Traveling Tastes: Authority, Authenticity, and Publics for Indian Cooking in Manhattan

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Behind every assertion about authenticity lie specific constructions of authority. Claims that certain dishes, food qualities, or ways of cooking are genuine says as much about the person making the claim, and the medium through which it is disseminated, as the authenticated object. Insiders justify their authority by referring to personal experience. Outsiders build expectations through experience, thereby cultivating a sense of insider’s knowledge. Formal critics learn to judge and speak with an authoritative posture. Academics ride the tip of this pyramid by claiming critical distance from the discourse of journalists, chefs and food critics. These conflicting and overlapping voices not only influence perceptions about authenticity but also define the publics that participate in the conversation and, in turn, alter the very object of their judgments. Certain moments mark a turning point in this mutual constitution of authenticator and authenticated, when established authority is contested, co-opted, or overturned. This paper will engage with this changing relationship, by examining the topography of power – how different authorities in different media, in distinct time periods, delineate publics and define authenticity.

I will use four specific episodes centered on Indian restaurants in New York City (NYC) to draw attention to some theoretically productive directions of inquiry. My data sources contain five different kinds of information: (1) mainstream American newspapers, such as The New York Times, analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively through its full print-run since 1851; (2) expatriate Indian newspapers such as India Abroad and India Tribune analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively since their inception in 1970, which functions as a counterpoint to the New York Times; (3) blogs such as Desi Food in Theory that is illustrative of the new media ecology, which is changing the nature of authoritative claims in the field of journalism; (4) an ethnography of a Bangladeshi-run Indian restaurant named Angon on Sixth St. in the East Village; and (5) eighty semi-structured interviews of restaurateurs in NYC and a census of their immigrant labor-force. Based on robust empirical data this paper seeks to develop productive theoretical lines of inquiry.

Claims of authenticity are simultaneously assertions of authority, which in turn are rarely conceded without contestation; first, in as democratic an issue as taste in food, about which almost everyone is adamant; and second, the reverse thunder of the New Media have made such authoritative posturing even more precarious than what was already rickety after the Birmingham School’s re-conceptualization of Habermasian publics. A public is constituted contingently in a complex yet hierarchical series of interactions of various subcultures. Contingent claims echoing through authoritative and subterranean social networks undermine both the heroic individual taste-maker and the bounded community of taste.
I will use four instances of discussions about Indian restaurants in New York City to draw attention to some theoretically productive directions of inquiry about authenticity, authority and the constitution of various publics in these discussions.

1. First is a place called **Angon**. As I walk down the two steps from the sidewalk to enter through a lightly ornamented door, I find myself in a dark, low-ceilinged room. My eyes are drawn to the gourd shaped IKEA lamps over each table. Then they land on a large calligraphic backdrop on the far wall that is a cross between a verse from the Koran and the famous terracotta horse figurines from Bankura which pay homage to Vishnu.

Nilufar welcomes me as if she already knows me. **Angon** on 6<sup>th</sup> Street is in the East Village in Manhattan – our little stretch of brick lane – a block it shares with a dozen other Indian restaurants run by intricately linked Bangladeshi expatriates, at one time derived from Shyleti *lascars* who on jumping ship have given us a network of curry houses from Amsterdam, through London, to New York. **Angon** is the brainchild of three Bangladeshis linked by marriage, Nilufar the spirit occupying the place, her husband, and her brother-in-law Milton. They opened the restaurant because, in their words, they wanted to bring Bengali home-cooking to Americans.\(^1\) So they have put *khichuri* (a rice and lentil mess that is the very *apotheosis* of domestic cookery), and *maacher jhaal* (fish in mustard sauce) on their menu. That has drawn some critical attention from reviewers on the web and food critics in the print media. On Meupages among a dozen ecstatic evaluation, a typical one stated, ‘Best on the block.... Milton and his family are warm and welcoming and ensure a great meal.’ On September 1<sup>st</sup> 2004 Peter Meehan noted in his column, “Under $25” in *The New York Times*, “I swore off the restaurants on the block, and anything on Sixth between Cooper Union and the F.D.R Drive. **Angon**... brought me

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back. Angon is proof that interesting, authentic Indian cooking is not relegated to the outer reaches of the city.” I will return to Angon at the end of my presentation.

2. Let me now move on to the second but related instance, of Indian Food in the New York Times. Understandably Indian food is covered sparingly in the first hundred years of its publication since 1851. The first proper discussion of it is under the title ‘An Essay on Curry’ is in 1876. It ends with the judgment that ‘For, though curry is a good thing in its place and time… it hardly deserves to win its way, into the higher domain of the gastronomic art. It still rather deserves the epithet of “barbaric” than that of “marvelous”’ (Anonymous 1876: 2). 

