EXPLORING CHANGES IN FOOD MEANINGS AND FOOD CHOICES
AMONG ASIAN INDIAN HINDU BRAHMINIS IN STATE COLLEGE, PA:
A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

A Thesis in
Nutrition
by
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ABSTRACT

Immigration to a new cultural context leads to acculturation or the movement of traditional food-related values and behavior from one’s own culture to that of the host country’s (Mavreas et al. 1989). There have been few attempts to understand the process of change in traditional food meanings and food behaviors as a result of exposure to a new environment. Specifically, very little research has been done on the food habits of the Asian Indian immigrant population of United States. In the current study, a qualitative method was used to develop a theoretical framework on the process of changes in food meanings and food choices among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins residing in State College, PA. Participant observation and interviews were used as data collection techniques. Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, consistent with the grounded theory technique. The findings revealed that the degree of retention or loss of traditional foods and behaviors was influenced by several factors. Even though food-related rituals and their symbols were important factors in explaining their traditional food behaviors, by themselves they did not explain why some traditional food behaviors were retained while others were abandoned. The ‘system’ or the conditions that surrounded these participants such as their individual characteristics, the group characteristics of the entire Asian Indian community, and the characteristics of the State College area and its community were all important factors that helped to understand the process of food-related acculturation among this group of people. As Asian Indian food acculturation becomes better understood, nutrition and health workers can attempt to understand their alternative conceptual systems and work with them.
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Chapter I

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Pilot Study

In the summer of 2000, a pilot study was conducted to explore the food consumption experiences of Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin students residing in State College, PA. In doing so, the study hoped to reveal the symbolic associations with both Indian and American foods for this group of immigrants, and to determine what influence these associations had on their food choices after coming to America. A total of fifteen Hindu Brahmin graduate students (ages 22-28) were selected using the purposive sampling technique. These students were mostly friends and acquaintances of the researcher. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were used. Each interview lasted about an hour, and included questions such as ‘What comes to your mind when somebody asks you to describe Indian/American foods or cuisine?’, ‘What is your concept of a typical, Hindu Brahmin/American meal?’, ‘What makes a food Indian/American to you?’, ‘What does eating an Indian meal mean to you?’, ‘How would you describe your food habits after coming to America?’, ‘In what way has your eating changed after coming to the U.S.?’, ‘How does living in State College affect your eating habits?’, etc. The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for emerging concepts using the content analysis procedure outlined by Patton (1990). During this process, the interview texts were coded for or reduced into manageable content categories. The aim was to examine the connotations used by the participants to describe their food consumption experience in America.

The findings from this pilot study can be found in Appendix A. Terms such as “not filling”, and “fatty - not healthy” were used to describe American foods. Indian foods on the
other hand, were labeled as “filling”, and “low in fat - healthy”. Other characteristics used to
distinguish between Indian and American foods included those referring to the use of meat
(Indian – vegetarian versus American – non-vegetarian), the nutritional quality of the foods
(Indian – ‘less fatty’ versus ‘fatty’), the physical appearance of the food (Indian – ‘organic’
versus American – ‘processed’), the time required to prepare the food (Indian - ‘effort-requiring’
versus American – ‘convenient’), the variety of ingredients used (Indian - ‘varied’ versus
American - ‘monotonous’), and finally, the flavor of the food (Indian - ‘tasty or spicy’ versus
American - ‘bland’).

In addition to descriptive characteristics that pertained to nutrition, satiety, convenience,
and flavor, the connotative meanings, or the ideas, feelings, and attitudes that the participants of
this study associated with traditional and American foods were also revealed in the pilot study.
For example, a “proper” Hindu Brahmin meal was one that consisted exclusively of Indian food
items. Such a meal was also described as being “filling”, and “a meal in the true sense”. This
meal was termed “filling” because it consisted of a staple along with “a “variety of cooked lentils
and vegetables”. An American meal on the other hand, was one that was “just a mix of different
food items rather than a cooked meal”. Such a meal was described as being “not filling” due to
the fact that “it did not have any mixed dishes in the gravy form”. American foods were also
described as being “junk” foods, while Indian foods were described as being “healthy” foods.

This dichotomy in connotation resulted from their notions of what was nutritious and
what was not. A food was perceived as being nutritious when it was lower in fat. Thus,
American foods were perceived as being “junk” foods or “less healthy” foods due to the fact that
they were thought to be higher in fat content than Indian foods.
This study also showed that despite the positive symbolic associations with Indian foods, the Asian Indian students in this sample had made some changes in their food habits after migrating to the United States. The traditional Indian foods had, for the most part, been replaced by American foods. All the participants described their food habits as having become more ‘Americanized’ after coming to the U.S. They added that the use of American foods such as bread, chips, soda, pizzas, etc. had increased, especially for breakfast and lunch, while the use of Indian foods such as lentils, rotis, etc. was limited to dinner meals. These findings suggested that in addition to food symbols and meanings, other environmental and social factors such as the participants’ socioeconomic status, time constraints, the availability and quality of ethnic foods in State College, the amount of exposure to American foods in India, and the extent of contact with Americans and other Indians in State College may play a role in determining food choices by this group of people. Therefore, it was felt necessary to gain an in depth understanding of these factors, and the relation between them. It was also determined that in order to understand this process of changes in food meanings and choices in this group of people, a sample that would include all age groups, and students as well as professionals was needed. Due to these reasons, an enlarged study was conducted the following year.

**Introduction**

Of the biological, ecological, and sociological factors, culture and ethnicity have been shown to be the most significant predictors and modifiers of food-related behavior (Parraga, 1990). Within a specific culture, individuals have been known to make choices about food that have little to do with nourishment and everything to do with the culture-specific meaning associated with a food. Food symbols and meanings are thus part of cultural heritage (Axelson,
The cultural context of a group has been shown to change with immigration, leading to acculturation or the movement of cultural values and behavior from one’s own culture to that of the host country’s (Mavreas et al. 1989). Acculturation in local food habits has been measured in a variety of immigrant groups (Kuhnlein and Receveur, 1996; Haber, 1997; Shatenstein and Ghadirian, 1998). However, there have been few attempts so far to understand the process of change in food symbolism. In addition, some researchers also theorize that in addition to dietary symbols and meanings, it is also important to consider a group’s specific environment in understanding their food behaviors (Hertzler and Owen, 1984). Specifically, very little research has been done on the food habits of the Asian-Indian Hindu Brahmin immigrant population of United States. Information is lacking on what foods mean to this specific group of people, how changes in food meanings (if any) influence the changes in their food choices, and what environmental conditions might contribute to a change in their traditional habits. An understanding of culture-driven food preferences is needed for improved design of methods to communicate nutrition information for Asian-Indians immigrants and other ethnic minorities as well.

The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical framework on the phenomenon of changes in food meanings and food choices among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmans of State College, PA.
Overall Objective

The present study used elements of qualitative research to address the following broad research question:

How does the American cultural context affect the traditionally held meanings of foods and food choices for Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin immigrants residing in State College, Pennsylvania?
Chapter II

THEORETICAL BASIS AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following provided the theoretical bases for this study: 1) the role of acculturation in changing traditional food meanings and food choices in immigrant groups; 2) the role of culture-specific food-related meanings in determining human food choices; and 3) the application of the systems approach to the study of changes in traditional food behavior. The convergence of the above mentioned theoretical elements guided the development of a theoretical framework that helped to understand the process of food-related acculturation among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins of State College, PA. A review of literature on Hindu Brahmin food practices and meanings, the acculturation patterns of this immigrant group, and the existing theories and methodologies that have been used to understand and study food behavior were also presented and incorporated in this chapter.

1) Acculturation and its Influence on Traditional Food Habits

Immigration changes the cultural context, and commonly leads to acculturation. Acculturation has been defined as a bi-directional process where an individual or a group of migrants, is acquiring, retaining, or relinquishing the behaviors and values of two or more cultures (Krondl and Coleman, 1986). However, one is not to assume that the end result is assimilation by a powerful, dominant culture. Anthropologists today are urging scientists to view acculturation as a continuous process (Mavreas et al. 1989). Models of acculturative change have been based on the assumption that over time, behavior patterns, attitudes, and beliefs of an immigrant population will come to resemble more closely those of the population they have entered than those they have left behind (Gilbert, 1991). The processes involved in acculturative change however, are thought to be complicated. Migrants between cultures often find themselves
confronting long-held assumptions as they adjust to new environments. It is predicted that while the essential elements would be preserved, their behaviors will simultaneously be complemented with some aspects of the host culture (Tan and Wheeler, 1983).

Food-related acculturation may be viewed as the movement from the existing food values and symbols of one culture to that of another. Differences in food customs and ethnic food availability as a result of a different cultural context may influence or alter traditional food behavior. The changes in the food habits of immigrant groups have been reported to usually occur by substitution, addition, or modification (Karim et al. 1986). Aspects such as meal patterns, food selection, meal preparation, and belief systems/symbols and meanings have been considered to reveal the varying degrees and qualities of dietary acculturation. These aspects have been suggested to be influenced or affected by factors such as the historical impact of colonization, ethnicity, the length of residence, level of income which is related to the price and availability of foods, level of acculturation, family structure, and social beliefs/food-related symbols and meanings, among others yet unidentified. Some of these factors have been discussed below:

a) Impacts of Colonization and Migration: The change in immigrant cuisines has been attributed to colonization and its aftermath (Kokturk-Renefor, 1991). When people moved to and from both sides of the oceans, they took their food preferences with them and in this way made their own contribution to the diffusion of cuisines. Migrant groups were reported to have established their own little shops and restaurants so that they could continue to eat their own food. This development was known to be particularly evident at the end of the First World War. However, in spite of all their efforts to maintain their own cooking and eating habits against strong
pressures of change, migrant groups that arrived to a host country as a result of colonization and war, succumbed to changes in their traditional cuisines.

In discussing the change in eating habits of Greek immigrants to the United States since the 1800s, Theodotarus (1993) also illustrates the example of the use of garlic, and coffee. While the use of garlic has been maintained, although at strategic times such as weekends or in combination with chlorophyll pills so as to diminish the odoriferous impact on other people; the use of Greek coffee has been reported to gradually diminish owing to the fact that it was once considered too cumbersome to make and serve to American guests.

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1994) explains that changes in the traditional cuisines of ethnic groups occurred when they shifted from a Core-fringe-legume pattern of food consumption (CFLP) to one that was composed of excess sugars and fats. He illustrates the example of the carbonated, sweetened soft-drink, Coca Cola. He explains that due to its wide availability all over the world, and the fact that migrant groups may find themselves in the situation when it is as easily accessible as water, both the Chinese and the Russians have taken it up.

Thus, the above studies show that even prior to immigration, there may be a development towards the ‘internationalization’ of eating habits and cuisines due to the growth of international food industries and large-scale trade in food in the native country. Such pre-immigration ‘Americanization’ can in turn contribute to an easier transition from traditional behaviors to non-traditional behaviors after immigration.

b) Ethnicity: Some researchers have studied specific immigrant groups and the changes in their diet after immigration. While some have found food habits to be among the last cultural traits to go in the process of acculturation, there are others who have described rather large changes that
occurred rapidly in some groups. For example, Choe et al. (1993) found that the Korean immigrants in the United States were found to be venturesome in trying new American foods during their early years of stay in America, but deferred large-scale adoption of most non-traditional food items until much later. In other words, there was a cautious but gradual increase in the consumption frequency of American food items through the years for these people.

Describing the changes that entailed for the Turks who moved to Sweden, Kocturk-Runefors (1991) explains that the changes occurred in three phases. Phase one connotes the labor migration from Turkey to Sweden in the 1960s, when the men left their families behind, because they were planning to go back after having saved some money. Few of the men knew how to cook and it was difficult for them to keep to the traditional food habits. The second phase involved cooking traditional dishes after they had left for Sweden but the amounts of the ingredients differed. In keeping with the influence of the host country, there was an increase in the consumption of meat and fat. The third phase is the present time in Turkey, when their dietary habits still resemble those of Sweden.

In a study of factors affecting change in the diet among Vietnamese refugees in Norway, Araldsen (1985) found great variation among these people in the way they took up Norwegian dietary traits and this was related to their different views of the relationship between food and health, which in turn was influenced by the different health systems to which they had been exposed, such as the Chinese system, the Ayurvedic system and the Western health system. The results from this study especially pointed to dietary changes that occurred differently for children and adults. For example, some Vietnamese mothers were concerned that the children should not become too different from Norwegians in their appearance. They were especially concerned that small size could be a disadvantage for the children. In keeping with the Western medical system,
they wanted to give their children Norwegian food, like bread and milk, to grow tall like the Norwegians. A few were found to feed their children in accordance with the ‘Ying and Yang’ concept of the Chinese health system. Therefore, foods that were too ‘hot’ or too ‘cold’ were avoided with the belief that they might stunt growth and development. In accordance with the Ayurvedic system, some Vietnamese mothers went to the extent of feeding only natural, whole, and unprocessed foods to their children with the belief that these were conducive to a healthy state of mental and physical being.

Pangborn and Bruhn (1971) reported the popularity of specific foods with different ethnic groups. For example, chicken was found to be very popular among people of Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Negro, and Indian ancestry in this country. However, the distinguishing differences among chicken prepared by the groups was not so much in nutritional value as in the methods of cooking, addition of spices and flavorings, and accompanying dishes. This study pointed out that differences did exist among different ethnic groups regarding the types of new foods selected, as well as the ways in which they were prepared. The Hispanic population, which makes up the largest ethnic group in the US, has been reported to succumb to changes in their traditional dietary habits as a result of acculturation. However, the difference in this group is that over the years, they have been found to stop the consumption of certain raw fruits and vegetables due to food safety concerns (Diaz-Knauf et al., 1993).

The above studies show that the process of dietary acculturation is definitely not the same for all ethnic groups. Depending on the particular group’s cultural values, the changes have either been conservative or large-scale.

c) Length of residence: Each generation of American residency is believed to strongly influence the process of dietary acculturation (Cuellar et al. 1980) and several studies have reported a
positive association between the length of residence and dietary acculturation. For example, more nutrient-dense diets, greater nutrition knowledge, and improved attitudes about nutrition indicated acculturation of US-born, Chinese American women (Schultz et al. 1994). Crane and Green (1980) in their study on Vietnamese refugees living in northern Florida reported that although the majority of the respondents had resided in the United States for less than four years, a change in their food habits was apparent. The refugees were found to have increased the frequency of American foods such as milk, beef, butter, margarine, eggs, potatoes, candy, fruit, and soft drinks. However, they still strongly preferred the Vietnamese cuisine. Income level, length of time in the US, media exposure, food availability, and the relative price of foods were implicated as additional factors that might have influenced the change in food habits.

Tran (1991) examined the impact of American influences on traditional Vietnamese food selection, preparation, and eating habits and found that the longer a family resided in the US, the more likely were its members to eat American food. The length of residence was also found to influence their eating of Vietnamese and American food. For example, some foods such as dog meat, snakes, and rice field rats, which are considered taboo in the US, are in fact traditionally important foods to the Vietnamese. However, the more time the Vietnamese had resided in the US, the more likely they were to accept American perceptions of foods. Consequently, even though the so-called ‘taboo’ foods were available in the US, the Vietnamese immigrants did not acknowledge eating them, and reported a decline in their consumption.

Similarly, an increase in alcohol consumption was observed in Mexican-American women with each successive generation following immigration to the United States. The changes in drinking patterns in these women were thought to be part of an acculturative process in which they adopted the behaviors and attitudes of women in the general population (Gilbert, 1991).
Thus, these studies show that the degree of use of traditional foods and non-traditional foods is variable and likely to be influenced by the length of residence in the United States.

d) Level of income: Several studies have looked into the impact of income level on the dietary practices of immigrants. As a result of availability of new foods, the desire to emulate the dominant culture, and often, rising economic status, traditional plant-based diets have been rapidly replaced by diets incorporating more animal foods and a high percentage of western refined, prestige, and convenience foods, particularly among youth (WHO, 1990). The concept of affordability also extends to the amount of time and personal energy available to harvest and prepare traditional cultural food items. The selection of traditional cultural items has been shown to be limited to holiday events, or during vacation times among various groups of indigenous people in various parts of the world (Kuhnlein and Receveur, 1996).

Bronner et al. (1994) in their study found that one of the factors responsible for the changes in traditional African-American soul food practices and a shift towards fast foods and convenience foods was income. Once in America, the Africans, slaves and owners alike had limited income and resources with which to survive. A consequent sharing of survival techniques and strategies led to borrowing from what was found in America. Tran (1991) found that among low-income Vietnamese immigrants, the increased consumption of red meat and poultry after immigration was due to their relatively lower cost in the U.S. compared to Vietnam. On the other hand, the consumption of fish and seafood had decreased owing to the lack of fresh seafood and higher costs in the US markets. The survey further showed a decrease in the consumption of bananas and an increase in consumption of oranges, juices, and soft drinks. These changes were attributed to the easier availability and the relative inexpensiveness of the food items in the US.
Romero-Gwynn et al. (1993) in an effort to investigate the degree of retention and/or abandonment of traditional foods/dishes and adoption of new ones among low-income first and second generation Mexican immigrants in the US reported the following: 1) there was a large decrease in the consumption of traditional dishes; 2) new foods readily adopted after immigration were primarily foods rich in fats and sugars; 3) ready-to-eat breakfast cereals were quickly adopted as breakfast and dinner foods; 4) new ways of consuming vegetables resulted in an increased consumption of salad dressing, mayonnaise, and margarine; and 5) sandwiches had taken the place of traditional Mexican dishes such as tacos in the core diet. These findings suggested that significant but potentially deleterious dietary changes have occurred in the diets of low-income first and second-generation Mexican-American immigrants. The food consumption practices of second generation Mexican Americans in particular, had increasingly begun to resemble the mainstream American diet.

