

BY CHANDNA SETHI ('86)

THE STORY OF NOWHERE MAN

If you were the daughter of Punjabi parents who grew up in Bengal and Bihar, and then married the son of a Maharashtrian Tamilian couple who grew up in Hyderabad, you'll face an identity crisis like our author. She talks of her family's attempts to wrestle with being an interracial, multicultural couple. First published in desijournal.com

“So, where are you from?” I mull over this question as I stir the gajar ka halwa while it cooks and as the amti boils.

I am cooking for tonight's dinner at which we are to be joined by guests, an Indian couple I met at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris last week. Like me, Anil and Saumya were waiting that day to board the plane to Nice. I was returning home; they are residents of New York who were traveling here on vacation. We got talking as we waited and exchanged phone numbers after I gave them some information about the region. We spoke again on the telephone a few times this week. We seemed to hit it off and agreed it

My sister-in-law advises that for best results amti must be allowed to boil for a good length of time. Normally I am not so patient but today I allow that to happen, to buy some time as I ponder how to reply if our guests ask that question posed almost inevitably by new acquaintances to each other - “So, where are you from?” But the problem is that in the twenty years since I left my parental home to find my own place in the world, I haven't found a succinct answer to this question though it has been asked of me on many occasions.

I have often wanted to say in response (and I think I actually did, once or twice) “Oh, from all over the place”. But that can seem frivolous even though it comes

How to explain lives like ours? My parents were born in what is now the Punjab province of Pakistan and spent their early years there. My mother's family then moved in the 1940s to Rajasthan (films like Chandni bring on huge nostalgia for summer holidays spent with my grandparents and memories of thrilling camel rides). My father's family moved to Jamshedpur in Bihar and they have called it home ever since. My father went to IIT Kharagpur and according to family legend came back after four years more a Bengali than a Punjabi in his tastes. My mother accommodated the results of this change in her style of cooking and it led me, fortuitously, to grow up reading such literary greats of Bengal as Sharatchandra and Bimal Mitra.

And since my father spent much of his working life in Bihar, it is where my brother and I were born and schooled. It was then off to Delhi, Rajasthan, Calcutta and Mumbai for the next few years at various points in our academic and working careers while my parents moved to Orissa, where my father worked until he retired.

In the process, we never experienced what is known as “Punjabiya” nor did we come to comprehend completely the Bengali or Bihari way of life though those are the cultures that perhaps we have observed most closely (no one in my

family was surprised when my brother married a Bengali and now he calls himself one).

My husband's story is no less complicated than mine. His mother was a Maharashtrian Brahmin while



would be fun to get together before they went back. So my husband and I have invited them to eat with us tonight.

closest to the truth. My father, who cared very little for this line of enquiry, used to say, “Tell them we are refugees from Pakistan”. But that doesn't tell the whole story either.

his father comes of a family of Telegu-speaking Brahmins who moved to Nagpur from Hyderabad just two generations ago. That past is still very evident in my father-in-law's family's religious and culinary traditions. And because my father-in-law served in the Army until he retired and then settled down in Madhya Pradesh, my husband and his siblings can truly claim to have grown up all over the place.

Exposed to so many diverse influences over the years, the original traditions of our respective families have been somewhat transformed and diluted. One benefit of this familiarity with change has been that it has made the task of adapting to each other's ways easier in our marriage. Especially in the matter of food, my husband's Punjabification is complete. He loves nothing better than gobhi ke paranthe any day of the week. As for me, I enjoy nothing as much as I do the varan with rice and toop that he grew up on. (Maybe I should confess here that this isn't the whole truth. It really pains my husband that I refuse to concede the supposed superiority of the Alphonso mango. But though it is beloved to Maharashtrians, it is often unknown to Biharis like me who grew up on such delicious varieties of the fruit as the Dusseri, the Langra and the Sindoori.)

Yet an acceptance of each other's culinary traditions doesn't help us find an easy answer to the question most Indians we meet for the first time ask us about ten minutes into the conversation – "So, where are you from?"

Like the time my husband and I were in a local store that stocks Indian spices. As we browsed, we noticed another Indian and we all stopped to introduce ourselves. We had barely gone past the stage of exchanging first names when he popped this question at us.

I remember thinking to myself "Oh no, here we go again". I knew that my husband's answer—"Well, that's a tough one for us..." he began—would fail to put us in a comprehensible slot because we are the kind of people who are from everywhere and yet from nowhere. But how do you sum up the nomadic past I have described into an answer that can be delivered in one sentence in a shop aisle? Quite predictably, we never heard from this person again.

There are other issues that such muddled histories as ours raise, which are not easily resolved simply



by acquiring a taste for new foods. For instance, I was raised as an Aryasamaji and am still a staunch advocate of that way of life. Yet I also have a deep love of Maa Durga and all that she stands for, while my husband's family have their own set of divinities they put their faith in. Is it possible, I wonder, to find in all this a coherent belief system and traditions to pass on to the next generation?

These are not questions that bother me in a serious way though. I have never missed having a strong ethnic identity, nor the traditions that go with such an identity. For I have noticed that good people everywhere in the world seem to live their lives by the same human

values. This makes them—whether they are Kannadiga, Czech, or Japanese—honest, kind, considerate, polite and hospitable. So as my daughter grows up, if these values are the only tradition I teach, I think we will be okay.

As for tonight, hopefully the food will represent the amalgamation my husband and I are trying to achieve in our lives because this amalgamation is our identity now. The amti and the khamang kakdi reflect my husband's Maharashtrian antecedents while the matar paneer and the dessert represent my Punjabi background.

Imagine my surprise then that our guests expressed no curiosity in our ethnicity in all the hours we spent together. Anil and I were delighted to discover that we went to the same school (though several years apart) in Delhi and that he has relatives who live in the same city as my mother. But apart from this common ground, there was so much else we were able to talk about. We discussed the pros and cons of life in Europe versus life in North America, we exchanged accounts of our favorite destinations in Europe and India, we traded funny stories about our toddlers. And we argued amiably, as all people who know these cities do, about which is the better city between Mumbai and Delhi.

The reason for the lack of an inquisition about our roots became clearer over the course of the evening. Anil, as I gathered from the conversation, is probably a native of Uttar Pradesh who grew up in Delhi but many members of whose family now live in Bihar. Saumya is a Gujarati who grew up in Mumbai. Both she and Anil have lived in America for twenty years. So perhaps they are the kind of people who don't bother anymore with the question of where someone came from.

May their tribe increase. |