On April 3, 1921 Helen Lowry identified the first Indian restaurant (without naming it) in The New York Times in an article titled “The Old World in New York” (1921: 37). She wrote, ‘Six short weeks ago an Indian restaurant was discovered on Eighth Avenue near Forty-Second Street. Grave Indian gentlemen, with American clothes but with great turbans on their heads, used to come in for their curry and rice’ (1921: 37).

On March 12, 1939 in one of the earliest discussions of curry in the context of gourmandaise, Charlotte Hughes asserts that ‘Curry powder is a blend of fifteen or twenty spices’ that needs proper blending as explained by ‘Darmadasa, of the East India Curry Shop.’ Jane Nickerson, on the other hand, informs us in 1946 that ‘Chutney, by definition, is a relish that is equally sour and sweet, according to the proprietor of the East India Curry Shop, a restaurant that probably serves the most “authentic” curries in town’ (Nickerson 1946: 12). Yet, Nickerson noted that there was hardly ‘a hint of curry’ in the cuisine of Dharamjit Singh, a ‘crimson-turbaned Sikh’ who cooked an Indian meal for some food-minded New Yorkers in 1955 (Nickerson 1955: 20). “Mr. Singh observed that
curries he had eaten in east Indian restaurants in New York were hotter than anything he ever had tasted in Delhi’ (Nickerson 1955: 20).

Until about 1961 an authoritative native interlocutor is always invoked in talking about Indian food in the NYT. The informant is often a spice trader, a restaurateur, or a housewife (in the terminology of the time). Craig Claiborne, who would change the shape of restaurant reviews and culinary reporting by acquiring an increasingly authoritative posture towards the food and the audience, would initially also channel the exotic housewife. On 25th of February 1960, perhaps in his first piece on Indian food in the NYT, Claiborne would depend on Manorama Phillips (Claiborne, February 1960: 22).

‘Miss Phillips is a diminutive, dark-haired young woman with a mercurial smile who has lived in the United States for nearly four years.’ The article is accompanied by a large photograph of Phillips in her apartment, clad in a sari and framed by exquisite Indian hand-crafted textiles. [slide – Manorama Phillips]

‘An enthusiasm for curried dishes,’ he writes by mid-1962, ‘seems to be national and curries are as welcome in Wichita as in Westchester.’ Then there is the long explanation of what the curry is not. ‘It is almost easier to define a curry by what it is not than by what it is. It is not made from the single spice of a tree, vine or bush. In the western hemisphere, at least, curry powder is a combination of a dozen or more spices, the prominent one being turmeric….’

This is an enduring trope of culinary journalism on curry and other ethnic and foreign things -- it is not what you think -- asserting an early kind of expertise that would come to bloom slowly among this cohort of cultural experts. This was just the beginning
of the process of sacralization of the restaurant critic in American society that would emerge in full force by the end of the twentieth century.

Restaurant reviews until about 1963 noted the mere facts of the restaurant’s location, price, décor and ended with a quick judgment. By the 1964 World Fair the critical load is increased when Claiborne (the critic is named by now) notes that ‘The food is admirably spiced but without the overpowering hotness that is frequently and often mistakenly ascribed to Indian cuisine’ (1964: 16). But a touch of the exotic is maintained by reference to ‘the most incredibly beautiful women, hostesses with delicate faces wearing saris and sandals.’ Claiborne had come a long way by 1969 when he could assert with confidence, all on his own, that ‘There is not a restaurant in New York that prepares food equal to that in a well-staffed Indian or Pakistani home’ (1969: 12).

I do not want to insinuate that Claiborne was pretentious. He was merely developing a script that would distinguish a restaurant critic from others -- as every new profession must -- and develop credibility with the public who must be willing to pay for it. Practitioners in ‘communities of practice are engaged in the generative process of producing their own future,’ be it the professor or the restaurant critic (Lave & Wenger 1991: 57-58).