These studies suggest that although income seems to influence the selection and acquisition of new or traditional foods, depending on the immigrant group, it also appeared to have a differential impact on the types of foods selected. This was revealed by the fact that the decrease and increase in a particular food consumption depended on the relative costs of the food available in the US markets.

e) Family Structure: The evidence of family structure influencing the change in food habits is evident in several studies focusing on changes in traditional dietary patterns. For example, Tran (1991) reported the influence of different family members on a family’s traditional food behavior. She found that Vietnamese children acted as catalysts for food acculturation in many Vietnamese immigrant families. Children attending American schools lacked choices in school meals, making them accustomed to eating American foods. Grandparents in Vietnamese
immigrant families on the other hand, were found to be the stronghold of traditional foods. Due to the fact that they were unemployed and had the time and opportunity to prepare Vietnamese foods, other members of the family were able to eat more traditional foods. And finally, having both the partners in a household working full time placed time constraints on a family. Consequently, priorities shifted towards convenience in food selection and preparation, whereby traditional food items were replaced by processed American foods. However, due to the lack of skills in preparing regional American cuisine specialties such as Tex-Mex or Cajun styles, the consumption of American foods was limited to fast foods.

Among Vietnamese refugees in Norway, the mothers wanted to give their children Norwegian food in the belief that they would grow as tall as the Norwegians. The results from the study pointed to dietary changes that occurred faster for the children than the adults (Araldsen, 1985). A similar pattern was observed in Chinese immigrant families in London, wherein there was a cautious incorporation of English foods in the diets of the children, despite the mothers’ apparent lack of confidence in the nutritional and health aspects of English foods (Tan and Wheeler, 1983). As the above studies suggest, family structure is one of the primary factors affecting dietary acculturation.

**Acculturation Studies on Asian Indians**

There are 1,678,765 Asian Indians living in the United States presently and account for 0.6% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2001). India was cited as the third most listed country of origin for immigrants, following Mexico and Philippines. Asian Indians started immigrating to the United States in the early 1900’s (Pandey, 1969). The Asian Indian immigrants came either to get a higher education or worked as farmers and laborers in the
lumber industry. The immigration rates for this group of people picked up since 1965, and a vast number of Asian Indians came to the U.S to get white-collar jobs. They comprised a highly educated and affluent class of Asian Indians.

There is some evidence to suggest that among all the different castes, and religious sub-sects that migrate every year to the United States, Hindu Brahmins have consistently been the majority (Gandhi, 1970; Gupta, 1975; Karim et al. 1986). This can be attributed to several reasons, the main one being that people belonging to this religious sub-sect form the majority of the population in India. Secondly, owing to their high status in the traditional Indian society, and because of the traditions of higher learning, they have always reaped the benefits of higher education. While the community has been rapidly growing in the United States, it has not been the basis of many empirical studies; therefore not much is known about their food habits or adjustment.

Gupta (1975) in his study on the food habits of Asian Indian students in Pennsylvania reported that a vast majority of the Hindus gradually transitioned from vegetarianism to non-vegetarianism over a period of from two to seven years after immigration to this country. The processes and the degree of assimilation were positively related to the length of stay in the U.S. He also found that Hindu Brahmin students who had been in the United States for a short period of time (1-3 years) were comparatively less acculturated than those who had been residing for at least 4-15 years. While the former group’s knowledge to American food habits was limited to hamburgers, hot dogs and fries, the latter group was more familiar with American cuisine, and ate beef and other non-vegetarian foods on a regular basis.

Karim et al. (1986) reported that the acculturation of food consumption patterns of Indian immigrants to the United States were manifested in the form of modification of vegetarian status,
alterations in meal patterns, and changes in the frequencies of use of ethnic foods, as well as foods from other cultures available in America. The use of some ethnic foods however appeared to defy acculturated modifications, although it was not clear for how long. Thomas et al. (1986) also found that the traditional diets of Asian Indians had become more American.

Raj et al. (1999) found a relation between the length of stay in the U.S. and dietary habits of Asian Indians. The Asian Indians in the study included many American foods in their meal plans. Yet they continued to eat many traditional foods. The degree of use of American and traditional Asian foods was variable and was found likely to be influenced by many factors, including length of residence in the United States. Those who had been in the US for less than 10 years preferred non-Indian foods, while longtime residents (> 10 years of residence in the US) reported eating Indian foods more often. Gandhi (1970) found that among a group of Asian Indian students in Minnesota, the consumption of the most traditional diets were limited to social get-togethers with other Indians. American fast foods were the norm on a typical day.

This handful of studies suggests that the acculturation in food habits for this group of immigrants has been significant. These studies also show that existing data in this area is conflicting. However, little research has been conducted so far to identify the many avenues of modification of food habits in this community.

2) Culture-Specific Food-Related Meanings in Determining Human Food Choices

“Food-related behavior is very culture-specific” (Axelson, 1986). Cultural values, beliefs, and symbols have been shown to categorize those foods, food handling, and food processing practices into those that are acceptable, and those that are not (Perraga, 1990). For example, while in some parts of the world, coffee is a symbolic means by which adults get to know one another; tea may serve the same purpose in others. The symbolic aspect of foods is
often of such primary importance that a food will be refused if its symbolic significance makes it unacceptable to the eater. Conversely, a food can be craved if its symbolic significance is positive.

Cultural anthropologists such as Murcott (1992) and Leininger (1969) have time and again touted the significance of culture-specific symbolic perceptions of food and eating in dealing with obstacles to dietary change. Murcott (1992), in examining the British concepts of a ‘proper meal’ or ‘cooked meal’, illustrates the import of such symbolism and its relationship to features of routine social organization of domestic life, in order to suggest the manner in which this too may act as a brake to dietary change. She discovered that there were several notions or symbolic associations with the idea of what a ‘proper meal’ or ‘cooked dinner’ should be. The idea of a proper meal was symbolized by the cooked dinner. Many British women simply referred to this dinner or meal as “meat and two vegetables”. They described meat as occupying the “pride of place” followed by two kinds of vegetables. There were also rules that characterized the modes of preparation. The cooked dinner also meant that it should be a single plateful of food with no accompanying side dishes. The fact that the meal was represented by a ‘cooked dinner’ did not however mean that it was a meal eaten only during dinner-time. Such a meal was still the main meal of the day and was to be substantial. In describing their concepts of a cooked dinner, the women believed that it was an essential meal to maintain their health and well being. It was also believed that such a meal was a family meal and that it was to be taken at home. Thus the concepts of a ‘proper meal’ revolving around rules regarding its proper composition and preparation, revealed that the cooked dinner was a symbol with a range of meanings, consisting of ideas about general well-being that, above all, is secured by its home-based nature.
Leininger (1969) believed that people from different cultures use food for different reasons. While some use food for nourishment, others use it to express friendliness, maintain interpersonal relationships, to promote and maintain their social status, to cope with stress and tension, to influence others’ behavior, and even for religious and creative expression. There are others who subscribe to this view and believe that culture-specific symbolic influences on food behavior may affect dietary patterns and social relationships, independent of material conditions (Marmot et al. 1987). Their perspective is that although behaviors such as food preparation and consumption habits are largely cognitive choices made freely by individuals, these very individuals also conform to cultural proscriptions of what is thought to be ‘okay’ to be eaten and not.

According to Dickens (1965), there are four concepts (cultural, social, personal, and situational) that determine food behavior. She viewed cultural causes as only one of the determinants of the various food combinations eaten. She believed that these cultural food patterns resulted from environmental conditions such as climate, technology, geography, and food availability. The social determinants include the influences of friends, relatives, and family members; personal determinants include age, education, and psychological characteristics; and situational factors are income and employment of homemaker.

Cultural-specific food meanings have been studied in relation to the classifications in actual food items, food handling practices, connotative meanings of foods, and the imagery meanings of foods. Typical food categories that have been used to classify food symbols are food groups, food preferences (like-dislike), food taboos, foods for special diets such as pregnancy or weaning, magical or health foods, traditional foods, and festive or ceremonial foods. Food
handling classifications have been largely limited to describe the roles of family members in planning, shopping, preparing, and cleaning up after the meal (Goode et al., 1984).

Connotative classifications concern meanings that deal with the physical and economic properties of food. These also include the aesthetic value (appearance, aroma, flavor, and satiety), convenience, versatility, availability, and ease of storage. Foods have been categorized on the basis of the images they present to the user and also to those around the user (Sadalla and Burroughs, 1981). Examples of some imagery classifications have been super-cultural foods, prestige foods (e.g., snobbish, exotic, gourmet), body image food (e.g., beautiful, athletic), reward foods (e.g., good behavior, success), status foods (e.g., rich, elite), magic foods (e.g., cure-all, quick weight loss), and foods for sickness. In the same study, it was also found that a relationship exists between perceived social identity and patterns of food preference. For example, vegetarians were perceived as pacifist, hypochondriacal, drug-using, weight-conscious, liberal, and likely to drive foreign cars. Fast food lovers were categorized as patriotic, pronuclear, conservative, antidrug, and dressed in polyester suits. Studies on dietary patterns of immigrants explain that the adherence to traditional food habits provided the symbolisms of psychological stability and reassurance during the period of great uncertainty, which developed as the refugees, moved from one country, with its tradition and culture, to a country that is totally different. Examining the traditional food practices of Chinese immigrant women in London, Tan and Wheeler (1983) found that the women did not believe that English food was notably better than their own. Consequently, they were found to make few changes in their traditional diets. Culture-specific food symbolism may thus predict the health and disease status of a certain group with greater certainty than nutrition knowledge.
As far as research strategies are concerned, the dual realms of qualitative and quantitative research have been employed in the study of food meanings and their role in food behavior. Qualitative research has been used to describe people’s perceptions or recall of events regarding food. Quantitative research on the other hand, has been used to include actual linear measures, such as food intakes, nutrient intakes, food frequencies, food records, and anthropometrical data to assess changes in the food behaviors and the nutritional status of a population.

Some qualitative researchers are of the view that the meanings of foods can be revealed through an examination of ways in which members of a culture categorize foods, their descriptions of the characteristics of foods in each group, and the ways in which foods from each group are used (Spradley, 1979). A qualitative study conducted to examine the meanings of foods within adolescent females revealed that the participants dichotomized foods into categories of “healthy” and “junk” foods. While the consumption of junk food was associated with weight gain, pleasure, friends, independence, and guilt, the consumption of healthy food was associated with weight loss, being at home, and parents (Chapman and Maclean, 1993). Through this study, the researchers were able to demonstrate the meanings given to different foods within a specific culture.

Similarly, Lupton (1994) used the qualitative method of memory-work to uncover the meanings surrounding food practices in developed societies. By asking people to recall their memories about with food-related events she demonstrated that dietary beliefs and behaviors were not just biologically or economically determined. They were formed as a process of socialization throughout early childhood and adolescence, culturally reproduced from generation to generation, and the products of individuals’ experiences with the social relations connected
with food events. She reported that childhood memories of food were linked to familial relationships.

Examples of quantitative research to study food symbolism include the use of the Food-Related Behavior Characterization Instrument. Using this instrument, Williams and Penfield (1985) were able to identify four types of eaters (finicky eaters, health-conscious dieters, diverse diners, and high-calorie traditionalists) according to their food-related beliefs. Similarly, Sadalla and Burroughs (1981) found that particular foods were associated with the personality of the eater. In other words, they were able to demonstrate that individuals choose foods to present images to those around them.

All of the above listed findings help to drive home a crucial point: an understanding of eating patterns as they are anchored to cultural perceptions and to well-established regularities of social relationships is necessary to deal with obstacles of dietary change.

Food-Related Meanings Among Hindu Brahmins

The traditional food habits of Asian Indians are influenced by various ecological, economic, religious and cultural factors. They differ from region-to-region, caste-to-caste, and even within a caste from one economic status to another. Hinduism is the dominant religion in India. The unique features of Hinduism, such as the sacredness and the inviolability of the cow (Roy, 1954) have been known to override local or regional differences, and produce a common solidarity. In the U.S. while Hindus are marked off from the majority Asian Indian community, the practices, feasts, and festivals of Hinduism have been shown to possess the quality of drawing the regional phenomenon into the common all-community complex. Food prescriptions or avoidances as practiced by this group foster a sense of security within the community.
The Hindu Brahmins belong in the highest strata of the religious and caste system in India and thus are the designated priests of the society (Kilara, 1992). The symbolic aspect of foods plays an important role in the food choices of Hindu Brahmins. These symbolic connotations are not only the result of religious proscriptions, but they are also seeped in the ancient Hindu medical science known as *Ayurveda* or ‘the science of natural healing’. They dictate the use of certain food commodities and the manner in which they are consumed. The basic tenets of food consumption are examined below:

1) **Vegetarianism**: While eating of meat is believed by the Kshatriyas (the warrior caste) to give strength (Gandhi, 1970), the Hindu Brahmins believe in *'ahimsa'* (non-injury or non-violence to living beings), and therefore are predominantly lacto-vegetarians. Cattle are considered sacred and the cow is worshipped. In the Hindu doctrine, the religious reason for holding cattle sacred stems from the belief that the cow was created by Brahma (the god who created the universe) on the same day as the Brahmin (a person belonging to the priestly caste). Not surprisingly then, this group vehemently condemns the practice of eating beef. However, although Hindu Brahmins in general do not eat meat, the Brahmins who live in the Northern and some eastern and western parts of India such as Punjab, Bengal, Orissa, parts of Maharashtra and Kerala consider eating fish to be religiously sanctioned (Kilara, 1992).

Within vegetarianism lie the doctrines of *Sattvic, Tamasik,* and *Rajasik* foods. Foods such as parched grains (puffed rice, rice flakes), fruit and most vegetables are considered *Satwick* or pure or conducive to health and spiritual well being. *Tamasik* foods were those that were too spicy or too high in fat, and include fried foods, pickles, and condiments. Such foods are associated with anger and restlessness. On the other hand, *Rajasik* foods such as onions, garlic,
mushrooms, several root crops, and beef symbolize masculinity, power and aggressiveness and are therefore prohibited for Hindu Brahmins (Kilara, 1992).

2) Milk and Dairy Foods: Five products from the cow singly or in combination, called *Panchagavya* are important to the Hindu Brahmins. These are milk, curds (yogurt), *ghee* (clarified butter), urine, and dung (Kilara, 1992). Cow’s milk as well as milk in general, is considered as *Sattvic* or a ‘peace-producing’ food. In addition, the Indian butter *ghee* (made from milk) is said to be having many healing powers and so is regarded as an elixir for excellent health (Tiwari, 1998).

3) Cereals and Pulses: Cereals and pulses are the most important items and contribute nearly 80-90% of the calories and protein content of the traditional diet of Asian-Indians. Barley and rice are referred to as “immortal sons of heaven” and are therefore preeminent as foodstuffs in the Hindu Brahmin diet. Rice and wheat are described in contexts of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’. While rice harvested in summer, also called *Sastika* rice, is described as “cold in potency, unctuous, and light and sweet”, *Vrthi* rice which is harvested in the autumn is described as “hot, sweet, heavy and an aggravator”. Wheat is described as a “restorative alleviator, sweet, cold in potency, invigorating, nourishing, aphrodisiac, unctuous, stabilizing, and heavy” (Kilara, 1992). To this day, wheat is eaten in the Punjab, parts of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Bihar; while the rest of the country prefers rice as the main staple cereal.

4) Oilseeds and Condiments: Next to *ghee* or clarified butter, the Hindu Brahmins consider sesame oil to be most sacred. They use a variety of fresh herbs and spices in their day-to-day food preparations. These spices such as turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, cloves among several others are not only used to serve the purposes of flavoring, but are also considered sacred. The
principles of *Ayurveda* describe them to have many healing powers for a variety of diseases ranging from heartburn to arthritis (Tiwari, 1998).

5) **Beverages**: Water is the beverage of choice with meals for Hindu Brahmins. The ancient Hindu scriptures or the *vedas* describe water as *Amrta* or nectar. These scriptures emphasize the importance of water as a beverage for Hindu Brahmins by stating that “the water vessels in the house should never be empty” (Kilara, 1992). Alcohol is socially and religiously proscribed for this group of people. While coffee is popular in the Southern parts of India, tea is the commonly consumed beverage in the rest of the country.

All this suggests a rather complex picture. It seems reasonable to assume that it would be difficult for Hindu Brahmins to change their food behaviors without altering the meanings of foods. What then prompts them to take to eating hamburgers after decades of holding certain values and beliefs in the traditions of the sacred cow and vegetarianism? It would be interesting to know if the change in food meanings due to immigration also means a shift or a move from the beliefs of *Ayurveda* to that of principles of western medicine.

Other researchers have also shown that changes in dietary practices may occur due to reasons other than changes in food availability, food prices, the encountering of new and attractive foods, peer-group pressure, and the pressures brought about by their children attending American schools. For example, Tran (1991) showed that among Vietnamese immigrants a decline in the consumption of traditional foods such as dog meat, snakes, rice field rats, and organ meats (heart, liver) was attributed to the immigrants not purchasing the foods even if they were available, in order to avoid public disapproval. These foods may have taken on the meaning of taboo foods for this group of people as well. Thus, a change in conceptualization of the
functions of foods, or in other words, changes in traditional food-related meanings and beliefs may be partially or fully responsible for changes in dietary behaviors.

3) Systems Approach to Study Changes in Food behavior

Hertzler and Owen (1984) explain that the retention or abandonment of cultural tradition does not impinge upon each individual or family equally. Nor is a person a passive recipient of cultural patterns. Rather, human beings and families are creative in their synthesis of information, which in turn is dependent on the characteristics of the ‘system’. The system is defined as a social system that includes both the characteristics of the unit (individual, family or a community) undergoing the change, as well as the variables (the social environment) that influence the change. Thus, if one wants to study the process of change in food habits in immigrant groups, then one has to question how and why some groups change their traditional food habits and adopt a more westernized diet while some don’t. The examination of single indicators such as nutritional practices, or even of nutritional practices considered jointly but cut adrift from the social context will not provide a comprehensive explanation for the change. It is important that the principles of nutritional science and social science are combined to study changes in dietary habits.

