

Banglatown: The Study of Food and a Gendered Diaspora



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Introduction

- “Banglatown,” located in the Danforth East area of Scarborough, was recently certified as an official neighbourhood, despite its long-standing history as home to numerous Bengali businesses, restaurants, stores.
- This study considers Banglatown as an area where diasporic connection and “homeland” norms are enacted and challenged.
- Specifically, it focuses on how gender is negotiated within the space of one restaurant, and specifically, in interactions between patrons, workers, and guests. How does the negotiation of gender in a diasporic food space indicate cultural belonging or difference?

Literature Review

- Diaspora is defined by James Clifford (1994) as the experience of ethnic communities living outside of traditional homelands.
- Sokefeld (2006) describes diasporas as “imagined transitional communities” where cultural ties are recreated.
- Girish Daswani (2013) notes that the “diasporic subject” is created based on the past, present, and future.
- Lisa Lowe (2008) provides a framework for understanding “Asian-American” diaspora based on various identities.
- Jean Duruz (2010) discusses the idea of Asian-American food and diaspora and the act of “eating-back” at Asia.
- Parveen (2016) questions the production of food, specifically how food knowledge production may be gendered in an Asian context.
- Chakraborty (2014) describes the complex representation of the Bangladeshi identity across the diaspora.

Methods

- Participant observation was completed between January-March 2024.
- Ethnographic interviews with the chef and kitchen staff were completed throughout March.
- Archival data, including newspapers and photographs, were collected between January-March 2024.



Victoria Park and Danforth Avenue, 1930



Banglatown today: restaurant with Bengali writing and posters

Results

- In all participant observation sessions, there were significantly more men than women in the restaurant (at least 70% of patrons), but interviews highlighted that the staff found that both men and women attend the restaurant equally.
- Almost all patrons are Bengali and speak the language fluently; almost all speak Bengali exclusively in the restaurant.
- Most staff who attend the front are men, however, the key assistant cooks are women from Bangladesh.
- Recipes are modified and created in order to cater to the tastes of customers.
- Although the restaurant serves non-Bengali foods, none of the patrons during participant observation ordered anything non-Bengali.
- Interviews with the assistant cooks highlighted stories of forced movement and diasporic interactions with “Banglatown.”
- Women assistant cooks detailed lives of hardship back in Bangladesh as a significant factor in their moving to Toronto, usually with little money.
- Interviews with kitchen staff highlighted a hierarchical order of customers, dividing individuals based on their time spent in Canada.

Discussion

- “R” Restaurant in Banglatown acts as a diasporic space where gendered cultural norms are recreated and contested by both patrons and workers.
- The space itself is heavily male-dominated and reflects behaviours such as shouting across the room to make orders, talking over the workers, and expressing dissatisfaction outwardly.
- The kitchen staff have very distinct stories and personalities, but all are individuals who have recently immigrated from Bangladesh.
- The staff do not see a visible difference between men and women patrons in the restaurant; this could be due to the ‘normality’ of gendered norms in Bangladesh.
- Women hold important power in the kitchen; the two main assistant cooks (both of whom sacrificed their lives back home to work jobs they’d never had before) challenged traditional norms.
- Food knowledge is required by the patrons to recognize the dishes due to no labels, which reflect a diasporic understanding of foods.
- A sense of locality is present where almost all patrons know the workers or live around the area; the space itself is important to this Bangladeshi community.

Conclusion

- “Banglatown” has a rich local history of Bangladeshi people and acts as a diasporic space of movement, interaction, and cultural engagement.
- Food creates important spaces around which these interactions manifest; the restaurant business provides a critical window into these diasporic ties.
- With diaspora, social norms also emerge, and this includes gendered ideologies that can later unintentionally recreate gendered hierarchies.
- Gender norms are both enacted but also contested, highlighting the complexities of diasporic food experiences.
- However, the increasing gentrification of these spaces and constant visitations from non-local individuals may shift practices (for instance, selling foods that are not distinctly Bengali).
- Diaspora, gender, and food studies need to be studied intersectionally to understand cultural spaces in cities.

References

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