It would also appear that for the last hundred years everyone began their coverage of Indian food with a comment about heat. For instance an anonymous 1897 piece titled ‘Indian Curries’ noted that the curry offered in the West ‘sacrifices the roof of your mouth and tongue and gives no pleasure in eating’ (Anonymous 1897: BR7). Almost a hundred years later, on November 26, 1982 Mimi Sheraton noted, ‘Dynamite is merely hot, but double [dynamite] is promised as the real thing, so insist on it if your tolerance is
high’ (1982: C18). In a hundred years, the complaint has been turned on its head. Mimi Sheraton, David Canady and Raymond Sokolov repeatedly insist on the real thing, real heat, like connoisseurs. In the process they also incessantly berate the American public for forcing these ethnic folks to tone down the real thing. Heat becomes a shorthand for difference and tolerating it, nay appreciating it, appears to be an important way for critics to distinguish themselves from the run of the mill American.²

3. The third instance is a blog written by Amardeep Singh an Indian immigrant intellectual titled Desi Food in Theory. He writes, “I came across an interesting "food tourism" type piece in the New York Times, featuring Krishnendu Ray, a Professor of Food Studies at NYU (can anyone think of a better discipline to be in? I can't). The Times has Prof. Ray go on a tour of a series of very different Desi restaurants around New York City, beginning with high-end fusion food in Manhattan (Angon), passing through Jackson Diner (a cross-over favorite), stopping by the Ganesh Temple Canteen in Flushing, and ending at a working class place in Brooklyn called Pakiza. Ray's comments are… intriguing. He writes, “The immigrant body is a displaced body — it reveals its habits much more than a body at home, because you can see the social friction,” Mr. Ray said. “The ethnic restaurant is one of the few places where the native and the immigrant interact substantively in our society.”

² JFores: “I have had this problem there for some time. I run the risk of just being annoying when I repeat "spicy, please, Thai spicy, and oh yes...please make it very very spicy". They look at me like I am an idiot when I do this, and rightly so… I think that the best way to handle this is speak with the nice older woman who runs the place or her son. They understand.” NYJewboy Mar 31, 2008 08:10AM. Toby 1355 noted on Feb 09, 2008 08:31AM: “Went to Sripraphai last weekend and was somewhat disappointed...What I remembered was food that was ordered, [which was] moderately hot, but was so hot my nose ran and my bald head sweated with every delicious mouthful. This time moderately hot, was mild at best...Another example of Asian cooking giving way to accommodate American palates.”
“I think what Ray is getting at here is the fact that how we eat is both more intimate and harder to conceal than other aspects of cultural difference. In many other spheres, adaptation and mimicry can be pretty straightforward: you buy a certain kind of suit and shoes, and fit in at a workplace or school, more or less…” Another blogger with the screen-name Narayan responded to the above posting with the following: “A very irritating article. Fishbane & Ray, sounds like the cult movie duo "Withnail & I", and similarly clueless. My guess is that Ray, a sociologist by PhD, knows his Mughlai & Bengali cuisine, and little of much else, including the changes in dining-out over the decades in India. I see a certain swagger in his pronouncements to the impressionable Fishbane.” S/he concluded with a long discussion of how good Indian-Chinese food is contrary to the claims of Ray and Fishbane, and she offered her authoritative version based on her wide travels and friend’s residence in India. Anu, another commentator noted, “Interesting article but I did not like that Mr. Ray reinforced the impression most Americans have of Indians = Hindus and Hindus = vegetarian: "Not only are Hindus vegetarian, he pointed out, but cows are deeply sacred to them. “Who is supposed to eat here?” Mr. Ray asked.” One half of my family is Malayali Christian and traditionally eats veal. Also while a substantial number of Hindus are vegetarian, there are far larger numbers of Hindu non-vegetarians.” Note the new possibilities of what Marshall McLuhan might have called the reverse thunder of authoritative declarations.

4. Indian Food in India Abroad: Finally, I want to draw your attention to the coverage of Indian restaurants in expatriate Indian newspapers, such as India Abroad and India Tribune. This is the counterpoint to the New York Times. There are at least 3 kinds of
food-related copy. The most common are advertisements for sweetshops and restaurants. In this category I would also include classifieds selling restaurants and looking for cooks.

[Slide/s]

Second, the rare feature on restaurants by Arthur Pais and Jeet Thayil which usually tends to address the work of a chef already made famous in prestigious newspapers such as the NYT. It is in that sense a derivative discourse. A third kind of food copy, are interviews with food writers and recipes written by women for women; the most common type of consideration of food other than the classified.

The focus of the food articles in expatriate Indian newspapers has *not* been on restaurants, which are seen as important sites of commerce but not of the production of culture. Not yet. As Partha Chatterjee has noted in another context, the domestic realm is seen as the primary domain of culture, while the public is tainted with commerce. Thus, the focus in expatriate Indian newspapers is on collating a pan-Indian domestic cookery in the diaspora often introducing the readers to dishes from “elsewhere” in India, such as Goan fish curries, Bengali sweets, Andhraite pickles, etc. The addressee is explicitly hailed as the female, domestic cook, who wishes to introduce some regional variation in her cooking for her family or for a party at home – the very audience that Arjun Appadurai found for Anglophone cookbooks in India about two decades ago.