Extensive literature search conducted during this study proved the above point. For example, even though several studies showed that dietary symbols and food meanings were important factors in a model explaining food choices (Hertzler et al. 1982; DeGarine, 1972), they by themselves did not explain why some families took on new food preparation and consumption behavior while others maintained traditional ways (Bavly, 1966; Young, 1968). For instance, dietary symbols and meanings alone did not explain why some American Jewish families included fresh fruit and leafy vegetables in everyday meals while others did not. Nor did it
explain why only some Hindu families in America ate beef. Therefore, the current study was guided by the systems approach to study changes in food meanings and food choices among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College, Pennsylvania. Based on this theoretical perspective, it was hypothesized or presumed in this study that the process of food-related acculturation for this group of people will be influenced to varying degrees by three sets of factors:

1. Individual characteristics of the participants (age, gender, occupation, income level, marital status, family structure, personal Brahmin-related values and beliefs, personal values, beliefs, and perceptions towards American and other ethnic foods, length of stay in the U.S., exposure to American foods and media while in India, extent of contact with Americans in America, and perceptions of the State College area and its community),

2. Group characteristics of the Asian Indian community (extent of solidarity between members, attitudes towards one another, and perceptions of themselves as a group living in State College, Pennsylvania), and

3. Characteristics of the State College area and its community (availability of information and other resources such as Indian foods and spices).

In addition to the systems approach, models and theories such as the Food Patterning model (Kokturk-Renefors, 1991), the Gatekeeper Channel Theory (Lewin, 1943), and the Trends Theory (Holmes and Clark, 1992) all provided an important framework to study the process of food-related acculturation among the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin community residing in State College. According to the Food Patterning model, dietary changes are shown to occur in two opposing forces; one that is directed towards conserving the food traditions after migration and
the other towards change. The model focuses on the power with which different foods are tied to cultural identity. Changes in food habits are believed to proceed in a continuum where identity and taste form the two extreme poles. When composing a meal, the immigrant asserts his/her own culture by selecting the staple foods such as potatoes, wheat or rice. These signify a strong attachment and identity to their culture. The selection of new foods such as sweets, and fatty snacks signifies giving taste a priority over identity. The new foods are also not considered ‘real foods’ by the immigrants. Therefore, the low level of cultural prejudice against these foods paves the way for additions, and dietary changes in the traditional diets. Even though the traditional diet is not altered at the basic foods (staple foods) level, it can no longer be purported that the immigrants eat the same way as in their country of origin.

Lewin (1943) in his “gatekeeper-channel” theory suggested that the food behavior of a household depended on the primary person who was responsible for food selection and procurement. He called this person the “gatekeeper”, and believed that the social and psychological characteristics of the “gatekeeper” should be examined to understand food acceptance and changes in food selection. Holmes and Clark (1992) believe that there are two positions or ‘trends’ that have been commonly used by the scientific community to guide their study of dietary change, depending on the scientists’ attitudes toward economic development and modernization. Researchers belonging to the “secular trend” camp view dietary changes as being positive and believe that people change their diets due to better western modes of food production and consumption. The “victims of progress trend” camp believers see westernization of the diets of traditional people as a negative change. However, Holmes and Clark argue that in real social conditions, the advantages and disadvantages of dietary change are rarely so clear-cut. To illustrate this point, they outline the case of Venezuela Amazonian Indians, some of them
who have abandoned their traditional subsistence strategies for more modernized diets. The modernization of the diets in some through the purchase and consumption of non-native foods did not cause deteriorations in their nutritional status. Neither did it produce a notably healthier population. Therefore, the data did not specifically point to either positive or negative outcomes.

The above-mentioned theories and models presented some interesting considerations about the Asian Indian immigrant community as well. For instance, studies have shown that this group retains some traditional foods (rice and lentils) while abandoning others (pickles and chutneys). At the same time, they have also been shown to adopting some new American foods (cookies, cakes, ice creams) while avoiding others (beef, meats) (Raj et al. 1999). According to the Food Patterning model, this practice of selective retention and adoption among immigrant groups has to do with the emotional significance that different foods hold for them. In another study, it was found that the single male Asian Indians were more acculturated in their food-related practices than their female counterparts (Gupta, 1975). The same study also found that the males reported a lack of know-how due to the fact that they had never cooked while home in India. These findings are in agreement with Lewin’s Gate-keeper Channel theory in that the personal characteristics of the primary food provider may be important determinants of changes in food selection among. Studies have also shown that the increased ‘Americanization’ of the food habits among this people has also resulted in a higher risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (Kumanyika, 1990; Raheja, 1989). Going by Holmes and Clark’s ‘trends’, in this case it may be fair to agree with the “victims of progress” camp of scientists since the replacement of traditional foods by American foods has indeed resulted in a deterioration of their nutritional status. Thus, these theories and models provided an important perspective in conducting this study – to understand the process of change in food meanings and
food choice among Asian Indian Brahmins in State College, Pennsylvania, keeping in mind that several factors may be involved.
Chapter III
METHODOLOGY

Methodological Considerations

Most of the research on changing food habits in immigrants, and food-related meanings in the United States has been quantitative, using surveys, questionnaires, and instruments (Axelson, 1986; Kuhnlein, 1989). These methods are well suited for asking the following questions: (a) what are the foodways of a particular ethnic group in the US? (b) how does a particular ethnic group’s foodways in the US differ from the group’s foodways in their culture of origin? (c) how does a particular ethnic group differ from the dominant cultural group? Exploring these questions has provided a rich field of study.

Little consideration has been given however, to determine the rationale and ease of change in food habits and food-related meanings among immigrant groups in America. Asking the qualitative questions ‘How does the American culture impact on the dietary symbols and meanings of an ethnic group?’ and ‘Are the changes in traditional food habits of ethnic groups in America a result of possible changes in dietary symbols and meanings?’ have not been the concerns of most researchers. Research has shown that the “westernization” of the food habits of Asian Indians has been proposed to be a major factor in triggering diseases such as obesity, NIDDM, and heart disease among this population group (Wandel, 1993). The shift from a traditional ‘low risk’ diet composed mainly of whole grain cereals, pulses, vegetables and fruit, with the occasional consumption of meat, eggs, and fish, to a westernized ‘high risk’ diet is believed to be the leading cause for the change in the status of risk to chronic degenerative diseases (Raheja, 1989). Health and nutrition scientists remind us that the meanings foods hold may have a greater role in food preference patterns than any sound nutritional advice, and also
that the symbolism of food must also be taken into account in trying to get people to change their eating habits (Parraga, 1990; Lupton, 1994; Sadalla and Burroughs, 1981). Given the scarcity of existing research in this area, the aim of this study was to determine what the experience of exposing traditionally held food-related beliefs and behaviors to the American cultural context means for this acculturating group of people.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study since this approach has been shown to be particularly well suited for exploring uncharted areas of inquiry (Guba, 1978). Considering that the purpose of this study was to analyze the meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences of a group of people, a qualitative approach consisting of in-depth interviews and participant observations allowed observations of interactions, dynamics, and contexts in a holistic way that incorporated the understanding of behaviors. Many “backstage” meanings may have been otherwise closed to more remote methods of data collection, such as questionnaires. “Unstructured interviews and direct observations allow participants to discuss their experiences in their own language, in their own natural setting, and according to their own comfort in disclosing” (Daly, 1992). Qualitative researchers, having the advantage of entering the participants’ life worlds, are in a good position to access the private meanings of behaviors. Some attitudes, beliefs, and values will never be disclosed to a researcher, but even the very avoidance of a certain subject may become a rich source of data. Participants would not consider reporting some seemingly routine, taken-for-granted parts of their everyday experience, and it is a qualitative researcher’s challenge to take the obvious and put it in a new light and make it comprehensible to the members of another culture. What participants think of as habitual, takes on new meaning when compared and contrasted with the habits of others.
More specifically, the qualitative research approach of grounded theory development was utilized to address the questions posed in this study. Grounded theory is an inductive process involving the derivation of a theory or a conceptual framework from data that is systematically gathered, coded into concepts or categories and analyzed through the research process. The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data (Patton, 1990) instead of using any pre-existing theory. The above method is applicable to research that is not conducted with the sole purpose of verifying an existing theory. Instead, it has the purpose of generating theory from the detailed reports offered by the people to be described by the theory (Addison, 1989; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory was first developed and articulated by sociologists Barney G. Glaser, and Anselm L. Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Despite its potential to present an adequate analytical schema of a phenomenon under investigation, the method has mostly been confined to social science studies. These studies qualitatively explored topics ranging from drug addiction to parenting attitudes (Kearney et al. 1994; Wellisch and Steinberg, 1980). In the recent past, an impressive set of nutrition-related studies have used the approach of grounded theory to study key concepts such as describing the feeling of hunger (Radimer et al., 1990), menu planning knowledge in child care center providers (Briley et al., 1994), food intake cessation in cancer patients (Meares et al., 1997), attitudes towards breastfeeding (Locklin and Naber, 1993), and symptoms of anorexia nervosa (Serpell et al., 1999). In the present study, grounded theory development provided a vehicle for investigating changing food habits from an “emic” perspective (a process-oriented research that focuses on examining the “how”) by emphasizing the “actor’s meanings” rather than the “etic” (observer-based assumptions about a phenomenon that focuses on examining the “what”) viewpoints of observers (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). With an emphasis on utilizing participant
perspectives to explain and interpret behavior, this methodology lends itself to developing theories or conceptual frameworks that are more grounded in the experiences of individuals. Furthermore, comparing participant viewpoints with existing theories and literature in the area allowed the current researcher to expound upon the theories and literature in ways that make them more accurate and useful.

The grounded theory approach empowered each participant to define and describe his/her unique experience of food-related acculturation. For this reason, grounded theory development was useful for exploring those food-related aspects of intercultural negotiation, which are most important or relevant to acculturating individuals. Furthermore, this approach permitted access to crucial aspects of the individual’s appraisal and coping processes that were not easily addressed with more traditional research methods. The current researcher entered with a flexible set of assumptions (e.g., context influences, adjustment strategies, etc.) and then uncovered immigrants’ own ideas which were then used to qualify and build on existing theories on changes in food habits among immigrant groups.

Due to its reliance on using participant voices to explain and interpret behavior, grounded theory was particularly useful for exploring the process or the “how” of negotiating food-related behaviors within two cultures. The present study shifted the research focus from measuring dietary acculturation “outcomes” to clarifying how acculturating individuals arrive at the choices they make. In order to explore how these individuals perceive, think about, and cope with adaptation to intercultural situations, it was necessary to ask open-ended questions that could uncover the precise meanings underlying the choices that they make.

Understanding the “how” of dietary acculturation requires examining the individual’s acculturation choices in relation to the surrounding ecological contexts. This study examined the
processes of changing food habits in Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins as they take place – embedded in a specific context that is characterized by unique demand characteristics, resources, and obstacles. Understanding the adaptive food-related behavior of this group of immigrants required attention to both the demands within a particular context and the individual’s interpretations of those demands. Prior research has also suggested that an individual’s adaptation to intercultural contact is better understood by looking at the degree of perceived conflict, congruence, and divergence (Taylor and Bogden, 1984) between the cultural demands within a life sphere. Additionally, the grounded theory approach was appropriate for exploring which contextual factors influence the perceptions, appraisals and adaptive strategies of immigrants.

Specifically, the study was warranted for the following reasons: 1) changes in food habits have been quantitatively measured in a number of immigrant groups. However, the process of dietary acculturation has not been sufficiently elucidated. The reasons why immigrant groups adopt some new foods belonging to the host culture while retaining other traditional foods are not very clear; 2) the literature suggests that factors such as the degree of exposure to the host culture, and culture-specific food meanings might play an important role in determining food choices of immigrant groups. However, these have not been explicitly identified, and finally, 3) there is a need for a conceptual framework on dietary acculturation, food meanings, and food choices that are grounded in the views and experiences of the participants in this study. The proposed qualitative method enabled participants to identify the food-related domains and settings that they experienced as involving intercultural experiences (e.g., choice points, awareness of cultural differences, conflicts). In addition, participants were encouraged to describe precisely those aspects of the domain (or setting) that made it particularly distinct,
important, or challenging. It was expected that a better understanding of such contextual influences would help researchers to account for some of the diversity in food-related acculturation processes both across individuals and for the same individuals across distinct settings. More specifically the information obtained in this study could allow nutritionists to help Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins to achieve a nutritionally appropriate food habits despite the exposure to a new cultural context.

**Research Questions**

One of the most distinctive features of naturalistic research is that it is cyclic (Tesch, 1990). A qualitative researcher does not have a “set list” of questions for her subjects. Rather, questions evolve during the analysis of the data presented by the participants (Ely et al., 1997). The initial questions posed in this study were as broad in focus as possible so that they defined the area of interest without imposing an agenda. As the data were collected and analyzed, additional questions emerged and, in turn, produced new information. The initial areas of interest in this study were:

What meanings do Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College associate with their own ethnic foods/cuisine, as well as with American foods/cuisine?

What changes in traditionally held food-related meanings did the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins report after migrating to the United States?

What specific factors led to the reported changes in ethnic food-related meanings among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins of State College, PA?

What modifications in food choices did Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins residing in State College, PA make as a result of a change in ethnic food-related meanings?
Setting

All the participants for this study were recruited from the State College area. The Borough of State College is nestled in a wide valley at the foot of the Nittany and Tussey Mountains, part of the Appalachian chain of ridges in central Pennsylvania. The earliest-known occupants of this land were the Shawanese and Muncy Indians. Early settlers included English, German, Mennonites, French Huguenots, and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. The early African settlers came as slaves in the 1700s, while the Italians came much later in the 1800s. In 1791, the first iron furnace, known as the Centre Furnace, was built in the hardwood forests of central Pennsylvania. Quality iron ore, limestone and timber were plentiful, and the industry grew and the economy prospered. In the early 1850s the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society established an agricultural school, the "Farmers' High School", which later became the Penn State University. It wasn't long before higher education took the place of iron as the new area industry (Chesworth, 1996).

Growth and change in State College have shown to be largely dependent on the college's growth (Chesworth, 1995; Schlow, 1995; Little, 1999). For example, the student and faculty population alone were found to account for nearly 50 percent of the total resident population in the early 1900s. To accommodate the expanding population, the earlier farms have now been annexed into the Borough for the development of homes, apartment buildings and fraternities. The end of World War II brought rapid growth to the town and college. New industry developed, adding employment for an ever-increasing, diverse population. Penn State has long participated in the international exchange of educational resources. International students have been known to
attend the University as early as 1888, and the first program sanctioning overseas study (in Germany) was started in 1908.

A Penn State-in-China program, linking faculty and students with Lingnan University, began in 1911 (Little, 1999). The Office of International Programs is Penn State's focal point in the international arena. It supports the University by initiating and responding to international opportunities and obligations in an increasingly interdependent world, thus ensuring an international dimension to the University's three major functions of teaching, research, and public service. Each year, nearly a thousand Penn State students from a wide variety of majors enroll in about eighty study-abroad programs in Europe, the Middle East, Australia, Latin America, Asia, and New Zealand. Liberalized immigration to the U.S. in 1965 was reported to have largely stimulated the significant entry of Asian Indians all across the United States (Khandelwal, 1992). This included the several thousand Indian students and faculty in various four-year colleges and universities. For example, a survey of Indian immigrants in New York in the late sixties found that 84 percent were college graduates, with 54 percent having post-graduate training. Over 5,000 nationwide were faculty members at American universities (Saran et al., 1980). As such, they have been shown to increasingly represent the most highly educated segment of the Asian population. In 2001-02, students from India alone accounted for 18 percent (618 graduates and 122 undergraduates) of Penn State’s International enrollment as opposed to the moderate 15 percent in 1992 (Office of International Students and Scholars, Penn State University, 2002).

This trend of increasing number of Asian-Indian enrollees at Penn State can be seen as a major contributing factor to the growth of the Asian-Indian community and businesses in a
historically homogenous town such as State College. From my personal interviews and conversations with local Asian-Indian entrepreneurs and some elderly participants of this study who had reported migrating to State College as early as in the mid to late 1960s, I was able to learn that there were no Indian restaurants or grocery stores in the area at the time. The Asian Indian community often had to rely on obtaining Indian groceries from nearby cities such as Philadelphia, and New Jersey. Stocking up on spices and other ingredients during their trips to India was also a commonplace phenomenon. Understandably then, since these techniques did not ensure a constant and reliable supply, eating non-traditional foods and meals became a necessity for these people. This lack of Asian Indian restaurants and grocery stores could be related to the lower influx of Asian Indians at the time, and consequently a lower demand for Asian Indian foods and groceries.

U.S census data reveal that in the year 1970, Asian Indians accounted for a mere 2.3 percent of the total population as opposed to the current 6.7 percent (U.S. Census, 2001). In the early 1980s, a local Indian family started India Mahal, the first Indian restaurant in the area that served an exclusive Indian fare to the local community. This family also reported to me that the most frequent and common patrons of the restaurant were the Asian Indian students, faculty, and other residents. The presence of American, and other ethnic customers was “an oddity that occurred every now and then”. Unfortunately, due to financial difficulties, the owners were forced to shut down the restaurant in less than a year. The same family then opened the very first Indian grocery store in the area, Krishan Indian Groceries, which for a long time remained the only store exclusively selling Indian spices and other food items in the area. Now however, other local stores such as the International Food Store, and Giant sell not all, but a few common ingredients and spices that the subjects in this study reported depending on in addition to Krishan
Indian Groceries. Also today, not one but three Indian restaurants such as India Pavilion, India Grill, and Shalimar dot the State College downtown landscape.

Over the years, as diverse ethnic groups have moved into State College, its cultural disposition has expanded. With new groups of ethnic people, came many cultural subtleties: ethnic boutiques and food stores; the availability of traditional music and art; the introduction of different sports and recreational activities; and, of course, ethnic restaurants. Ethnic restaurants, including the Asian Indian ones have become a common outgrowth of ethnic expansion in State College. These restaurants are one amongst many others that appear to offer a respite from the garden-variety pizza and burger places. In response to the growing numbers of ethnic students, local government and university organizations such as the International Hospitality Council, and the Office of International programs and Scholars offer a variety of educational, cultural, and social programs, and routinely sponsor activities and organizations that promote cross cultural interaction. One of the aims of these programs and services is to educate the local, non-ethnic community about the many different customs and cultures that they are cohabitating with. With all the ethnic growth and diversification over the years, State College today appears to be an interesting neighborhood full of cultural nuances that may be a pleasant and interesting place to live.

