Mrs Gupta makes it a point to tell the hosts of rotating pujas to omit onions and garlic from both the food offered at the altar as well as the food served at the meal following the puja, which the community calls *prasad*. She has never explicitly

mentioned that the food served for *prasad* also has to be vegetarian. As north Indian high-caste Vaisnavas, this requirement is assumed, and does not need to be explicitly articulated.

In addition to food's ability to connect devotees to God, ethnographic accounts often focus on food as a marker *and* a shaper of identity. The food one eats reflects one's caste, moral character, homeland and sectarian affiliation. People are predisposed to eating certain kinds of food. Despite these predispositions, however, Hindus can control what they eat, most often to purify themselves or devote themselves to certain moral principles (Khare 1992b: 29). The fasting associated with *vrats* (ritual fasts) is a particularly vivid instance of the periodic control of food intake. Among Hindus, therefore, the food one ingests can be read as communicating vital information about the very nature of that person. Khare explains:

Conjoining materiality, practice, and experience, food in Hindu India stamps one's being and becoming; it runs through the personal, social, pragmatic, spiritual, and ideal domains.... Food does not merely symbolize; it just *is* one of the self-evident truths on which the Hindu world rests (1992c: 16).

Thus, concerns about food abound in the Indian context—from village ethnographies to elite Sanskrit textual sources, to regional folk stories and even to urban middle-class India. It is not surprising, therefore, to note that when the transmigrant Hindus, with whom I did my fieldwork, described their immigration experiences, they often talked about food. When I first asked Mrs Gupta to describe how her family felt about her living in the US, she said, 'They were very much worried how I'm going to adjust over here and what kind of food we will get here and all that. They were worried about it'. Mrs Gupta thus communicates that for her and her family, food is vital to their lives, and is a concern that needs to be addressed if and when they travel abroad from India. This is corroborated by the fact that, during a six-week visit to India in the summer of 2001, Mrs Gupta's sister's family constantly questioned her American-raised daughter Deepa about what she eats back home.

Other researchers have noted the functions that food plays in the lives of Indian emigrants and their children. Madhulika Khandelwal, for example, found that New Yorkers of Indian descent often '[defined] their culture in terms of their regional or religious foodways' (2002: 37). That

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is, at the same time that they are defining an *Indian* ethnic identity, they are also maintaining important regional and religious identities through food. Anne Vallely also argues for the importance of food in creating religious identities for Jains outside India. The significance of food for these Jains is heightened because, as she writes,

[D]ietary practice remains inseparable from Jain metaphysics, ethics, and identity construction, but... the diasporic context simultaneously reinforces and transforms this connection. In addition, the same basic dialectic between the worldly/transcendent is at play, but... the 'ingredients' of those opposed categories have been modified (2004: 13).

I will show later that one important way through which communities can modify these categories and meanings of food is by talking about it.

In addition to food's symbolic importance in constructing identities for Indians living abroad, food from the homeland can also physically connect immigrants to India. Food grown on South Asian soil can transmit a connection between the homeland and those who no longer live there, as they ingest the characteristics imparted into the food from the location in which it is grown. As Sunita Mukhi explains, 'eating Indian food is like ingesting Indianness, being nourished by it, having it flow in one's veins. Eating Indian food makes the Indian feel that he or she is still part of the homeland or of Indian culture, at least!' (Mukhi 2000: 83).<sup>5</sup> I would take this one step further and argue that it is not just the way the eater feels, but that food from India transmits a substance that is absorbed by the eater upon ingesting.

Therefore, it is clear that in an Indian Hindu context, food is much more than sustenance—what a person ingests shapes and reshapes that person's identity and character on a daily basis. Both ethnographic and textual data demonstrate the deep value that food has for Hindus. R.S. Khare writes that food in India is 'synonymous with life and all its goals, including the subtlest and the highest' (1992c: 1). While my informants have never expressed food in these terms, they do talk about food constantly. Food is the central topic of many conversations—my informants talk about buying food, preparing food, eating food, what food other

<sup>5</sup> Katy Gardner's work on Bangladeshi immigrant communities demonstrates how this phenomenon also occurs among Muslims (Gardner 1993).

people ate, what food other people prepared and how they prepared that food. When they include food in their discussions about immigrating, the connection between food and identity becomes apparent.