Write-ups about notable Indian chefs have just started drawing attention – since about the year 2000 – in erratic columns by Thayil and Pais (incidentally, both men). In one recent instance Mumbai film stars share some of the glory with chefs, as *India Tribune* noted:
Bollywood star Suneil Shetty is not only a successful restaurateur and a health freak, he is also a gourmand who can gobble up any amount of his favourite dishes without a care in the world. "I am not particularly calorie-conscious. I don't distinguish between food because I have taste buds for all varieties of dishes. But after having had my fill, I make it a point to burn the fat with rigorous exercises," the star told an amused gathering while inaugurating a food festival at the forecourt of the World Trade Centre in South Mumbai… The food festival…is marked by the fact that the stalls offered an assortment of food, not particularly from any place or region - but the kind Mumbai is known for.  

5. Thus in Conclusion let me draw out some of the theoretical threads from the weave of discussions I have presented so far. First, India Abroad’s discussion of expatriate Indian cooking in restaurants is hesitant and derivative of the discussion in high prestige Anglophone newspapers such as the NYT. Yet, even here we can see a certain kind of appropriation of the idiom of Hindi films with its melodramatic hyperbole and swagger that surprisingly tames the reach of the chef by turning him into a B-grade Bollywood star.

Second, the discourse on food in Mumbai lacks the anxiety about authenticity. Instead, authenticity plays under the doublet of elsewhere and another time. It is acute amongst exiles and those who buy most of their culture. To poach from Walter Benjamin, authenticity is the aura of culture in the age of commodification. The more we buy it, the more we are anxious of its veracity. It is a gift of cash; a nexus that academics tend to dismiss in theory but put in practice whenever they go out to eat. Anxiety about

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3 India Tribune accessed on 1/28/08 at http://www.indiatribune.com/index.html#. 
authenticity is a site worth interrogating as a practical activity of theorists. Which of course draws us to the master magician who was constantly turning things inside out – Pierre Bourdieu – who insisted that there is no way to separate the interrogation of stuff out there, with the messy stuff in our heads, called categories and concepts. To paraphrase him in *Practical Reason*: the genesis of a cultural field of ethnic food is the progressive emergence of an economic world if not reversed at least seriously altered.

Third, claims of authenticity are simultaneously assertions of authority, which in turn are rarely conceded without contestation; first, in as democratic an issue as taste in food, about which everyone is adamant; and second, the reverse thunder of the New Media have made such authoritative posturing even more precarious than what was already rickety after the Birmingham School’s re-conceptualization of Habermasian publics. A public is constituted contingently in a complex yet hierarchical series of interactions of various subcultures. Contingent claims echoing through authoritative and subterranean social networks undermine both the heroic individual taste-maker and the bounded community of taste. The NYT claimed that “At the request of the New York Times, Mr. Ray visited the Jackson Diner and several other Indian restaurants over the past few months to scrutinize their menus and motifs, their staffs and their clientele, and their relationship to India and to New York.” Of course, nothing of that sort happened. It started as a final project of a journalism student at NYU who developed the story in conversations with me, and then pitched it to the City section editor. But that sounds much less authoritative, so the story about the making of that story had to be altered to evoke confidence in the mutually feeding authority of Mr. Ray, who is a professor at NYU and perhaps more importantly is an Indian, and the *New York Times*. Authenticity
in the realm of culture has to authorized, partly by the explicit knowledge of the professor and partly by the implicit knowledge of the Indian, which is amenable both to charisma and consciousness.

Fourth, Angon, with which I opened this presentation, has a few entrees that can be considered Bengali – khichuri and maacher jhaal. In spite of its claim and the critical attention it has garnered, the food, especially those two dishes, were particularly disappointing to me. But of course that may be the incurable problem of the expatriate in his everlasting longing for what is lost. The man who eats here is missing home-cooked meals, which was cooked by his mother, his aunt, his grandmother. This is the site of a double craving. The craving of back home, which is a craving for women in the home, cooking. Khichuri and maacher jhal may satisfy the desire for home, but the need for domesticity is never fulfilled in a place like Angon, which after all means a courtyard.

But the problem here is more than just what is going on inside my head. It is also a technical matter of the successful or unsuccessful commodification of Bengali cooking, which I posit is particularly difficult to do because the cuisine is not yet codified. Here the discussion eludes Bourdieu’s reach in terms of cultural capital, which has primarily been read under the sign of status aspiration. But it is productive to read it also as the accumulation of real technical skill that can be inter-subjectively validated. So the hinge that holds these stories together is a robust idea of practice and rich empirical work, which can be deployed to address the limits of theory. As Bourdieu argues in Practical Reason, “the deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality, historically located and dated” constructing it as a special case of the possible (1998: 2).