**Data Collection**

Traditionally, grounded theory researchers have been known to generate theory and data from interviewing processes and participant observations (Addison, 1989). Data collection in this study consisted of both the above. As data analysis in qualitative research is inductive in nature, the information provided by the participants was used to construct the fullest possible picture of the phenomena being studied (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). Inductive data analysis is a
form of synthesis by which the researcher creates categories based on the emergent data (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). As more information was collected during the following interviews, the original categories were tested and expanded, discarded, or reformulated to accommodate new information. In this manner, the processes of data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout this study. A timeline for this study can be found in Figure 1.

**Sampling:** The objective of sampling for this study was not to focus on the similarities that could be developed into generalizations but instead to focus on those specific aspects that gave the context of changes in food choices and food-related symbolism among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins its unique flavor. In the process of selecting research participants for this study, the following three criteria were followed: the first criterion was that all participants belonged to specifically, the ‘Hindu-Brahmin’ caste. Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, and Hindus are further classified as belonging to one of four different castes: 1. Brahmans (the priests, spiritual leaders, and teachers); 2. Kshatriyas (the warriors); 3. Vaishyas (the merchants, businessmen, and cultivators); and finally, 4. Shudras (the untouchables, and laborers). Hindu Brahmins were specifically chosen for this study due to two main reasons: a) there is some evidence to suggest that among the four different castes that migrate to the United States to each year, Hindu Brahmins have consistently been the majority (Gandhi, 1970; Gupta, 1975; Karim et al., 1986), and b) food prescriptions or avoidances practiced by Hindu Brahmins are unique, and differ from the other castes.

The second criterion was that the participants had been living in the United States for at least two years. This meant only those men and women were chosen who had sufficient time to overcome the initial culture shock (Taft, 1977) and to be reasonably exposed to the mainstream American culture of State College, PA. The third and final criterion was that the participants
belonged to different socioeconomic groups and came from different geographical areas of India. The objective was to optimize the probability of describing the full range of the phenomenon of changes in traditional food meanings and food choices among this population.

The participants were selected using a combination of snowball, and theoretical or purposive sampling techniques. Using the snowball technique, the initial participants recruited were friends and acquaintances of the researcher. Additional participants were traced through social contacts between these initial participants. An essential element of the theoretical or purposive sampling strategy involves keeping an eye on the range of experiences that are being studied, and to identify any obvious gaps. There is an emphasis on the selection not of individuals as cases but of situations (Patton, 1990). In the current study as well, individuals who had been identified by their friends as having just arrived, or as having children, etc. were searched out to make the data more comparable. As a result of this ongoing ‘stocktaking exercise’, it was possible to identify gaps such as unmarried older men, people with American roommates, Brahmins who ate beef, etc. early on. This in turn served as a guide to whether more data was needed - to continue selecting participants until the categories achieved theoretical saturation. As similar instances were seen over and over again, it became empirically clear that a category was saturated. When one category was saturated, nothing remained but to go on to new groups for data on other categories, and an attempt was made to saturate these categories also. By the time all the categories were saturated, and no more new information was being obtained from additional interviews, the sample had reached a size of twenty-eight participants. An outline of the process of sampling and theoretical saturation as it occurred in this study can be found in Figure 2.
The adequate theoretical sample of twenty-eight participants was judged on the basis of the fact that the sample consisted of Hindu Brahmins who were diverse enough to develop a theory on the process of changing food meanings and food choices. The sample consisted of Brahmins who were from both rural and urban areas in India; from different socioeconomic backgrounds; were students as well as professionals; working-women and housewives; single, married, and widowed; with and without children; and finally, recent and long-term immigrants. Thus, this sampling approach was not only one that gave priority to theoretical significance in the sampling decisions made, but was also one that forced the investigator in this study to sharpen her reflections on the findings during the fieldwork process. It placed a premium on theorizing rather than the statistical adequacy of the sample, which may have been a limited guide to sample selection in this instance. In short, the sampling techniques adopted in this study helped to optimize the probability of describing the full range of the phenomenon of changes in traditional food meanings and food choices among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins of State College, Pennsylvania.

Approval from the Institutional Review Board from the Pennsylvania State University was obtained in keeping with the regulations for human studies (IRB # 01B1053). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants (Appendix B). The participants’ real names were replaced by fictitious Indian names in this dissertation in order to maintain their confidentiality. A profile of all the participants can be found in Table 1.

**In-depth Interviewing:** The interviews were semi-structured in format, and the same interview guide was used with each participant. A copy of the interview guide is included in Appendix C. While each participant was given the opportunity to elaborate on the points raised by the researcher, each interview question was presented to each participant by the researcher to
maintain consistency within the interview process. In addition, Lofland’s (1971) system of structuring the interviews was followed to make them purposeful, relevant to the area of interest, but sufficiently flexible to leave room for unexpected information. The interviews were structured around the participants’ perceptions of their experience as immigrants in the USA. The researcher began with exploring general areas by asking questions of this type: “How are your eating habits in the USA different from that in India?” Subsequent interview questions arose from the topics touched upon by the interviewees. In order to keep the participants focused on the area of the researcher’s interest, open-ended questions of three types were used, as suggested by Spradley (1979). These included descriptive (e.g., what are the Brahmin related rules regarding food preparation and food consumption?), structural (e.g., what do you do to maintain your traditional eating habits here in America?), and contrast questions (e.g., you described some Brahmin related rules regarding food preparation and consumption. How do these rules apply now that you are here in America?). Such questions helped to elicit the participants’ descriptions of the food-related areas of change and negotiation they encountered as a result of intercultural contact.

An interview with a participant usually lasted from one to one and a half hours. All the participants were interviewed twice. The first audio-taped interview (I1) with a participant was transcribed, studied in depth, and coded for themes before a second interview (I2) was scheduled. The main purpose of conducting two interviews (I1 and I2) was to ensure that the participants’ reports of their experiences were consistent each time. The idea was to compare the two interviews, and make sure that the list of themes that emerged from both were the same. Asking a participant to respond to the same set of questions that had been asked once before also gave him a chance to include any detail that he might have forgotten to mention the first time.
around. Thus, conducting two interviews with a participant helped to achieve two things in this study: consistency, and a more exhaustive report from a participant. Ultimately, this resulted in a set of themes that were as exhaustive as possible, and a thicker, richer description of the process of changing food meanings and food choices among the participants of this study. This in turn, helped to increase the validity of the findings of this study.

Since the idea was to obtain a consistent report each time, it was felt necessary to conduct the two interviews with a participant within a short time frame, namely within a couple of weeks. A longer time frame between the interviews may have resulted in the possibility of a different report each time since human memory, and its ability to recall accurately in semi-structured or unstructured follow-up interview sessions has been reported to be unreliable (Lofland, 1971). Moreover, this study was not meant to be a longitudinal one. A longer time frame between the two interviews raises the possibility of a possible change in behaviors and perceptions over time in a participant.

All the interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes, as a natural setting such as a home is said to be the “most conducive to openness and sharing of feelings and opinions between the researcher and the participant” (Lofland, 1971). Interviewing the participants in a familiar place also gave them an opportunity to share their opinions and feelings safely and confidently. Finally, this provided the opportunity to observe the participants as they were engaged in their routinely activities such as cooking, cleaning, or eating food. Such activities, along with the participants’ apartments or homes, and kitchens were by themselves a good source of information about their tastes, priorities, and strategies. Following Bogdan and Biklen’s (1982) suggestion, the method of audio-taping the interviews and transcribing an
interview within two weeks was utilized in order to ensure a most accurate recording of information as possible.

Participant Observations: Participant observation is the conventional name given to data collection that involves social interaction between the researcher and the informants in a naturalistic setting during which data are systematically collected (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). “It is a major means of collecting data in case study research, providing a firsthand account of the situation under study” (Merriam, 1988, pg. 41). The objective of conducting participant observations in this study was mainly to provide hard evidence against the participants’ self reports of what they ate, and why; as an alternate source of data for enhancing cross checking and triangulation. Traditionally, participant observers rely most heavily on the use of field notes, which are running descriptions of settings, people, activities, and sounds. Descriptive field notes were kept in this study as well, to describe the data found through the observations. They “occurred out of the flow of activity” and helped to form a comprehensible account of what was observed (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), the descriptive aspect of the field notes may encompass:

1. portraits of the subjects,

2. reconstruction of dialogue,

3. description of physical setting,

4. accounts of particular events,

5. depiction of activities, and

6. the observer’s behavior.
The extent of a researcher's participation in observational data collection techniques can vary from full participation to onlooker observation. For example, researchers can enter the homes of people with disabilities as care workers or users (full participation), or as onlookers or spectators (least participation). However, even the mere presence of an observer is likely to introduce a distortion of the natural scene which the researcher must be aware of, and work to minimize (Lofland, 1972). Considering the above, the strategy in the current study was to engage in limited interaction, intervening only when further clarification of actions was needed. Examples included explicit impromptu questioning and probing such as "Why are you using your right hand versus your left hand?", “Why are you using this spice?”, etc. These limited interactions provided ample opportunities to probe for meanings about events and actions observed during participant observation. These intentional observations of the participants were conducted in their homes after they had been interviewed for the second time.

The observations, which lasted for approximately one to two hours, were recorded while a participant was engaged in food-related activities such as preparing and cooking a dinner or a lunch meal, packing a lunch meal for the next day, preparing and cooking foods for a festival, feast, or a fast, eating a meal, etc. A guide that focused on the characteristics of the environment, namely their kitchens, and dining rooms, and the participant’s activities in this environment was used to record observations. The questions that were part of this guide included what the participant’s work environment looked like, what kinds of resources were present in the workspace, what the participant’s mannerisms were as they complete their activity, how the participants used past experiences, and how their values and beliefs influenced what they were doing, etc. The field notes from these observation sessions were later transcribed into an electronic format for analysis, at which time the researcher included reference to her own
opinions and experiences, as well as references to various pieces of literature that might help to inform what was seen during the observation sessions.

An analysis of the field notes prepared during these observations helped to lead to deeper understandings than the interviews alone. “Rich data are filled with pieces of evidence, with the clues that you begin to put together to make analytical sense out of what you study” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, pg. 98). For example, it was observed that all the participants almost exclusively used their right hands during activities such as cooking and eating. During their interviews as well, many had mentioned the Brahmin tradition of using one’s right hand exclusively during activities such as cooking and eating. The right hand was considered the ‘hand of god’, and since food was thought to be a ‘gift from god’, the use of this hand during food-related activities symbolized preserving purity and godliness, and paying gratitude to god. Thus, through such observations, the theme of ‘Being a Brahmin’ was given a more concrete, unambiguous, and descriptive language. A list of such observed behaviors, their meanings, and their relevance to a particular theme can be found in Table 2.

**Data Analysis**

A study using a grounded theory method can be conducted using one of two approaches. Glaser and Strauss (1967) outlined an inductive approach that relies on generating a theory from data that is systematically collected, coded into categories and concepts, and analyzed through the process of constant comparison. A few decades later, Strauss collaborated with Corbin, and developed an alternative approach with the perspective that the process by which a theory is constructed can evaluate the quality of a theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Although many of the essentials of the original grounded theory method were maintained, the modified method
consisted of a systematic set of procedures whose careful execution was thought to result in a reliable and a valid theory as the outcome. Taking the above into consideration, the approach outlined by Strauss and Corbin was employed to generate a theory on changing food choices and food meanings among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College, Pennsylvania.

The analytic process in the current study was concurrent with data collection, as recommended by Tesch (1990). Even as new subjects were being interviewed, the existing interviews were transcribed, and prepared for analysis. This parallel modality allowed for new questions to emerge and for new findings to be made in an ongoing, cyclical way. After an interview was completed, it was transcribed, and re-read several times as soon as possible in order to preserve the full meaning of the participants’ words. Attempts were made to get to the intended and implied meaning of the participants’ words, to note regularities, patterns, and explanations. This helped to form a sense of the participant’s shared reality as well as to conceptualize its similarity with other participants under study to formulate common categories and themes. In the initial process of the collection and analysis process, a detailed, systematic analysis of field notes compiled from the observations and interviews was also conducted. These field notes along with the transcribed interviews were condensed or summarized to identify a range of findings, primarily focusing on classifying the described and evidenced impacts on participants. This process of reducing or condensing the transcribed interviews helped to sharpen, sort, focus, discard, and organize data in such a way that it could be analyzed.

In order to avoid data overload and to be true to the naturalistic paradigm, coding was started right after the first interview was transcribed. The following code operations, as delineated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were utilized:

1) **Open coding**: It is the part of the analysis concerned with identifying,
naming, categorizing and describing phenomena found in the text. Essentially, each line, sentence, paragraph etc. was read in search of the answer to the repeated question "what is this about? What is being referenced here?" Labels, that referred to things like Indian restaurants, grocery shopping, blending in, loss of traditional eating, etc. were attached to the text during this process. These labels were the nouns and verbs of the conceptual world of food-related acculturation among the participants of this study. The main aim of this part of the analytic process was to identify the more general categories that these things were instances of, such as businesses, food-related activities, social relations, social outcomes, etc. Adjectives and adverbs were also identified to develop the properties of these categories. For example, the participants were asked to reflect on the quality of an Indian or American meal in order to determine the significance of these perceptions to maintaining or losing traditions.

2) Axial coding: It is the process of relating codes (categories and properties) to each other, via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking. To simplify this process, rather than looking for any and all kind of relations, causal relationships are emphasized, and an attempt is made to fit things into a basic frame of generic relationships. The frame consisted of the following elements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenon</td>
<td>The outcome of interest – changing food choices and food meanings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal conditions</td>
<td>A set of causes and their properties – factors in the system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>The specific locations (values) of background variables; a set of conditions influencing the action/strategy – immigration to State College.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervening conditions</td>
<td>Similar to context, but the conditions that have a direct effect – a hectic schedule, lack of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action strategies</td>
<td>The purposeful, goal-oriented activities that the participants performed in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
response to the phenomenon and intervening conditions – eating at fast food restaurants.

Consequences
The consequences of the action strategies, intended and unintended – loss of traditional eating behavior.

For example, consider the following text fragment from an interview in this study:

“Making a complete Indian meal is a major problem when you don’t have the time. Sometimes, my schedule is more hectic than other times, but when it gets really bad, whew! It gets so busy, you don't even have the time for a cup of coffee. You don't get the time to do anything, not even shopping. Anything you can get from the fast food place that is fast and filling is the best option. So maintaining the traditional way of eating here is sometimes impossible”.

In the text segment above, it seems obvious that the phenomenon of interest is the inability to cook and eat a complete Indian meal, the causal conditions are lack of time, the action strategy is not eating at all or eating fast foods, and the consequence is loss of traditional eating behavior.

3) Selective coding: It is the final step in the coding process where the idea is to generate a final set of categories. In conjunction with the method of constant comparison, this procedure involved comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences), comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time (I1 and I2), comparing incident with incident, comparing previously analyzed data with an emerging category, and finally, achieving a parsimonious final set of four categories by comparing a category with other categories. In this way, similarities and differences among the participants’ changing food-related experiences were identified. Each category was a compendium of several related themes and sub-themes that defined the overall attitudes and behaviors of the participants. A list of the categories, themes, and sub-themes that emerged during the coding procedures can be found in Appendix D.
The final analytic step involved generating a theoretical framework on the process of food-related acculturation by choosing one category to be the core category, and relating all other categories to that category. The essential idea was to develop a single storyline around which all everything else was draped. For example, ‘Changes in Food Choices and Food Meanings’ was identified as the core category in this study to which all the factors of the system are connected such as time, availability of Indian foods, attitude of the host community, etc.

**Researcher-related Bias**

As a qualitative researcher who has no instrument but me, I was acutely aware of the need to separate my personal position from the worldviews and perceptions of the study participants. Since I belong to the same cultural group as my informants, this need was even more pronounced in this study of intercultural influences. I followed the recommendations of Spinelli (1989) and made every attempt to detect and bracket my own memories and known preconceptions about the immigration experience from my questions and from the participants’ reports. I believe I was reasonably successful in this process. Immediately after each interview I registered my conscious attitudes and emotional responses to the participants’ responses in a diary and analyzed each contact in depth. In doing so I was able to define and separate my positions on many issues touched upon by the participants and to formulate my questions and follow their responses without imprinting my personal biases on them. To understand my other, more ingrained biases, I turned to my advisor and a fellow researcher.

From the inception of this study, I was in regular contact with Hema, a fellow researcher interested in acculturation issues. By asking for clarifications of cultural norms implied in the participants’ responses, she helped me realize that I took some of these norms for granted and addressed them from an insider’s position. As Hema was born and raised in the United States,
she provided me with a background against which I could flesh out the perceptions and attitudes my participants and I carried over from India. My next step was to separate these and address them as distinct from each other and from the mainstream Asian American attitudes. On Hema’s suggestion, I wrote down my attitudes and beliefs and shared them with her. This process helped me diminish the possibility that my concepts would “seep” into the study and shape my research. As a result, I was able to remove this personal “filter” from my ears and eyes. Thanks to Hema’s vigilance, I gradually learned to explicate various aspects of living in India that left their imprints on my participants’ and my own perceptions and behaviors. I learned to separate these and to present my informants’ responses and points of view with minimal amounts of my own bias. I believe that the overall process enabled me to produce a credible study. In order to maintain the participants’ confidentiality, their names and any other information about them was not disclosed to Hema. For verification purposes, a copy of Hema’s consent form, agreeing to assist me as a confidante during this process, can be found in Appendix E.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research operates on the concept that every participant and his/her experience are unique in its own way, so it does not presuppose replication of its findings, crucial for quantitative methods. The product of qualitative research contains no “hard data” one can use to replicate or disprove the results of the study. Finally, the only instrument is the researcher herself. This instrument’s reliability and validity are in its trustworthiness. The crux of the matter is: what is the truth value of qualitative research? Do the findings of the study make sense? Are they credible to the people we study and to our readers? Do we have an authentic portrait of what we were looking at? (Patton, 1990).
To answer all these questions positively, attempts were taken in this study to make it as trustworthy as possible. Guba and Lincoln (1985) provide a number of guidelines that were followed to ensure that this research is credible:

1. **Triangulation** is a way to support a finding by showing that other observers agree with it or, at least, do not contradict it. Patton (1990) described three major sources of triangulation: by data source (persons, time, places, etc.), by method (observation, interview transcript), and by researcher (two investigators, or peers, or advisors). In this study, all three ways of triangulation were incorporated into all cycles of data collection and analysis. Multiple repetitions of a finding from different participants were searched for before finalizing it. The interviews were not the sole sources of findings. Rather, the audio-taped transcripts were balanced with observations.