### III

#### *Discourse about food as a meta-discourse*

Khare notes that he observed differences between food in ideology and food in practice (1976: ix). The differences can be significant, as I observed in my work, but it is also important to note that ideology and practice both inform each other. And if we can think about food as discourse, as Khare and others have suggested, what does it mean to examine the discourse about food? Can we think of such narratives as meta-discourse? Discourse about food can reify categories and identities in ways that actual practice might not. When the Guptas and other members of their family and community tell stories about food, they are not necessarily consciously manipulating categories and meanings. However, such stories do help to shape new ways of understanding food's symbolic and substantive meanings. For transnational Hindus, discourse about food helps them define themselves as being tied to India as they actively connect vegetarianism with India, and explicitly define what 'true' Indian ingredients and cuisine are. This is an important means by which they express and shape their continuing Indianness, despite living abroad for decades. Khandelwal (2002) found that vegetarianism became an important marker for Hindus in New York despite the fact that most Hindus are, in fact, not vegetarian. During the course of her research, she noticed that many of the Hindus in New York that she worked with ate meat only when outside the home. Additionally, many immigrants are now more religious than they were in India, and 'are also dedicated vegetarians' (2002: 38). This is a common phenomenon to which I will return later.

Food has become an important marker of difference between India and the US in the Guptas' verbal discourse. The two main differences are in the way food is prepared, and whether a place is associated with a 'veg' or 'non-veg' diet.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I analyse excerpts from a longer conversation I had with Dr and Mrs Gupta, soon after they agreed to participate in my study. I had known them for a year but had never heard their

<sup>6</sup> Notice how Indians commonly shorten vegetarian to 'veg'. 'Non-veg' becomes the opposite of 'veg', which subtly makes a vegetarian diet the standard. The Anthropological

immigration stories, so I arranged to meet them at their home on a Sunday afternoon and, after some initial conversation, I asked if they could each tell me about their life histories. We sat at their kitchen table for nearly an hour and a half that day.

At the beginning of our conversation, Dr Gupta explains that he came in the early 1970s from Delhi to the US for an engineering degree, but that there was 'a cultural difference and social shock and other stuff, which I had to cope with for a period of time. You know, the food was different over here and basically the system was different over here and I had no knowledge about that'. He does not elaborate here what he means by the different food, but a few turns later in the conversation I ask him if he had found anything in the United States to alleviate his homesickness. He explains that he was living with other Indian students, and 'by staying with them and then cooking our own Indian meal at home, we were living, living off campus [in a flat] so we had our own kitchen', he was able to adjust. He then adds, 'so basically [I] could enjoy the same kind of food and same kind of atmosphere a little bit'.

When he answers my question about what kinds of adjustments he had to make in coming to the US, again Dr Gupta mentions that he had to adjust to the food. Not only is the food in the US prepared in a different way from Indian food, but Dr Gupta also had to adjust to the lack of vegetarian food options there. Later in the conversation he explains that he had been a vegetarian before coming to the US.<sup>7</sup> He says that when his friends and he went out to eat about a month after his arrival, however, he tried eating meat. Although it was difficult at first, Dr Gupta explains that he eventually developed a taste for it. This was helpful because he used to travel for work, and he says, 'eating would have been a problem if I had not developed a taste for the meat'. He also explained that he had given up eating beef three years earlier, but still eats chicken occasionally when he travels.<sup>8</sup> This provides an interesting example of the difference

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Survey of India estimates that only 16.1 per cent of the communities in India are actually vegetarian (Singh 1998). Yet, the diet of the majority of Indians is reduced in this discourse to a non-standard one.

<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge, his siblings and their families back in India have all remained vegetarian. According to the Anthropological Survey of India, 70.6 per cent of Baniya communities are vegetarian (Singh 1998). Also, the Guptas are an Arya Samaji family, and many Arya Samaj communities promote vegetarianism.

<sup>8</sup> The Gupta household is generally vegetarian, although family members eat eggs at home on occasion. It is important to note here that the Guptas do not *talk* about eating

between discourse and practice. I have seen Dr Gupta eat chicken in local restaurants on a few occasions, but his narrative relegates his non-vegetarian eating practices to moments of necessity and convenience. Thus, he explains he only eats non-vegetarian food when he travels.

Mrs Gupta, however, has remained a vegetarian. She admits that this practice was particularly difficult when she ate at restaurants after she first arrived in the southern US in the 1970s, having grown up in western Uttar Pradesh. At the beginning of her narrative about first coming to the United States, she explains how her family felt about her going there. She says:

They were very much worried how I'm going to adjust over here and what kind of food we will get here and all that. They were worried about it. And main part was that [in] America people eat meat and all that—they were really devout—everyone is still surprised that we are here for so long like twenty-five years and I don't eat meat. Everyone is surprised, people in India, some people start eating meat even though they didn't eat meat before. They're surprised.

