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Anjali Jain is an artist, technician, dancer, amateur cook, reader, ethnographer, dobro player, and day-dreamer from Saratoga, California. Although she herself is not from the Midwest, her time at Grinnell College and her parents' Midwestern childhoods have helped her to feel a deep-rooted connection to the area. She frequents Iowa City during her time at school, and the time she has spent in her father's hometown has enabled her to get better acquainted with the stories of her family. This piece is a narrative analysis of her own life, interspersed with excerpted interviews conducted with family members—primarily her father, aunt (Bua), and grandfather (Dada)

Tortilla Pooris (and Other Kitchen Experiments)*

BY ANJALI B. JAIN

When my *Dada*, my paternal grandfather, moved to Iowa City in 1967, there were approximately one hundred Indian students at the University of Iowa, and only five Indian families in Iowa City. My *Dada* was one of those students, and my family one of those families. Iowa in 1967 was not equipped to, nor was it conscious of, maintaining space for Indian food, lifestyles, and culture. That trailmaking for the Indian community that exists in Iowa City now was in part due to those five Indian families who, despite being in the middle of prairie and cash-crop corn, learned to find ways to continue to cook Indian food and live as a close-knit community.

When my *Dada* moved to Iowa City, he subsisted on a *dabba* containing spices from India to maintain a tie from home. By the time my *Dadi*, my father, and my *Bua* joined him in 1968, there were enough Indian families to buy Indian spices through the post.

Dada: *You see, I got some spices from India when we came so I had a...Masala dabba we call it, some spices. But there was no way I could get the grocery from India so [laughs] I had to buy them here. Basically [only] a few items were available and I was able to just cook those. I came in '67, and [Dadi] came in February '68. And at that time there were five Indian families in town. So all these five Indian families will get together, and we used to [order] grocery from New York. And at that time, if you order more than twenty-five dollar worth of grocery the postage was free. And one family couldn't afford to get the grocery of twenty-five dollars because twenty-five dollar was at that time, was a lot of money.*

So each family will contribute five dollars and order for twenty-five dollars and then we just used

*SEE GLOSSARY AT THE ARTICLE'S END

to split all those things.

Something as simple as free postage brings people together. I like to think that it was the simplicity of it all that made those bonds so tight. Although in the short term my family may out of simple necessity have bonded with the people around them who shared their looks, their food, and their culture, it came to mean decades of those same Friday night dinners. Eventually, coming together was no longer about finding space for Indian food in Iowa. However, those nights of food and cards remained the way to swap methods for adapting Indian dishes with new ingredients, for watching each other's children and grandchildren, and for cultivating family away from family.

I didn't grow up in that core community, but I grew up on their stories and traditions. Visiting Iowa City from my hometown in California was always a window back into that familial past. When my family would get together and snack on *chaat* or have big cups of *chai*, there would always be stories about the big weekend potlucks.

Bua: *Oh, growing up it's like Friday came and you know—you were like “Ok, who's house are we going to dinner at?”*

Continuously hearing those stories, I have always been struck by the parallels to how my family operates now; long dinner tables (covered in a Fabindia tablecloth), the regular dishes: *aloo gobi*, *raita*, *chaval*, *kaddu*, *poori*.... The same people, lined up along the sides of each table; sometimes nine, sometimes thirteen, sometimes twenty-something. The same conversations about sales at different supermarkets, and updates on different relatives' lives. Every dinner had multiple courses. The actual meal was usually followed by multiple rounds of fruit and *chai*, met with protests of “Oh no, I'm too

full,” followed by everyone somehow finding room for more food. The decks of cards for *teenpatti* would be whipped out sometime around ten o'clock, and round after round would begin, until at last the people who had abandoned the game were sleeping on the floor and had to be dragged home. Although we now end the night at two or three in the morning, it used to be different. When my father was growing up kids used to spend the night at whoever was hosting.

Bua: *“...whose house are we going to dinner at?” ‘Cause you knew that's where you were having breakfast.*

Although I never attended the weekly potlucks that happened every Friday night as my father was growing up, I still start and end my nights with my family the same way he did: by sitting down at a familiar table, overeating and playing cards until two in the morning. Although I never ate the marshmallow *rasmalai* my

Dadi attempted to make in one of her many kitchen experiments, I did eat *pooris* made by frying store-bought tortillas (another kitchen experiment).