2. **Prolonged engagement**: In this study the individuals were interviewed and observed in their own homes rather than “getting immersed” in a particular setting. Some of the participants belonged to a culture that differed from the researcher’s own slightly due to the difference in the time of emigration. Spending much time with the participants helped the researcher to become open to their reality and to neutralize the interference of her own experience.

3. **Working with a fellow researcher** is crucial for reduction of research bias. Hema Swaminathan, a fellow researcher who had no conceptual interests in the situation (Guba and Lincoln, 1985) read the interview transcripts and coded some of the data independently of the researcher’s coding. When agreement was achieved, trustworthiness of this study increased. New perspectives and insights were gained about bias or emotional involvement. Working with the fellow researcher was done on a regular basis from the inception of this study. Hema’s study of
life changing experiences of Russian immigrants was simultaneously close to and different from this study. So the findings of both the studies formed a backdrop against which the researchers’ positions were clarified and their formulations were strengthened.

4. **Reflexivity:** Since the only instrument of qualitative inquiry is the researcher, the subject of “objectivity” becomes extremely important. A totally bias-free person does not exist. So each and every qualitative “instrument” is skewed in some way by her developmental and emotional “baggage”. Being aware of her limitations, the researcher in this study kept a detailed record of her emotions, responses to the participants’ information, and insights for the whole duration of the study. This way, presumptions were confronted with and worked through, as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1982). Guba and Linclon (1985) call this process “progressive subjectivity” and provide specific guidelines for executing this technique. Basically, they recommend that the researcher record his or her a priori constructions as they relate to the study. Examples of some biases and assumptions that the researcher held during this study included the following: ‘I think all Hindu Brahmins avoid all forms of meat and meat products’; ‘I think the people who have stayed for a longer time would have a more Americanized lifestyle. Such a lifestyle would include eating beef, and other meat and meat products’; ‘People from the more urban areas would be more interested in taking up American foods than those from the rural areas’; ‘Considering that the women who decide to come to the U.S. are educated, they would not be the exclusive cooks of the household’ etc. These constructions were then discussed at regular intervals with Hema, the fellow researcher. Such discussions in turn helped the researcher to face her own personal constructs and work so that the stance was not antithetical to the emerging data.
5. Negative case analysis is a method of strengthening one’s findings through analyzing data that does not fit neatly into the construct. Such analysis protects a researcher against self-selecting biases and may help build better explanations (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finding the reason why this particular segment of data does not fit may throw light on the whole theoretical concept or provide additional refining touches. When a preliminary conclusion is on hand, Miles and Huberman (1994) advise us to ask, “Do any data oppose this conclusion, or are any inconsistent with this conclusion?” In this study the working hypotheses were revised several times, and negative cases were mined for each version, using prior and newly collected data. At the end of the process, a stage of relative comfort with the conclusions was reached.

6. Member checking, the most crucial technique for establishing credibility of conclusions (Guba and Lincoln, 1985), is sharing aspects of emergent findings with the research participants for their opinions and insights. The participants acted as judges, evaluating the major findings of this study, or as collaborators, providing more information and expanding the richness of the data (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Giving the participants copies of the interview transcripts and asking them to comment on them helped to enhance the credibility of the findings of this study. A copy of the request for transcript validation (Transcription Validation) can be found in Appendix F.

Another method of increasing trustworthiness of this study was that of the researcher forcing herself to “strike a balance between the development of empathy and the practice of a distanced, non-judgmental stance.” (Ely et al., 1991) Furthermore, trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by constant self-reflection, a willingness to discard pre-conceived notions that conflicted with the data, an openness to alternative explanations and a desire to represent the multiple views of the research participants in an honest and thorough manner. This study
provides with useful insights into the experiences of Asian Indian Hindu Brahmmins in State College, PA. The findings were presented through the use of narratives and individual stories, as recommended by Wolcott (1990) and Atkinson (1992).

To summarize, the greatest strength lay in the fact that this qualitative study, like most others, was multi-method in focus. The use of participant observation techniques helped to allow for creativity in generating the conceptual framework. There were no pre-determined categories, and so this method allowed for the flexibility of gaining insight into new ways of looking at old realities of changes in food-related meanings and food choices. Visiting and observing the setting in which the interviewees carried out food-related activities would help to notice some behaviors that nobody had talked about in their interviews because it was so familiar to them that they thought it unworthy to refer to or they may have not wanted to talk about it.

As Fontana and Frey (1998) pointed out, and as confirmed by this study, the informal interviews offered the greatest benefit of allowing for an in-depth understanding of complex food behavior without imposing any prior categorization that may have limited the field of inquiry. The face-to-face interviews helped the researcher to understand and explain the complex phenomenon of changes in food meanings and food choices among Asian Indian immigrants. Most importantly, a conceptual framework was generated that not only related to the particular situation of Asian Indian immigrants in State College, but one that is ‘grounded’ in the data (Creswell, 1998), especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of the participants. An understanding of the phenomenon of change in food meanings and food choices was obtained not from the researcher’s perspective, but from that of the participants.
Chapter IV

RESULTS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the categories and themes, which emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the participants. Themes are affect-laden statements, which appear frequently across interviews or seem relevant and important. Themes are organized into categories. All the sub themes were introduced by the participants, and are listed in this section in their own voices in the hope that the participants’ perceptions and thoughts on the immigrating experience would be reflected adequately. A glossary of Indian terms can be found in Appendix G.

Category I: Changes in Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings

The themes and sub-themes that made up this category revealed the food choices made by the immigrants both before and after coming to the United States, and what these choices meant for the participants. A list of these can be found in Table 3.

Theme 1: Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings in India

Sub theme A: “I ate a variety of Indian foods back home; more so than here”.

“Back home, it was typically South-Indian food. Naturally, because we were South-Indians. No meat. We never had any eggs even. My mom always cooked. Breakfast was usually dosais, idlis. We would take a packed lunch for school - vegetable curry and some rice. Dinner would be more sumptuous – rice, two or three varieties of vegetables, sambar, rasam, pappadams, pickles, and yogurt”.

The consumption of foods such as rice and wheat varied considerably from region to region, and depended on the texture and consistency of the side dishes that were eaten. For example, participants who were from the southern (Tamilnadu, kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh), eastern (West Bengal, Orissa), and western (Maharashtra, Gujarat) parts of India reported eating
boiled rice more often. Revathi, a South Indian Brahmin from Madras, Tamilnadu spoke of how she and her family back home had always considered rice to be their main staple:

“We had rice for all the 3 meals. That’s what all people from the south do. Rotis were made, but only on very rare occasions. Once a month or so. And even then, we wouldn’t eat rotis for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Occasionally, on a weekend in the afternoon, if my mom felt like it, she would make some rotis for tiffin, and we would have it with some stew. And when we had dinner, it would be rice and sambar again. Stuff like sambar and rasam can only be eaten with rice anyway”.

Sonali, a Hindu Brahmin from Bombay, Maharashtra, and KumKum, a Hindu Brahmin from Calcutta, West Bengal, also talked about how rice was the staple of choice in their respective households:

“Most often than not, we had rice for lunch and dinner. So did all my aunts and uncles. As typical Maharashtrians, rice is what we ate the most – with dal. We would mix the rice with dal, and eat it together. Roti was a treat to be enjoyed on the weekends. My mom would make a dry curry to go with it”.

Not only was rice considered a staple of tradition for the above participants, but their preference for it over roti also stemmed from the type of side dishes eaten. Rice was described as ‘blending’ or ‘mixing well’ with the thin, sauce-like gravies such as sambar (lentil and tamarind base sauce), rasam (a thin watery sauce consisting of spices and tomatoes) or dal (a lentil-based sauce similar to the sambar in consistency but without any tamarind). Rotis were described as being better for ‘scooping’ thick curried meats or vegetables.

“We ate more rotis because we didn’t really need to be eating rice. What I mean is that my mother did not really make a whole lot of sambar or rasam. These are thin, and sauce-like that will go better with rice. Since we grew up in the north, a lot of gravy curries were made at home. These in contrast, can be eaten better with rotis”.

Due to religious proscriptions, meat and meat products were excluded by most south Indian Brahmins in this study. The preferred mediums for cooking were sesame oil, and coconut oil.
Thayir, or yogurt, (the unsweetened, unflavored kind) was also a common food item that was eaten mixed with rice by the south Indians. The consumption of a mixture of rice and yogurt as the last course of a meal was unique to the south Indians. As Vikram, a south Indian graduate student put it:

“We (south Indians) all love our thayir chatham (rice mixed with yogurt). That I think is comfort food for us. In my opinion, this is an issue that is very common among south Indian Brahmins – not even north Indians, Bengalis, or Maharshtrians can understand this need to finish a meal with yogurt and rice. When my friends and I got together in Delaware recently, the three south Indians amongst us would try and eat yogurt and rice after every meal. The others could not comprehend that. There is something addictive there. Maybe it’s purely psychological”.

Kaushik’s response was similar:

“Even when my parents and I would go out to eat north Indian food, we would come back home, and my mom would whip up some salted lassi (beverage made from yogurt) in the blender. We felt satisfied that we were going to bed with something good and healthy in our stomachs”.

Many south Indian participants in this study reflected on the importance of yogurt in their cuisine. A mixture of rice and yogurt was described as being ‘a comfort food’. The idea of ‘finishing a meal with rice and yogurt’ was perceived as ‘completing’ a meal. Other positive qualities such as ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ revealed that yogurt, and yogurt-based products were perceived as being nutritious.

None of the Hindu Brahmins who were interviewed in this study were native to north India, or were north Indians by birth. This maybe due to the fact that although north India is home to many Hindus such as those belonging to the Kshatriya, or Vaishya sub castes, the Brahmin sub caste is almost nonexistent in the area. However, there were some participants in this study who were originally South-, West, or East-Indian Hindu Brahmins by birth, but had
spent all or a large part of their lives in the northern parts of India. These participants reported consuming foods that were more traditional to north India. Consider the following quotes:

“My mom, grandmother, aunts and uncles, I mean we have always eaten rotis, and sabji for at least one meal during the day if not two! I think it is because my family has somehow adapted to living in the north. North-Indians eat a lot of rotis, and hardly any rice. It’s just cheaper, and more easily available here in Delhi. So even though we (South-Indians) are traditionally rice eaters, over the years, we (our entire family) have molded ourselves to the ways of the north, I guess”.

Thus, the use of wheat over rice for these participants was due to the low cost and easy availability of wheat and wheat products in the north, and due to the fact that they consumed more north Indian style gravies and curries as opposed to sambar and rasam. This of course, was not always true. Consider the following quote:

“My mother maintained our south Indian heritage by cooking only south Indian dishes at home. Even though we lived in north India, we never had parathas (fried rotis), or puris for breakfast. Or for that matter, any north Indian curries. We would always only eat idlis, dosais, rice, sambar, rasam. And we never questioned my mom about this. If we wanted north Indian food, we would go out to eat it”.

For the above south Indian Hindu Brahmins who did not live in their native region but had been raised in other parts of India, cooking and eating foods that were native to south India meant maintaining their regional traditional eating habits.

The Hindu Brahmins from Bengal, Orissa, Assam, parts of Maharashtra, and Kerala (southern India) consumed a variety of seafood, including curried shrimp, crab, and clam dishes. The consumption of chicken and eggs was less common. Consider the quotes by the Brahmins in these regions when asked about the practice of eating meat and fish:

“For the Brahmins in the eastern parts of India, especially Bengal, there was and is no stipulation anywhere that they could not eat meat. The very ancient food habits in Bengal consisted of eating rice and freshwater fish. Without fish, they would not have had much protein in their diet. They considered fish to be a vegetarian food because it was the only
source of protein in the coastal areas at the time. People in the northern and southern parts of India had access to dairy products for protein source. I am not saying that there are no strict vegetarians in Bengal. All I am saying is that eating fish was not considered a non-vegetarian practice”.

The Brahmins in the study perceived fish and other seafood as being ‘vegetarian foods’ due to their contribution of protein in the traditional diet. These were therefore permitted during religious ceremonies. In fact, as one Bengali Brahmin participant put it:

“Fish for us is the ‘vegetable of the sea’. It always has been. We survived the droughts and famines in Bengal solely because of eating fish. We don’t beef, lamb, pork, eggs or anything like that. Just chicken. And that too, we wouldn’t eat it during religious occasions. Fish is different. It’s absolutely an essential part of our diet even during religious ceremonies. That’s who we are as a cultural group. So we are still vegetarian Hindu Brahmins”.

It appeared that chicken was deemed acceptable, while other meat and meat products were not, especially during religious ceremonies and festivals – occasions that symbolized purity and holiness. This may be related to the leanness of the meat. Red meats such as beef, lamb, and pork were perceived as being ‘flesh foods’ or ‘impure foods’, the presence of which was viewed as contaminating an otherwise ‘pure’ environment.

Along with heavily spiced (curry) dishes with vegetables, meat, fish, or eggs, the use of hot pickles and condiments were also common in the coastal areas. Spice choices included garlic, ginger, turmeric, tamarind, cumin, coriander, and mustard seeds. Spices and pickles were perceived as medicinal, and thought to have preservative properties by the participants. Vegetable choices included onions, tomatoes, potatoes, green leaves, okra, green beans, varieties of squash, and root vegetables. Milk was used in coffee and tea. Water was the beverage of choice with meals, and as a thirst quencher.
Sub theme B: “Back home, we ate more regular meals”.

All participants talked about eating more regularly, eating 2-3 meals a day, and almost always at home while describing their daily meal patterns in India. They also talked about what they considered to be a ‘proper’ meal. For example, a ‘proper’, ‘normal’ or a ‘typical’ breakfast was one that consisted of foods that were considered exclusively breakfast items such as dosais, idlis, or upma. The mid-afternoon munching, which typically consisted of dosais, idlis, upma, and rotis was described as ‘tiffin’. Tiffin was likened to a ‘big snack’ by most participants. As Kumkum, a college professor put it:

“We really didn’t snack much back home. At least not the way it is here – chips, soda, candy and all that. But if we did have something in-between meals, it would be after school, but before dinner time. We would be very hungry, and my dad would have just come home from work. My mom would almost always make something very elaborate. Pretty heavy foods like puris and sandwiches. What we called tiffin. You could call them mini meals here because it would be so heavy. It could be a meal itself. But for us it’s not a meal. It does not have rotis, rice, dal, vegetables, etc. When we were much younger, we would inadvertently make a mini meal or a tiffin out of anything that my mom would make because we would come home starving from school. And often at such times, we would all skip dinner, and just munch on some dalmut or fruits”.

A clear distinction was thus made by the participants between meals and snacks. The word tiffin was used to distinguish a snack from a meal. No matter how substantial the snack was, it was still called tiffin. The coffee or tea drunk in the late afternoon with foods like puris, samosas, dosas, idlis, upma, toast, biscuits (cookies) etc. was all part of tiffin. Milk-based sweets, such as the cardamom-, and saffron-spiced kheer, the Indian icecream called kulfi, and the candy barfi, were also popular snacks, as were salty foods. A snack also included cooling beverages such as the sweetened, diluted yogurt drink, lassi, or a fruit juice called sherbet.

A meal was not a meal for the participants unless the traditional staples prepared in the traditional manner (boiled rice for the southern, eastern, and western Indian participants, and roti
for the people from north India) were served. A meal was also considered ‘sumptuous’ or complete, and filling when it consisted of a variety of dishes such as rice, two to three varieties of vegetables, sambar, or rasam (dilute, sauce-like made from tomatoes, tamarind, and spices) etc. One vegetable, and rice did not make the cut for a complete meal.

Attributing qualities to their food consumption behavior while in India reflected the participants’ own personal values and beliefs about what constituted an acceptable or not acceptable daily meal pattern. Consider the following quote:

“My eating habits back home were good. For one, I always had breakfast back home. I would eat idlis, or dosas, or whatever was made. My mom would pack us some lunch, and then we would have dinner. Often, we would also eat some tiffin before dinner. I think eating regularly like we used to back home is important for good health”.

Eating a traditional breakfast, and eating two or three meals a day were all considered healthy eating patterns. Starting the day with breakfast was perceived as a ‘good’ or healthy eating behavior pattern. Skipping breakfast was perceived as being a ‘deteriorating’ habit. Eating lunch, a mid-afternoon snack or tiffin, and an elaborate meal at dinner were all regarded as ‘better’ eating habits.

Sub theme C: “We didn’t eat out all that much, even when we had the money to. Eating street foods was fun though…..”.

All the participants talked about not eating out very often. Consider the following quotes:

“We ate out, but just once a month or so. And we would go out to eat something special – the kind of stuff that my mother wouldn’t make at home. But we definitely ate at home most of the time”.

“I don’t know why we as a family, never ate out much. Maybe once in a while. I never really analyzed it. Maybe we were just tuned to not eating out. The elders would tell us
that we would get a stomach ache if we ate out, and that became a part of our psyche. In the 70’s when I was growing up, hygiene was a big issue as far as eating out was concerned”.

The participants equated eating out with spending more money, and risking eating unhygienic foods. For some, especially the younger generation, eating out also meant breaking away from the norm - eating foods other than those cooked at home.