Her family believes that the US is a place where people eat meat, and their main concern was that she would have to compromise a strong value that they held at the time.

Mausi,<sup>9</sup> her older sister in Delhi, is married into a meat-eating household, and may eat meat products on occasion. Their mother, on the other hand, is still a vegetarian. In my casual observations, it seems to be fairly common for some in Mrs Gupta's generation, and in the younger generation, to begin eating meat occasionally. It seems safe to assume, for example, that Mausi was a vegetarian while she still lived in her natal home

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eggs—in their discourse it does not seem to affect their vegetarianism. Perhaps they are appropriating American or urban Indian ideas of vegetarianism, in which vegetarians are usually lacto-ovo vegetarians. That is, eggs are mostly acceptable in an American vegetarian diet unless a person specifically identifies him or herself as a vegan (a vegetarian who does not eat eggs or dairy products).

<sup>9</sup> Because I was first introduced to the Delhi family through the Guptas' children, I was considered their daughter's friend and thus, addressed her family the way she does. Therefore, for example, I call Mrs Gupta's older sister *Mausi*, or mother's sister, and her nephew's wife *Bhabhi*, or brother's wife. Members of the family wanted to use these kinship terms as pseudonyms in all written work about them.

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and only started eating meat after she married a man who did so. *Bhabhi*, her daughter-in-law, grew up in a strict vegetarian home in a small city several hours from Delhi. After she married into the family she continued to be vegetarian, but had to learn to cook meat during the first three years of her marriage. Therefore, despite these changes in India and obstacles in the US outlined earlier, Mrs Gupta has not compromised her values, but has remained a vegetarian and kept a vegetarian household.

She supports her implicit claim that food is an important aspect of her Hindu identity by explaining later in our conversation how the Guptas had taught their and other members of their community's children not to eat beef. At that time they were living in Auburn, Alabama, a small, southern university town, and she had begun a regular puja for the small Hindu community that lived there. They would do a children's programme during these meetings to teach the younger generation 'about the Indian culture'. She explains:

We asked the children how many eat beef. And almost everyone raised their hand ... So then we told them why in India you're not supposed to eat beef because it's cow meat and cow is just like your mother .... And I think every child said, 'OK we promise that after today we will not eat beef' .... They still don't eat it .... They kept their promise.<sup>10</sup>

Notice that she says 'in *India* you're not supposed to eat beef', and does not say that it is something Hindus do not do, thereby conflating Indian and Hindu identities. These children were eating beef because they were living in the US, something that people do there. They do not, however, do so in India, and although the children are living in the US, once their parents were able to explain to them how things are done in India and why (the 'cow is just like your mother'), they do what people do in India. Again, despite the pressures the children may feel to eat beef, they, too, have at least been able to refrain from compromising that important aspect of their identities. Mrs Gupta's narrative emphasises the parents' role and effort in shaping their children's identities as Indian and Hindu, creating connections that go back to India by explaining how people eat 'in India'.

<sup>10</sup> Mrs Gupta performs this narrative as she tells the story, connects it to the present by showing its impact ('they still don't eat it'), and ends with a marker of the performance's end ('they kept their promise').

In her immigration narrative, Mrs Gupta characterises her adjustments as minor by glossing over the specific adaptations she had to make. However, she explains that there still remained differences between India and the US that required some action on her part. She often described the problems she faced trying to make Indian food with American ingredients. In this conversation, she spoke about how the rice available there was not the basmati rice she ate in India. Additionally, she explains later in our conversation, ‘the whole-wheat flour over here is [a] red colour; it’s hard to roll it; it comes back, that was a big problem’. Making roti was a struggle with the American ingredients available to her at that time. She never says it, but an important aspect of the context of this conversation is that roti is the staple of her family’s diet; it is part of their identity.

Dr Gupta adds to the conversation at this point, and introduces a story about a visit they made to India ‘ten, twelve, fifteen years ago’. He says that his wife must have told somebody there about the unavailability of basmati rice in the US because someone in their family gave them about ten five-pound bags of rice to take back with them.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, when the Guptas went through US customs, they had to throw the bags out. Mrs Gupta explains, ‘I don’t think they had any insects but any grain if you used to bring [customs officials] used to throw it’.<sup>12</sup> Even though Mrs Gupta was able to engage in her religious practices and keep her vegetarian values, sometimes the differences between India and the US were insurmountable. The food with which she wanted to cook was not available there, and when she tried to bring some back herself, she failed.