According to many mem-

bers of my family, passing down recipes is not a large part of how they think about food. Although foodways are passed down, it is not through an ordered sense of tradition. After she passed away, I remember my *Dadi* through how her food tasted, how she particularly favored one spice over another. Anytime I tried to learn to cook from her, she insisted that I feel out how much of each ingredient to put in (she never measured!)—the point was to understand how to use each spice to create a dish, not to recreate her way of cooking exactly. I know that no one will ever make a dish the way she did. It is a different kind of history, but it is one that I value above having recipe cards of her food.

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Dada: *So in India, again, we don't have these recipes, nothing like that. Once you know how to make potatoes, then you can make zucchini, you can make any vegetable just once you know. You need to learn only one vegetable, and then you can make all of them. Same thing with daal, if you know how to make one daal, you can make all daals like that. So-so it was simple. I think-cooking here, I don't know why they think it is so complicated, because they have to go through recipes and we don't have.*

I would say that there is a lot of recently-developed history in the food traditions that my family and extended family hold. And there is a tradition that can be created without intention—tradition that is simply made through love and generosity towards family. My *Dadi* and her friends (my father's and my *Bua*'s aunts) would talk about these traditions as simple parts of life. All of these events, the cooking large dinners for everyone, finding ways to make Indian food out of American food, were never considered tradition or the start of tradition. Rather, they were a part of everyday life living as an Indian in Iowa City. And yet, those everyday aspects of life in the 60s have persisted even now. And even though cooking is supposedly not passed down all that often, cooking was learned, and was shared within the Indian community. It became an impromptu family, and a family that unintentionally blended cultural traditions of passing down food.

Bua: *Even Auntie talks about it—they [Dadi and others] talk about how simple life was then; how much fun it was experimenting, and you know, you discovered one thing and you'd share it with everybody, and it was just so fun.*

Papa: *And then when new families came, they were the ones that taught everybody, that this is what you can do and this is how you make this or....*

Bua: *And even at the hospital, Auntie came and was talking about how she learned cooking from [Dadi]. So many people learned cooking from*

her.

That is why the members of those families who are still in Iowa City are considered family, and that is why I have such a strong relationship with family and food. That same sharing that still persists now has shaped the way I have come to think about food.

There are many things that have changed about Iowa City since 1968. The airport that my father flew into no longer accepts commercial flights; when I fly in to town to visit, I come through Chicago O'Hare or Cedar Rapids. One thing that I know hasn't changed is the drive from any of those airports in February—down the highway, past snow-covered fields; spindly trees gathered in the distance, everything soft as if drawn in slightly-smudged colored pencil. Both my father's and my first snows were in the Midwest, although his was when he stepped off a plane in Iowa City in February 1968; mine, looking out the window of his childhood house as an infant. It is these small details that make me feel connected to the history that is so important to my family.

The truth is, when people ask me why I came to school in the middle of Iowa, I have no way to explain that I don't find it that odd. After all, moving from the San Francisco Bay to Grinnell in 2017 is far less outside-the-box than moving from India to Iowa City in 1968. And every time I go to Iowa City, I see how happy my family is after more than 50 years there. I see how the members of two of those four other Indian families have come to be grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins to me. I see how community developed in a place where they weren't expected to develop, and how those deep connections remain. And I know that if my father's family could make it that far in the prairie, then I also have a shot. 🌿

Glossary:

Aloo Gobi: Potatoes and cauliflower

Aunty/Aunties: Female adults one generation older than oneself

Bua: Father's sister, however can also be extended to people who fill a similar role/closeness.

Chaat: Indian snacks that almost function as their own separate meal/time. Perhaps the best way to explain it is the Indian version of High Tea. Google it (it's hard to explain).

Chai: Tea

Chaval: Rice

Dada: Paternal grandfather, however can also be extended to people who fill a similar role/closeness.

Dadi: Paternal grandmother, however can also be extended to people who fill a similar role/closeness.

Kaddu: Pumpkin

Masala Dabba: A spice container

Poori: An deep-fried Indian bread made with a whole wheat dough

Raita: An Indian side made with spiced yogurt or buttermilk, with various other ingredients.

Rasmalai: A Bengali dessert, made with cheese dumplings soaked in spiced, sweetened condensed milk.

Teenpatti: Three-card poker