Snacking in India referred to snacking on street foods. These were perceived as being “junk” foods not to be taken seriously, and not to be replaced by actual meals. A clear distinction was also made between tiffin, the mid-afternoon snack, and street foods. While tiffins symbolized healthy, home-cooked snacks, street foods were associated with a typical, Indian way of life, of festivities, and abandonment. Consider the following quote by Gayathri, a housewife:

“We snacked occasionally back home. I don’t mean the tiffins, but just those street foods. We would go out to eat those – my friends and I. They are so good! They’re such an important part of our culture. I mean think about it – the way we Indians relish street foods, I doubt any other culture does. We love our food, but we also love our junk food. And they’re different from the junk foods here – they’re low in fat! The snack foods here only make you fat. They have no nutritive value whatsoever. And eating those street foods – it’s different. It’s almost a festive thing – it’s fun. It’s being so typically Indian – standing in those flea infested streets and eating food made by a guy who has no food safety permit whatsoever! You just don’t think about those things back home. You just eat it”.

Even though the participants perceived street foods to be “junk foods” and described them as being “flea infested” or “probably not very hygienic”, they were still an integral part of Indian culture and represented to them, the Indian lifestyle of celebration, and festivities. Some even considered these to be lower in fat, and higher in overall nutritional value than the ‘junk’ or snack foods available in America.
Theme 2: Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings in State College

Sub theme A: “The foods I eat now are quite different from what I used to back home, but I still try to eat as Indian as I can”.

After migrating to State College, PA, most participants had made some changes in their food choices. The typical, traditional breakfast food items such as puris, parathas, or dosais, and idlis were replaced with ready-to-eat cereals. Foods such as ghee, yogurt, dal, roti, rice dishes, and tea, which were consumed very frequently in India were consumed less frequently in the U.S. Instead, the consumption of foods such as fruit juice, canned or frozen vegetables, American bread, cheese and cheese dishes, had increased. Other changes included drinking soda during and between meals, snacking on chips, cookies, and candy in-between meals, and eating foods such as sandwiches, pastas, burgers, and pizzas very frequently. Lunch consisted of sandwiches, and burgers, and sometimes other ethnic foods too, such as Chinese, Mexican, and Italian food. These were eaten at the local restaurants located in downtown State College.

Many factors were cited as being responsible for the changes made. Commenting on the fact that she had to plan her own meals after coming to State College, a participant commented that she could not retain her traditional food habits for all three meals a day even if she wanted to. The changes made in her diet were mostly attributed to time constraints – she implied that planning an Indian meal, and preparing it took up a lot of time that she did not have:

“I have to plan my own meals here. Unlike back home, it was my mom. So the foods I eat here – some are the same, while some are very different. For example, for breakfast, I no longer eat dosais, and idlis. Who has the time? It’s usually cereal and milk. For lunch, instead of having a packed lunch like rice and sambar at home, I just eat a sandwich, burger, or a bagel. I really don’t have the time to cook the things I used to eat back home. I mean, most of the time, I barely have time to brush my teeth in the mornings! And dosais and idlis take a lot of advanced planning, energy, and time. Neither of which I
have. So I eat anything I can get my hands on. I do cook an Indian meal for dinners, and during the weekends when I have some time on my hands”.

Other factors such as age, gender, marital status, family structure, children, financial status, extent of contact with Americans Vs fellow Indians, nutritional awareness, availability of foods, etc. were all influential in altering their food behavior. These are highlighted under a separate theme later in this chapter.

The participants also described their meal patterns as being a mix of traditional Indian and Western. For example, consider the quotes below:

“When I do eat breakfast, it’s cereal and milk. Lunch is usually out with my laboratory colleagues. So we eat pasta, Chinese food, sandwiches, burgers, Taco Bell, you name it. I make dinner at home. I just make rice now only because it takes a lot more time to make rotis. My mom back home would make rotis sometimes for dinner. I don’t have the time. And then, I also make a dal or a curry. Nothing elaborate. Just one dish. Sometimes, I eat this dal or curry with pita bread or just toast. I know it is not a ‘meal’ in itself, but at least it’s somewhat Indian. I guess I could make some elaborate pasta dish, but I prefer eating Indian. I crave for it. After all, I am an Indian, and that’s how I have been brought up – to eat Indian food. Sometimes, if I have the time, and if I cook enough dinner, then I will take the same thing for lunch to school the next day. But that’s not very often. I usually find myself running out the door in the mornings”.

“We eat what we can get our hands on for breakfast and lunch. But dinner time is different. We usually make an Indian meal, and we all sit together and eat. I feel that we are doing what we used to do growing up. After all, during the evenings, and during the weekends and holidays, we have a little time where we can cook some Indian food. This makes me feel like I am maintaining my culture….”.

Even though American foods were accepted during the busy hours of the morning, eating an Indian meal for dinner, and during the weekends and holidays was common among most participants. They described a ‘need’ or a craving’ for Indian food which they suggested stemmed from being raised in that cultural milieu. Most even described the feeling of maintaining their cultural traditions by cooking and eating Indian meals. However, the Indian-style meals prepared by the participants although were perceived as being “Indian”, were not
considered as “complete meals”. They attributed this to the fact that the meal did not always consist of rice or roti and 2 or 3 vegetable curries as was the traditional pattern back home.

Sub theme B: “I don’t eat very regularly. I eat very sporadically here. It’s bad”.

Almost all the participants reported that their eating patterns had become more irregular in the United States. Breakfast was the meal most commonly omitted by all the participants. A strong American influence was observed in their luncheon patterns. Dinner was the only meal that was eaten at home, and most regularly. Skipping breakfast, and being forced to eat out for lunch was perceived negatively. The need to prepare and eat a traditional Indian meal for dinner was not only viewed as an integral part of their cultural upbringing, but was also seen as a way of compensating for their sporadic eating patterns during the day. Consider the stories of these participants:

“My eating habits have deteriorated considerably after coming here. First of all, I skip breakfast. I never did that back home. My mom always had fresh, hot breakfast ready for us. I guess I can’t seem to find the time or means to do that for myself. I’m either running late, or there’s way too much to be done at school, or that I am sick and tired of eating cold cereal and milk. And for lunch, I eat anything that I can get hold of. Sometimes, my lunch is nothing more than a snack - bag of chips and a soda. I sometimes prefer that to eating a tasteless hamburger. And then there are times when I skip lunch altogether. I do eat dinner everyday though. My roommates and I take turns at making an Indian meal. At the end of a long, hungry day, we all relish it. It makes us feel that at least dinner is a good meal”.

The reasons for these sporadic meal patterns were attributed to the pressures of a faster-paced lifestyle here in the United States. Traditional concepts of what constituted a breakfast, lunch, or dinner, and the texture of these foods also influenced their eating habits. Some reported that they did not like the idea of eating cereal and milk for breakfast. For them, the concept of a breakfast was one that included dosas, idlis, and upma. Therefore, rather than change their breakfast
pattern, they preferred not eating any breakfast at all. This same behavior extended to their luncheon patterns. American foods such as hamburgers, and pasta were perceived as being bland, and tasteless.

Sub theme C: “I eat out a lot here, and snack a whole lot too. I never used to much, back home. Like I said, the quality of my diet has only gone down ever since I came here”.

Most participants resorted to snacking, and eating out more often in the United States than in their home country. As Sonali, a graduate student put it:

“Who doesn’t snack more after coming here? I mean, back home, if you wanted to snack, you grabbed a few biscuits (cookies), that’s all. Or you had to spend some money to eat samosas, chaat, panipuris. And that was always a big event – on special occasions. Not to mention all the risks you took with eating foods that were probably very unhygienic! It’s different here. Here, all you have to do is walk a few steps to the vending machine, and you have not just one kind of biscuit (cookie), but a variety of cookies staring at you in your face – chocolate cream, vanilla cream, plain, peanut butter, chips, sodas, candied, etc. etc. I remember seeing a vending machine for the first time, and thinking, ‘wow, this is just for snacks???’ So yeah, I do snack a lot more now. I know it’s horrible, but it’s difficult not to. They taste good, even though they are so high in calories and all. Sometimes, and I can say this for a lot of other Indians, they’re not only a novelty, but also one way you can fill your stomachs. In India, eating street foods cannot be considered as having a meal. After all, it’s snacking. But here it’s different. We often have to rely on vending machine snacks for a meal. And it’s so cheap, and so easily available. I also drink a lot of soda. A can of coke in India costs so much. It’s 50c here! I try to avoid snacking…….”

Snacking on items such as cookies, candy, chips, sodas, etc. was popular amongst most participants who were interviewed in this study. The easy availability, and the low cost of snack items were listed as some of the main reasons for the increase in snacking or ‘munching’. Upon immigration to the United States, time constraints did not allow most participants to prepare, buy, and eat Indian meals during a hectic work or school schedule. Often times then, they found
themselves replacing actual meals with snacks obtained from vending machines. However, American snacks were still perceived exclusively as snack-type foods, and not as actual meals.

A clear distinction was also made between the Indian “junk foods” (street foods) and the American “junk” foods. American snack foods were considered as “junk” foods with little or nutritive value, high in fat and calories, and a major cause of weight gain. While Indian street foods also symbolized ‘snacking’ or ‘munching’, they were still considered as healthier alternatives to ‘snacking’ or ‘munching’ in America. They were described as being lower in fat, and therefore, not major contributors to weight gain. Indian street foods typically consist of a mix of raw fruits, vegetables, cooked lentils, and spices.

**Sub theme D: “I eat out a lot more than I used to back home; out of compulsion mostly”.**

Many participants reported eating out in restaurants more often, and more frequently, than in India. While most participants omitted breakfast, and ate dinner at home on most days, lunch was the meal that was eaten out almost everyday of the week. The types of restaurants frequented were fast food places as well as fancy restaurants. These were usually the ones located in downtown State College such as The Corner Room, Golden Wok, Taco Bell, Wendy’s, India Pavilion, Subway’s, etc. Most participants however, described eating out for lunch as a necessity or a compulsion. Consider the quote below:

“I eat out a lot more at restaurants. It’s not that I really prefer it that way. But it has become necessary now. I don’t have the time to go home and cook an Indian meal. I do pack some Indian leftovers from the night before, but such occasions are rare. It’s just much easier to step out and eat a Subway sandwich or a taco from Taco Bell. It’s basically a matter of convenience for me, and most of my Indian friends. I don’t have an alternative. I would like to eat home-cooked Indian food for lunch like back home. I wish I could. But I can’t always eat that rich, greasy food served at the Indian restaurants here. It’s not a home-cooked meal, you know. At home we don’t add so much heavy cream and ghee in all our curries. So anyway, I feel that a sandwich or pasta is a healthier alternative
to the Indian restaurant food. Excluding French fries and burgers of course! It still doesn’t come close to the feeling of a home-cooked meal.”.

The participants did not appear to be particularly enthusiastic about eating outside of their homes. While eating at a restaurant was considered a luxury in India, and eating at a street food joint had symbolized fun and festivity, eating out in America had become a ‘compulsion’ or a ‘necessity’. It also meant ‘convenience’ and an easier alternative to preparing their own meals. An Indian meal at the Indian restaurants in downtown State College was viewed as being high in fat, and therefore not very conducive to good health. A healthy Indian meal was one that was cooked at home, and lacking an excess of cream and butter.

Despite expressing dissatisfaction at having to eat out so often in America, the American restaurants, and other eating establishments in State College appeared to represent a wide variety of foods to choose from – a ‘luxury’ that was not available in India. Some foods such as Subway sandwiches, fresh salads, and pastas were considered as healthier options than hamburgers and French fries. However, these too, did not compare to the feeling of eating a ‘home-cooked Indian meal’ which was paramount in their perceptions of goodness, and health.

**Category II: Brahmin-Related Rules, Values, and Beliefs**

The themes and sub-themes that made up this category revealed the Brahmin-related concepts, rules, values, and beliefs that the participants had about their traditional foods and eating behavior, and how these in turn affected their food choices both before and after immigration to State College. A list of these can be found in Tables 4 and 5.

**Theme 3: Being a Brahmin in India**

**Sub theme A: “A Brahmin is one who follows Brahmin specific rules regarding eating…..”**
It was interesting to note that while most of the younger graduate students in this study described their meals in India as being traditionally Brahmin, and identified themselves as being Hindu Brahmins by birth, they did not view themselves as traditional Hindu Brahmins. They attributed their Hindu Brahmin way of eating in India to the fact that they had been living with their parents, and had had no choice but to follow the norms established by them. Consider the following quotes:

“I never really considered myself as a Hindu Brahmin. I just didn’t believe any of those things. But my parents and grandparents believed in all that. They never ate any meat or beef, and nor did they drink any alcohol. They were pure vegetarians. I eat the way I do not because I think of what a Brahmin is supposed to, and not supposed to eat. I eat certain things, or don’t eat certain things because that’s how it was back home. And when you are raised a certain way, it becomes natural, or a habit”.

A few students who were interviewed also admitted to breaking the Brahmin-related rules while they were in India. They talked about eating meat frequently while out with their friends. This was perceived as a way of asserting their independence, and expressing their lack of beliefs in traditional Brahmin rules.

“Like I said, I don’t really believe in the caste system. I ate whatever I felt like eating. I couldn’t eat meat, or drink alcohol at home because my parents were such staunch believers in all this stuff. If my parents knew that I not only ate meat, but also drank alcohol, I think they would disown me! I didn’t really care for a lot of those rules. When I was out with my friends, we all had a good time eating and drinking whatever we wanted to”.

Some of these younger students also admitted to the fact that even though their parents and grandparents were staunch vegetarians themselves, they would make an occasional exception of cooking eggs, and other meats for their children. They explained that this was their grandparents’ or parents’ way of showing their love and devotion to their children. These foods, however, were always required to be consumed or prepared outside of their homes.
“I remember when I would visit my grandmother in a village in Calcutta. She was very staunch about avoiding non-vegetarian foods. But the interesting thing was when we grandkids were around, she would go to the length of cooking meat or eggs just for us – sometimes herself, or sometimes she would request the cook to do so. But never was this done inside the house – always in a little, isolated cooking place in the backyard – a little cooking shed of sorts outside the house”.

“I did eat meat, and my parents tried not to talk about it. It wasn’t that they were not aware. They didn’t mind it as long as I didn’t consume any of it, or cooked at home. I could eat what I liked at a restaurant”.

All of the older participants however, described themselves as having lived the ‘Hindu Brahmin way of life’ in India. As Ashok, a 70 year-old retired professor put it:

“I did all the things that a Brahmin was supposed to do. My family back home followed a Brahmin lifestyle growing up. We ate the way Brahmins were supposed to. And I thought I did them because I believed in the caste system, and its rules. Don’t get me wrong – I don’t believe that the untouchables should be mistreated or anything like that. I do believe that Brahmins had specific rules in life so that they could carry out their duties effectively. I believe that as a Hindu Brahmin, I am supposed to be a certain way. So yes, I would say I was, and am a Brahmin”.

Therefore, living a ‘Brahmin way of life’ was one that included abiding by the rules. The exclusion of eggs, meat and meat products, or in other words, “vegetarianism” was described to be the foremost Brahmin rule. Killing an animal or any form of life for food was perceived as “indulging in violence”. Ahimsa was a term that was familiar to all the participants. They described ‘ahimsa’ as a philosophy, or a practice of “committing no violence towards anything living”.

“Why kill an animal? Why take away life from something? I mean aren’t there other foods to eat? Don’t animals have the right to live too? We do not have the right to take away life when we don’t give it”

The exceptions to this rule were the Brahmins from the eastern, and western parts of India, and parts of south India such as Kerala. These Brahmins did not consider fish to be a non-
vegetarian food. They did not perceive the act of killing and eating fish as a violent act or as breaking the rule of ahimsa. They described eating fish as a practice that arose out of the need to survive in the drought and famine ridden areas of Bengal, and as a major source of protein.

“Fish is a necessity for people belonging to Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and Kerala. We are Brahmins in that we don’t kill to eat. But at one time, we (Bengali Brahmins) had to rely on fish to even live. And fish was the only source of protein for many. And this has now become a part of our (Bengali) subculture. It is a ‘vegetable of the sea’. So I think we are still Brahmins. After all, we don’t eat beef. And even chicken which some of us consume occasionally, as a result of modernization, is not eaten during religious ceremonies”.

The practice of not eating beef was considered more of a general ‘Hindu’ rule, rather than as exclusively, a Hindu Brahmin rule among the participants in this study. Even participants such as the meat eating Brahmins from Bengal and Kerala, and some of those who described themselves as non-practicing Hindu Brahmins talked about why they did not, and would not eat beef.

“How can you eat beef? Look at it, it looks so innocent. And we take so much from our cows. Think about it. Milk, ghee, panner. We drink cow’s milk everyday. Ghee is a medium of cooking. We wouldn’t have our traditional cuisine if it wasn’t for cow’s milk! If you go to any temple in India, you will notice a statue of Nandi (a cow that was a vehicle for God) at the entrance. We put garlands around it’s neck, kumkumam, and chandanam on it’s forehead. We worship it. How can you then eat it?”

A cow not only symbolized sacredness and as an object of worship, it was also regarded by some as a pet that needed to be taken care of. Also, since cow’s milk and milk products played an important role in their day to day cuisine, the cow was perceived as a generous animal.

When asked about what they thought to be traditional Hindu Brahmin rules regarding foods to be eaten and not, all the participants were able to classify these even though the younger generation were not all familiar with traditional terms such as satwik, tamasik, rajasik, etc. There were some who initially claimed to not even knowing what these rules were. However, upon
further probing and questioning, they were able to talk about what they thought differentiated the Brahmins from the non-Brahmins as far as eating habits were concerned.

“I think the reason why we have food taboos is because of the way they were classified. For example, as priests and teachers we are supposed to dedicate our lives to God and learning. And foods such as meat, onions, garlic, and alcohol arouse aggression, and passion. People belonging to the warrior sub caste (the kshatriyas) frequently consume such foods so that they can be aggressive, and passionate rulers. And then we have some foods that are calming or soothing. Such as fruits, vegetables, milk, honey. These are non-aggressive foods, which is the kind of diet that is for Brahmins. And then there are neutral foods, not too aggressive, as well as not too unreactive. I’m not sure what these are, but I know that they exist, and are a part of our diet. Maybe these were foods appropriate for the traders and merchants sub caste (the vaishyas)”.