This portion of the Guptas’ joint immigration narrative adds temporal comparisons to their spatial comparisons of India and the US. Both modes of comparison are common in many immigration stories. The Guptas compare the past and the present in two ways. First, they explicitly say that the customs officials ‘used to throw it’, but Mrs Gupta explains that they do not do that anymore. Second, there is no longer a need to carry one’s own rice back from India, as the proliferation of Indian grocery stores across the country has helped make these items available in

<sup>11</sup> He never specifies who this is. He just says ‘they’.

<sup>12</sup> The Guptas performed this narrative on several occasions during my fieldwork with them.

the US.<sup>13</sup> 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.

These temporal and spatial comparisons are apt examples of what David Harvey calls the 'time-space compression' that characterises post-modern culture (1989: vii). In the early days of living in the US, the Guptas and other migrants were separated from India by distance, and also experienced popular cultural expression (such as Bollywood movies) at different times from their Indian counterparts. These days, with Indian movie theatres, DVDs, Indian satellite television and Indian grocery stores, immigrants such as the Guptas can more easily live their lives contemporaneously across nations. Transnational living is easier now than it used to be because their connections to India are more immediate than before. Migrants such as the Guptas, while generally downplaying their struggles in adjusting to life in the US, had to make a concerted effort to stay connected to India in ways that current new immigrants do not. By enacting their imagination—their memory of the past and their interpretations of it in the light of the present—the Guptas keep those struggles alive. These struggles, such as the ones concerning food, are very much about their identity as Indian, Hindu and Baniya.

Retaining a Hindu identity in the US is so important that, Mrs Gupta once told me, the people who have emigrated from India are actually more often vegetarian and certainly more religious. This is the way that they can remain Indian despite living far from their country of origin. People in India do not need to take so much care to preserve an Indian identity because no matter what they do, simply by living in India, they are Indian. Mrs Gupta, as an Indian living abroad, implies that she has to make an extra effort to remain Indian.

<sup>13</sup> Indian grocery stores have also taken on the function of information centres vis-à-vis various Indian-related events in the area. In 1995 I could not understand, for example, how people found a local Hindu temple in the Raleigh, North Carolina, area because it was not listed in the phone book (nor was it online in those days). Someone commented that new immigrants coming into the area would find out where everything was by visiting the local Indian grocery store. It seems logical that these grocery stores would provide this kind of information—this is the one place new immigrants are sure to visit if they plan to remain 'authentically' Indian. Whenever I go to an Indian grocery store, I notice all the flyers and posters for local religious and entertainment events (see also Khandelwal 2002). Additionally, Purnima Mankekar explores the relationship between food and homeland in her work on Indian grocery stores in the US (2002: 83).

## IV *Conclusion*

Narratives such as the Guptas' help to define immigrants as transnational migrants because they perform their identities in the light of the immigration experience—they remain tied to multiple sites. Although physical activities such as the movement of people within the community across the oceans is one aspect of creating an experience of transnational migration, the narratives the community members tell can reveal the multiple ways in which they envision and perform themselves as transnational people. In addition to the visits back to India, through the hosting of relatives from across the oceans, the communication between them, and the movement of goods and money, these transmigrants envision themselves as tied to two countries—like the Guptas, they may continually enact their connections to India even though they create roots abroad.

Although I have focused this article on food in immigration narratives, the Guptas and their community perform multiple narratives that build transnationalism in slightly different ways. For example, as I explained at the beginning of this article, the Guptas meet other members of their social network once or twice a month to recite the *Sundarakand* of the Ramcharitmanas. The Atlanta community performs the *Sundarakand* along with other religious and more personal narratives partly to define itself within the context of other transnational Indians (both in Atlanta, India, and elsewhere), American society, and as citizens of a globalised world. Immigration narratives that focus on food, as well as other narrative performances, help the members of the community construct their 'social reality', negotiating both individual and communal identities that mediate caste, gender, class, sectarian, regional and national affiliations.

Perhaps these transnational Hindus can help reveal ways that help contemporary communities shape their own realities as global contexts shift. Following A.K. Ramanujan and R.S. Khare's analysis of the semantics of food, I argue that discourse about food serves a meta-discursive function in recasting the meaning of food. Although I have confined my analysis to transnational Hindu families and communities, this process may reveal important means by which non-migrants also create meaning and identities in a globalising world.

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