Foods such as onions, garlic, and mushrooms were also included in the ‘non-vegetarian’ category. Some participants explained that this was due to the fact that they grew underground, employed the use of microorganisms for their growth, and therefore symbolized ‘Himsa’ or killing of living entities. Others reported avoiding these foods due to their ‘meat-like’ appearance, smell, or taste. And then there were some who described the symbolic associations of these foods with meats. Consider the following quotes:

“We never used onions, and garlic in our cooking. It was a strict no-no. I know that my parents and grandparents hated the smell. They thought it smelt of meat! And because of this, we were forbidden to use these in our cooking. Cooking such foods meant impurity as it was with meat. And so it was not meant to be for a Brahmin. It was unfit for Brahmins to eat”.

“I have never liked mushrooms. When I tasted some once, I felt like I was chewing on what meat would taste like – all rubbery and leathery”.

“I was told by my grandfather that the reason we Brahmins traditionally avoid onions, garlic, mushrooms, and even some varieties of potatoes is because they grow underground. Anything that grows underground requires the help of some microorganisms. And in a way, that is contradicting the doctrine of Ahimsa. One living organism is being sacrificed to give birth to a food”.
Foods were described as belonging to different categories depending on their emotion-inducing properties. Some participants also described foods as being classified according to the principles of the ancient Indian medicine, Ayurveda. These principles were believed to be ‘prescriptions for eating’ for Hindu Brahmins. For example, consider the quotes by Anandi, and lathika, one, a graduate student, and the other, a part-time computer programmer:

“My grandmother used to say a lot of things about not eating or even touching certain foods during menses, etc. That some foods were ‘hot’, and some were ‘cold’, etc. At the time, it all made no sense to me. But over time I have realized that all of them have some scientific basis. For example if you read a book on ayurveda, it will tell you that during menses, the inner core temperature of a woman’s body is higher than normal – it is at Pitta state. At such times, she is advised to eat cold foods. And then also at times such as when she is nursing, she should eat a lot of cold foods because the production of milk is sending her body into a higher inner body temperature gear”.

Foods were described as being ‘hot’ or ‘cold’, and were therefore meant to be eaten during certain seasons and lifecycle stages.

**Sub theme B: “A Brahmin is not only someone who eats or avoids certain foods but also someone who follows other Brahmin-specific rules”**.

All the participants talked about Brahmin specific rules and rituals that pertained to other aspects of food-related behavior such as the characteristics of the primary food provider, food handling practices, food preparation, cooking and storage techniques, personal hygiene, and meal-time etiquette. The female members in their families were described as being the main cooks in their house. Menstruating women were not allowed to cook, and were perceived as being able to ‘pollute’ the food. Even though the younger generation claimed the practice to be a redundant one, they did not deny the possibility that there was a scientific rationale to it. Consider the examples of quotes below that illustrate the above perceptions:
“My mom always cooked for us back home. And so did my aunts, and grandmas. It was just their role, no matter how many visitors we had. And that’s how it is amongst Brahmins. Since my mom was the only female in the house she never took a break from it. Not even when she had a period. She just couldn’t afford to do that. She wanted to, but she finally reconciled to it. When I was little, she would say it was because her body was in impure state for 3 days. And then on the fourth day of her period, she could finally enter the kitchen. And that too, only after washing herself from head to toe – to completely remove all the impurities, I guess”.

Such practices pertaining to menstruation also resulted in specific food handling practices in some households in India. Consider the quote by Anandi:

“My grandma used to keep telling us that we especially couldn’t touch foods such as milk, yogurt when we had a period. I never really understood why. Now I realize that there actually might be a scientific basis to this. During our period, our body temperatures are higher than normal. And so if we touched foods that could spoil easily, we are only contributing to microbial growth by transferring heat. Atleast this is what I think it is”.

Not entering the kitchen area during menses implied that the kitchen was regarded as more than just a room for cooking. It was also perceived as a sanctum for offering food to god before consuming it. Pictures and idols of god were described as being commonly placed on a shelf in the kitchen for this purpose. Taking a shower, including washing their hair on the fourth day of the period symbolized the women ridding themselves of all the excess body heat, and any growing microorganisms.

Another Brahmin rule pertaining to the characteristics of the food preparer included that of the cook belonging exclusively to the Brahmin sub caste.

“When we had religious ceremonies then we hired cooks. But even then, it was important that we had Brahmin cooks. My grandparents used to say that Brahmin cooks would know how to cook the food the way we Brahmins like it. I think the real reason however was and is, because of issues of purity. No other caste was considered as pure as the Brahmins. Brahmins were the highest caste in the society. So Brahmins could not eat a meal cooked by a lower caste. Especially since the lower caste ate meat, and meat was
considered impure, and dirty by the Brahmins. I know that’s how my grandparents and my parents felt too”.

All the participants talked about the importance of having a Brahmin cook in their family back home. Having a Brahmin cook meant having vegetarian meals that were quintessentially Brahmin in quality. Non-Brahmins were also regarded as belonging to a lower caste. This implied that they did not share the same concepts and rules regarding food. It was an accepted fact that non-Brahmins ate meat frequently. To a Brahmin, meat symbolized impurity, and contamination. Therefore, having a meat-eating non-Brahmin cook their vegetarian meals meant eating contaminated foods.

Maintaining personal hygiene during food-related activities was also described as a Brahmin specific rule by all the participants. For example:

“I remember my mom never started cooking without bathing first thing in the morning. After that her next step would be to pray to the god of fire, and the god of obstacles. She would then clean the stove top, and the entire kitchen area. During the entire cooking process, she never tasted the food to check if the seasonings were right or not. She would not even allow us to sample anything until it was first offered as a prasad to God. And once she was done with her cooking, she would place a small portion of the cooked food in front of God, and chant a prayer thanking God for providing us with food. I guess you can call that as ‘saying Grace’ as they do here”.

All food-related activities such as cooking, preparing, and eating food were regarded as sacred or holy acts. Bathing or showering before entering the kitchen, and cleaning the kitchen before cooking or eating was perceived as an act of ensuring that the food was devoid of any impurities. Tasting a food before offering it to god as a prayer meant showing disrespect, and disregard to the one who made the existence of that food possible in the first place. It was perceived as an act of selfishness.
Rules regarding cooking and storage practices were also discussed by many of the participants. Cooking fresh food for every meal of the day was a practice that was told by many of the older participants.

“We never ate leftovers. My mother always made fresh meals, three or four times a day. In those days we didn’t have a refrigerator. So my mother would always insist that the food had gone bad. I know that a meal cooked a few hours before couldn’t have gone bad, but that was the rule – to not eat any leftovers at all”.

“I remember eating meals that were always fresh. No leftovers from the night before. Not even from the same day. It was like that at all my relatives’ and grandparents’ house. Brahmins never ate leftovers traditionally. Being in the highest class of the society, it was not usual to eat leftovers. Other castes did it. And this practice had become the norm in my family too”.

Eating leftovers was not considered a healthy practice. Leftover food from a previous meal was perceived as being gone ‘bad’ or stale. Also, for a Brahmin to eat leftovers was looked at as a demeaning act. Such an act was acceptable for the lower castes but not for Brahmins who were regarded as belonging to the highest caste in the society. Belonging to a higher caste meant enjoying privileges of eating fresh meals for every meal of the day – something that was not enjoyed by the lower castes. The participants explained that they themselves were not necessarily in agreement with this rule even though their families back home were. They reasoned that this practice probably arose out of a lack of appropriate storage facilities. The warm climates, and lack of refrigeration may well have actually resulted in the food spoiling more quickly than otherwise. However, they did accede to the fact that a meal cooked a few hours earlier could not possibly have spoiled as quickly as their mothers or grandparents claimed, and that this practice was the result of a specific rule for Brahmins.
There were also specific rules regarding meal-time etiquette as well. For example, consider the following quotes:

“My mother and grandmother were so orthodox, and particular about rules regarding how we were supposed to eat. First of all, the area where we are all to eat had to be thoroughly cleaned with water. The same was done after we had eaten. We had to then wash our hands, feet, and face before sitting down to eat. We could never eat off of each other’s plates. Nor could we pick a food from the main pot. My grandma would yell at us and say that we had contaminated the food. That our salivas had ‘polluted’ the other’s food, or the entire meal if we happened to touch any of the main pots with our hands’.

All the participants commonly mentioned the concepts of ‘contamination’ and ‘pollution’ while describing rules pertaining to meal-time etiquette, just as they did while for menstruation, cooking and storage practices. However, in this case, these terms were not limited to microorganisms and germs. Instead, they implied contamination and pollution through the transfer of saliva between people, and between people and foods. Although eventually, the transfer of saliva meant the transfer of germs and microorganisms. Washing the area where food is served both before and after a meal, and washing one’s hands, feet, and face meant ridding the area and oneself of all impurities or germs. The hands, and plate of a person were regarded as potential mediums for the transfer of germs from the saliva of that person. Therefore, the pots containing the foods, and people’s plates and glasses were not allowed to come into contact with one another. By having a person who was not eating at the time serve food to the rest of the family members, and by having the server dip her fingers in a bowl of water between touching different pots of food meant avoiding salivary contamination.

Another rule mentioned was that of scattering some droplets of water around the thali or plate before any food is served on to the plate. This symbolized preventing the access of ants and other insects from reaching the plate and contaminating it. Keeping fermented foods such as
yogurt and pickles away from other foods also meant avoiding the transfer of microorganisms from these foods to other foods. Being ‘orthodox’ meant obeying or following all the above rules. These rules helped to acknowledge the perception that food was a priceless gift of love from nature, and a symbol of the infinite grace of gods and goddesses. Therefore, polluting or contaminating this gift from God meant showing disrespect.

All the participants talked about eating with their hands while in India. While using one’s hands at home was considered the norm, it was not always the case when eating out in restaurants.

“We could not even use our left hand while eating. My father always had contempt for people who did that. Especially he would comment on the north Indians and how they used their left hands to tear the roti. He thought it was dirty to use the hand that was used for bathroom purposes, and then use the same hand for food. I think so too. We were taught when we were kids to tear the roti with our right hand. It’s kind of unique. You hold one end of the roti with your thumb, and use your other fingers to tear off a piece – all with the fingers of the same hand”.

This was not only contingent on the consistency of the food itself that was served at the restaurants, but also on the ‘size’ of the restaurant. It was believed that at more expensive restaurants, eating with hands might be looked down upon, and that eating with westernized table manners deserved more respect. The comparison to ‘a bunch of villagers’ meant behaving like those who lacked any social etiquettes, and most importantly, making an impression of being old fashioned, and crude.

The practice of eating with their hands at home, and occasionally in restaurants (the not-so-expensive ones) was justified by explaining that the consistency of some cuisines or foods required one to use their hands. For example, south Indian cuisine due to its more liquid consistency was considered to be more suitable to eating with hands, than a fork. The rationale
was that the soup-like food could be scooped better with the fingers and the palm, than with a fork, which would only result in the food slipping through it. North Indian cuisine on the other hand was described as being more suitable to eating with a fork due to its thicker, gravy-like consistency. When the participants were asked about using a spoon instead of a fork, and told how the spoon might be better equipped than a fork to eat even the most liquid-like foods, they responded that although that was true, one of the reasons why they preferred eating with their hands lay in their cultural upbringing. That “it was the traditional way. That’s how Brahmins have always eaten. Non-Brahmins eat with forks and spoons”. This implied that eating with hands was not a matter of convenience for these participants. It was a matter of practicing age-old established Brahmin traditions and rules. It was interesting to note that this notion persisted amongst even those Hindu Brahmins who had been raised in the northern parts of India. Although these Brahmins had adapted some of the food habits of north India (Sub theme A), some other rules and rituals had not changed. Their perceptions and understanding of these rituals had not altered either.

Some of the older participants also talked about the rule of using the right versus the left hand for eating and drinking in a Brahmin household.

“We never ate with our left hand. It was considered dirty. My father always teased our north Indians friends about it – that they ate with the same hand they used to clean all their dirt”.

The right hand was perceived as being a ‘pure’ hand – the hand that engaged in sacred activities such as lighting a lamp before God, cooking, eating, and drinking. Since these activities were seen as being associated with god and therefore symbolized purity, the contact of these with any form of perceived impurity was forbidden. For example, the left hand was to be solely used for
ablution purposes such as cleaning, washing, and bathing. Since these activities were associated with ridding oneself of bodily germs, the hand was also considered to be impure. Using one’s left hand for eating was not ‘Brahmin in nature’.

Sub theme C: “As a Brahmin, religious ceremonies are a way of life”.

All the participants talked about the importance of religious ceremonies and festivals while growing up in India. These were perceived as a time to celebrate, worship, and eat. For examples:

“During festivals and religious ceremonies such as pujas, diwali, and pongal, we would have these huge feasts. All us relatives would gather in one place. My parents and all my aunts and uncles would pitch in and hire professional Brahmin cooks for these occasions. We would all sit on the floor as usual, but we wouldn’t eat off a plate. It would be on a banana leaf. We all had to clean the leaf first with a few drops of water. And then food was served. The meals were always 3 or 4 course meals. Chutneys, pickles, curries, rice, sambar, rasam. All the curries, chutneys, and pickles would be on one side. And you would eat rice on the other side. I think this practice is unique to south Indians”.

Elaborate 3 or 4 course meals and feasts symbolized celebration, and the expression of gratitude to god for providing them with the gift of abundant food, and nourishment. During these times, certain foods such as eggs, meat, and meat products were avoided. The exceptions to this rule were the Brahmins from Bengal who considered fish to be a vegetarian food, and therefore included it in their festival menus. The notion of avoiding eggs, meat, and meat products in particular stems from the belief that such foods are ‘impure’, and therefore their presence in the feast arenas may contaminate an area where god’s presence and blessings were sought.

Meal-time etiquette practices during fasts, and religious ceremonies were also described as to be different from the routine. Instead of plastic or metal plates, meals were required to be served and eaten off of freshly cleaned banana leaves. Using leaves as plates to eat from
symbolized the fact that all forms of fruits and vegetables were a gift from god to provide nourishment to the mind and body. It was also used as a way of expressing to god that the Brahmin community was living in harmony with all that was living.

Many participants also talked about the observing of fasts by the women in their families. These were perceived as offering their gratitude to god, and were done for having a certain wish granted. Since food was considered a gift from god, not eating it was perceived as a way of expressing to god that one was willing to forego this gift and prove that they were genuine in their request to get a wish granted. This role of requesting a wish to be granted was considered to be that of a woman’s. Cooking for her family, and observing fasts to request god to shower his blessings on them officiated the role of a woman as the caretaker of the family.

“We observed a lot of fasts growing up. Especially my mother. She would fast whenever it was an auspicious day. During these fasts that lasted from one day to a week, she would only drink milk, and eat fruits. The idea was that you could not eat a meal”.

Theme 4: Being a Brahmin in America

Sub theme A: “I really don’t eat like a Brahmin here…although I feel like one”.

Some participants who had been following the Brahmin rules back home in India out of their own belief and conviction in these rules, found themselves facing a huge challenge after coming to State College. They not only found themselves struggling to eat an Indian meal 3 times a day, but also found themselves struggling to remain vegetarians in a country where meat and meat products were an important part of the cuisine.

“I am having a hard time trying to eat the way I did back home. I have realized that being a Brahmin in this country is very hard. I think it is easier for those who were used to eating meat. I just don’t find the same varieties of vegetables anymore. So making an avial or koothu without the traditional vegetables is a challenge. And eating out in a
restaurant is a challenge too. The vegetarian choices are too little. And on top of that their idea of serving a vegetarian dish is to take out the meat pieces from a dish, and calling it a vegetarian dish. And as a Brahmin, I find that hard to accept. Just because the meat pieces are actually taken out of the dish does not mean that I have not committed a sinful act. After all, an animal has still been killed to fill my stomach”.

A satvic menu was perceived as one that consisted of no eggs, meat, or meat products, no beef, and abundant in rice, and plenty of vegetables and fruits. Many considered maintaining this rule in America, of eating a satvic menu for all meals a big problem. The biggest concern expressed was that foods that were labeled as ‘vegetarian’ were not entirely meatless. The presence of meat extracts in sauces and gravies, the cooking of meat and vegetarian dishes together in restaurants and fast food places, and the practice of removing the meat pieces and serving it as a vegetarian dish in some restaurants caused a great deal of agony to some. The concept of ahimsa continued to be a driving force in that killing an animal or any form of life for its use in food was considered as going against the Brahmin rules, or committing an act that was against the will of god.

The participants also felt that the traditional vegetables and fruits that made up a Brahmin meal were not all available in this country. Consequently, they had to resort to eating those that were available. These meals however, without the traditional vegetables, fruits, and other ingredients were not regarded as nearly close to a typical Brahmin satvic meal, as they were, Indian.

For some other participants, the concepts of being a Brahmin in their food habits had taken on new meanings depending on constraints such as time, availability of Indian foods, etc. For example, some of them had taken to occasionally including eggs in their diet.

“I now eat eggs once in a great while. I would never have thought of it. I don’t get much protein otherwise. A major source of protein in the diet back home was from the lentils we ate. But here, I am only able to eat one Indian meal a day – for dinner. And that too, I don’t always have the time to pre-soak the dal or beans. If I have lived in New York,
New Jersey, or Philadelphia, things would have been different. You get ready-to-eat everything – dal, rajma, kadhi. Here, considering that the small Indian grocery store here is not as well equipped than some of those stores in big cities, it is just easier for me to make a curry out of a bag of frozen vegetables, and cook some rice. In that case, I have had no protein at all. So I realized that I needed to change that. And really, come to think of it, I am not really killing the animal – I am just eating something it provides – just like milk. I mean in the technical sense, an egg is still a life, but I am not killing an animal. And that’s what makes one a Brahmin – not killing an animal for food”

The justification that consuming eggs did not involve killing the animals that had produced them had altered their perception of the Brahmin rule of ahimsa. Ahimsa to them no longer meant ‘non-violence to all things living’. It had taken on a new meaning: ‘non-violence to an animal’. Although they acknowledged that fact that an egg was a form of life, consuming it was justified because it did not involve killing an animal. An egg had now become a food that was obtained from an animal without necessarily killing it. Also for these participants, these changes meant adapting successfully to an environment where traditional sources of nutrients were not available. They explained that had they been living in some of the bigger, more ethnically diverse cities of America, such ‘drastic’ and ‘substantial’ changes might have been unnecessary. A small town American setting such as State College, Pennsylvania was perceived as being less conducive to a Hindu Brahmin way of life.

The participants in this study were divided in their practice of consuming beef upon their arrival to the United States. Consider the quotes below:

“Like I said before I don’t believe in Brahmin rules and all that. I ate everything back home – when I went out, that is. And I do so now. I didn’t eat any beef at home. But that was because it was not available even in restaurants. You had to go to a special restaurant to get it. Otherwise I would have eaten that too. So I didn’t have any problems when I came here. I don’t believe in the whole sacred cow thing. For me, it’s just another meat – a source of protein”

“I ate chicken and everything back home. But never beef. And after coming here I continue to eat meat. But I still can’t get myself to eat beef. I’m not sure if it’s a
psychological thing. Maybe because that’s the way I have been raised. I still can’t get myself to eat it. It’s just a taboo….and I guess on some level, despite not believing in all this caste system and its rules, I still see a cow as being associated with god”

Outside of their homes, both these participants had eaten meat, and claimed that they did not believe in Brahmin-related rules, and that they had been forced to adopt these rules while living with their parents. There was however a crucial difference between the two. While one participant did not consume any beef at home due to availability issues, and had started consuming it in America, the other participant consumed all other meat except beef both at home and in America. For this second participant, despite her claim that she did not believe in following the Brahmin rules, she perceived the cow as a sacred animal just like a traditional Hindu Brahmin did. She did not believe in the concept of ahimsa, but she continued to regard the cow as an animal to be worshipped, and continued to exclude beef in her diet.

Sub theme B: “I do not eat like a Brahmin here even though I did back home….but I never felt like I was, or am a Hindu Brahmin in the first place”.

For many of the participants belonging to the younger generation, and for a few older participants who had been forced to follow the Brahmin rules of eating and drinking due to the fact that they had been living with their orthodox parents or grandparents, the transition from a vegetarian diet to that of a more westernized diet that included meat was an easy one. The biggest challenge however for these people was that of eating an Indian meal at meal times.

“I used to eat the way Brahmmins do before I came here. But when I first came here, there were no Indian restaurants here. And nor was there any Indian grocery store. So I basically had to eat what my American colleagues were eating – American food. I then started eating everything. Burgers, sandwiches, you name it. I had to. Otherwise, I would have starved to death. And in those days vegetarianism in this country was not as big as it is now. It was hard to even get a vegetable sandwich. I could not sit and think about being
Brahmin rules. I had to survive! So I think for me it was a question of getting by rather than a question of values and beliefs”.

Eating a non-Brahmin diet consisting of meats and pasta did not appear to be a problem for these Hindu Brahmin participants. They admitted to not believing in the caste system, and its many rules. This had been the case even when they were living in India. This was due to the simple fact that being a Brahmin for them had solely depended on observing the rules. Even back home in India, these rules had not been a part of their personal values and belief system. However, eating an Indian meal was perceived as a bigger challenge. The ‘craving’ or the desire to eat an Indian meal was described as being a natural part of their cultural upbringing as an Indian. Constraints such as lack of time, availability of ready-to-eat Indian foods, and the easier availability of American-type convenience and fast foods among some others that are discussed later in this section, were listed as reasons for the changes in their diet from an Indian one to one that was very ‘American’. An ‘American’ diet was perceived as one that included foods that were not only meat and potatoes, but also foods of different ethnicities such as Chinese, Mexican, Italian, etc. This concept will also be highlighted under a separate theme.

**Sub theme C: “Its not possible to follow all the Brahmin-related rules that I was raised to follow”**

Some female participants in the study who were working wives or mothers talked about the fact that although some rules pertaining to the personal characteristics of the cook, cooking, and storage practices had been feasible in an Indian setting, they were not so in an American setting. For example:
“I really cannot follow the rules we used to follow back home. For me now, over the years, even though I know that most of these rules have a scientific basis, they just do not seem practical anymore. For example, my mom used to make fresh all three meals a day. We never ate leftovers. Eating leftovers was considered unhygienic, unhealthy, and more importantly, beneath the Brahmin class. These may have been accurate back home. But who cares here if we are the highest class in the society or not? Moreover, eating leftovers that have been refrigerated immediately afterwards solve the problems of hygiene, and spoilage. I work here while my mom back home was a housewife. Her only role in life was to cook and clean. That was the Brahmin way. But that rule doesn’t apply anymore. In this society, everyone works to make a living – man or a woman. And since we are here, we have to adapt. I have a lot many roles. I not only have to cook and clean, but I also have to contribute to making a living. I just do not have the time to make 3 meals a day, let alone Indian meals”.

As working-class Indian women in a classless American society, these women felt that the ancient Brahmin rule of women as ‘exclusive homemakers’, and men as the ‘providers’ was not only redundant, but was also “not practical anymore”. A better standard of living in a foreign land meant an equal effort on their part to contributing to the family’s pool of income. This also meant that traditional Brahmin chores such as cooking three or four fresh meals a day would have to take a backseat in a time-constrained daily American way of life.

Those women who were interviewed, and were homemakers in this country had a different perspective however. For example, consider the following quotes by Shalini, 28, a housewife, and a mother of two young sons, and Kasturi, 35, a housewife, and a mother of two grown-up children who no longer live at home:

“Since I am home, I cook a lot. I make breakfast for all of us – dosai, idli, upma, etc. My husband and sons usually take some rice and yogurt for packed lunch. I make some tiffin when my kids come back from school, and then some dinner too. There really is no need for me to eat leftovers. We are Brahmins, and I have been raised to not eat leftovers. I lead a similar life to my sister, and my mom who are both housewives back home. However, I have realized that I don’t spend as much time in the kitchen as they do back home. Things here are fast and easy to make. You get frozen everything. Its easy to even cook an Indian meal here. If I worked, then of course, things would be different. I might have had to resort to eating out and eating leftovers, etc. I don’t think I would be able to maintain a Brahmin lifestyle even if I wanted to”.
“I do cook all the meals at home. We rarely eat out. It’s not that big of a deal, to cook here. Unlike my mom and grandmother who sweat the whole day in the kitchen, I do not have to. We still don’t eat leftovers but all you have to do is open some cans or bags of vegetables, make some instant rice, cook some sambhar in a crock pot and you’re done! Of course, I have friends who work and eat leftovers all the time. And they are Brahmins too. But I understand. It’s hard to practice your traditions when you have to work. But that doesn’t mean I would have completely abandoned the tradition either. It would still matter to me.”

For these women, the Brahmin traditions of taking on the exclusive role of cooks, cooking three or four full meals a day, and not eating leftovers were all still an integral part of their belief system. However, practicing these traditions depended on the situation they were in – being required to work or not.

Many participants also admitted to eating leftovers after coming to America, which had been considered an unhygienic practice in their homes while in India. Eating leftover food not only saved time for these often time-pressed working women, but was once again, considered redundant in a modern, technologically advanced, casteless American society where refrigeration and freezing was not a problem. Other examples that illustrated the above point of view included the reported free mingling, and the frequent occurrences of food-related activities such as cooking, and eating between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Although such activities would have been considered inappropriate in India, being in “classless America” meant that the entire Indian community was “after all one giant minority group in a foreign land”. In other words, it was important for them to maintain community solidarity in a country where they were not treated a certain way because of their caste but because of their nationality. They further explained that the international laws in America that pertained to Asian Indian immigrants were the same for all Indians, regardless of whether one was a Brahmin or not. As a minority group in
America, the need to adapt successfully in a non-Indian society was present in all Indians, Brahmins and non-Brahmins.

It was interesting to note that the abandonment of a certain Brahmin traditional behavior owing to its “impractical nature” did not always mean that the concept of the tradition was no longer an integral part of these women’s Brahmin belief system. For instance, all the women admitted that upon immigration, they ceased to practice the ancient rule of refraining from doing food-related household chores such as cooking during their menstrual cycles. They thought it was an impractical one to follow in America, pointing to the fact that unlike the extended family system, and the presence of more than one woman-caretaker in their homes in India, in the U.S they were the only ones their children and other family members could depend on for food. Therefore, it was far more important for them to fulfill this role than to continue practicing the traditional Brahmin rule they were used to. However, they reported continuing to believe in the concept that owing to a menstruating woman’s higher core body temperature, she could potentially “contaminate” the food supply she came in contact with, with “disease-causing microorganisms”.

Category III: Perceptions Towards Indian and American Foods

The themes and sub-themes that made up this category revealed the participants’ perceptions towards the traditional, and the American foods. Many of these perceptions were influenced by generational and gender issues. A list of these can be found in Table 6.

Theme 5: Perceptions Towards Indian Foods

Sub-theme: “I consider a meal or a food to be Indian when.....”
For all the participants in this study, the concept of what made a meal Indian depended not only on the constitution of the meal itself, but also on the composition of the individual items in the meal. In India, a meal was not considered a meal unless it consisted of rice or roti, two or three side dishes or curries, a dal or sambar, some yogurt, pappadams, and pickles. However, in the United States, time and other constraints had altered this concept so that the presence of even one curry with rice or roti had begun to represent an Indian meal. While it was true that a meal like the one described above had begun to be perceived as being “at least Indian in nature”, it pointed to the fact that other factors were also involved in the participants’ concept of an Indian meal. For example:

“I associate Indian food with spices. I feel that this is unique in this culture. Sure, other cuisines have spices too. But the specific spices, and the combinations in which they are used define the cuisine of India. So spicy food is Indian food to me. A dish does not become Indian just because it has Indian vegetables or lentils. It is original Indian food only when it has the specific combination of Indian spices”.

The presence of Indian ingredients and spices such as cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, cayenne, coriander, cumin, and ginger also played an important role in differentiating an Indian meal from a non-Indian meal. These spices, or the combinations of these spices such as garam masala, curry powder, sambar, and rasam powders were described as being unique to the Indian culture, thereby leading to the perception that Indian cuisine was ‘original’, or one-of-a-kind. Indian foods and meals were also described as being higher in salt content compared to other available cuisines in America. This factor was viewed as being responsible for making the cuisine ‘tastier’:

“We definitely eat saltier foods than Americans or other ethnic groups do. I think our food is actually tastier because of the higher salt content. I remember when I lived with some International students and American students at one time, I used the salt shaker a lot more than they did when it was my turn to cook food. I always made Indian food then”.

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Many participants also talked about the fact that eating Indian foods felt more like eating an actual ‘meal’. Experiencing ‘fullness’ was an important factor in their concept of an Indian meal:

“When I go to the Indian restaurant, or when I eat Indian food at home, I definitely feel fuller. I feel like I have eaten a meal. I don’t feel that way with say, pasta or noodles. Rice and curry or rice and dal or sambar make me feel more satisfied than a sandwich. Rice and curry is definitely more of a meal than a subway sandwich”.

The ‘filling’ aspect of a meal was associated with two things: the pattern of the meal, and the composition of the meal. The fact that rice or roti with a curry or a dal or sambar represented a ‘filling’ Indian meal suggests the following: unless the pattern of a meal was made up of a staple and one or two side entrees, and unless the meal actually consisted of traditional Indian meal items such as rice or roti with vegetable curries or dal, it was not considered a satiating meal. Some participants associated the ‘filling’ aspect of Indian food with its fat and calorie content. For example:

“To me Indian food is also very heavy. If you eat some rice and curry, you’re pretty much done for most of the day. Its heavy because it has a lot of butter and ghee. And I know that some kormas require a lot of heavy cream. So the food is rich. Indian restaurants of course make it greasier”.

The addition of ingredients such as ghee, butter, and heavy cream in some Indian recipes, particularly those native to north India, and the excessive use of these ingredients in Indian restaurants were perceived as being less healthy, and therefore detrimental to weight maintenance, and heart disease. Consider the following quotes:

“I don’t like to eat too often at the Indian restaurants here. I might put on a lot of weight! The dishes are so rich and greasy. They add heavy cream and butter to everything. We don’t do that when we cook at home, do we? At least, not in everyday meal”.

“I think that the food in Indian restaurants can actually make one fat. I have an uncle in Minnesota who ate nothing but the food at the local Indian restaurant. He weighed 145 pounds when he left for America. After about a year, he sent some pictures back home.
He weighed nearly 250 pounds! I mean, it’s a known fact that butter, ghee, and cream are all high in fat, especially saturated fat, right? And now, he has a lot of problems – obesity, heart disease for one…”.

It was interesting to note that a home-cooked meal on the other hand, was considered as not only hygienic, and free from suspect ingredients, but was also described as being ‘light’ and ‘healthy’. Consider the following quote:

“I think an Indian meal that is cooked at home is very different from the food you get at the Indian restaurants. Americans and others seem to think that the food at these restaurants is very typical of Indian cuisine. I have even had some people ask me if the food was authentic. I always tell them “absolutely not!” We don’t add ghee and heavy cream in everything that we make at home. If we ate the way they cooked at these restaurants everyday, we would be obese too”.

Consumption of Indian foods and meals also reflected family unity for some participants, especially for those belonging to the older generation. Through eating Indian food objects they experienced feelings of bonding and conformity with the Indian culture. Consider the quote by Mrinalini, a retired professional:

“Both my husband and I have to have Indian food. We feel like we haven’t eaten otherwise. If I don’t have some rice and curry for a day then I feel like I have not eaten anything…..no matter how good the rest of my food is. I mean even when we go to a party or something, we come back home, and have a small plate of some rice and yogurt, or some rice and sambar. Doing that makes me feel like I am still living in India. When I cook Indian food, I don’t feel so much that I am away from home. I also feel like that is a part of who we are – Indians”.

On the other hand, some participants belonging to the younger generation considered the eating of Indian food all the time at home to be routine and boring. For example, consider the following quote from Vikram (25, graduate student, unmarried) which reflects the notion of breaking the routine and a desire for variety:
“I never ate Indian food all the time back home. I remember going out on the weekends with my friends, and eating some pizza or sandwich or something like that. Sometimes, we would go to the McDonalds that had just opened up, and eat a burger. So even here, there are times when I don’t like to eat an Indian meal every night. I make some pasta, or order in pizza – even when I have the time to cook. But I think it is important to vary what you eat. I think its nice to change.”.

This desire to have variety and break the routine was shared by a few other students who were interviewed in this study. The following quote from Kaushik (student, single, mid-20s) also reveals a certain defiance of tradition:

“When I was back home, it was always curry, curry, and curry, and rice. But now I cannot sit down and say I am going to have something like curries every night. I just can’t. It just does not appeal to me. I have to have a change. Like today I did not have a curry whereas it was there to eat. I had some salad and soup instead. That was my change”.

For some younger as well as older participants, eating American foods in India and immediately upon their arrival to the U.S. also symbolized eating something that was ‘new’ or ‘novel’, ‘different’, ‘modern’, and ‘exciting’. Such an association however, reportedly diminished for them over time. The novelty of eating foods that differed so greatly from the foods they had been used to all their lives wore off as they became more and familiar, and comfortable in their new American way of life. Within a few weeks of their arrival, they found themselves craving for Indian food. The participants further explained that as they stayed on longer, married, and led professional lives, cooking and eating Indian foods not only ‘felt’ more comfortable because it was ‘familiar’, but also symbolized maintaining an Indian way of life in America. For example, consider the following quotes:

“I remember when I was back home, I loved to eat at McDonalds. It was just more novel and exciting than eating curry. And when I first got here, for the first couple of weeks, I ate everything except Indian that was available downtown. I ate Subway sandwiches, Pizza Hut pizzas, salads, chicken wings, pastas, etc. But after a while I found myself just
craving for Indian food. Come to think of it, it was what I had been brought up on. So naturally, I was more familiar and comfortable with eating Indian food for a meal”.

“I ate a lot of American food, and very little Indian food when I first came here. But after only about a week or so, I started cooking Indian food. I craved it. Somehow, the whole excitement of it all wore off. I started to get bored with eating sandwiches and pizza. And now that I have a wife, and kids, I feel that it is necessary for us to cook more Indian food at home. For at least one meal a day. I feel like it helps us to maintain our traditions”.

It was also interesting to note that there were gender differences in the perceptions of Indian cuisine among the participants of this study. While the women admitted to doing most of the cooking at home, and admitted to not being able to cook more Indian meals due to the fact that they worked full time in America, they did not associate any negative qualities with the cooking process itself. Men on the other hand, considered the process of cooking Indian food to be a ‘problematic’ one. The quotes by Vikram (male, student, 28, single), and Aarti (female, student, 24, single) reflect this difference in perceptions:

“I (Vikram) think cooking Indian food takes a lot of time, and energy. It is just a complicated, and problematic process of frying the masalas, cooking the vegetables, etc. I wish I had cooked more at home so that I knew how to cook. My brothers and I would never enter the kitchen. My sisters did. I don’t know why but that’s how things were. Guys weren’t supposed to be interested in knowing how to cook this or that. We did all the other stuff – filing tax returns, going to the bank, etc. which my sisters never did. I’m not even sure what I do when I make an Indian dish. I sure do add all the spices in, but it never is the way it is supposed to be. I think it requires practice and skill”.

“I wish I had the time to cook Indian food more. I just don’t find the time as a full time student. I don’t think Indian food takes a lot of time to cook. It’s just a matter of adding spices, and sautéing the vegetables, and simmering the gravy till it’s done. I used to cook back home too. Now I just don’t have the time to cook – period”.

This difference of opinion between males and the females could be attributed to the traditional role of men and women in Brahmin households. For example, according to the traditional practices described earlier by the participants, it is expected of a woman to be the primary food
preparer or the cook in the family. A Brahmin man on the other hand, is expected to perform his priestly duties of worship, teaching, and learning as head of the household, and as a provider in the family. Despite the fact that many of the younger generation participants had admitted to not believing in Brahmin-related rules, they had acted out their traditional roles without even realizing it. At some point in their lives, the women had learnt how to cook from their mothers, while the men had paid more attention to the financial aspects of the household.

This theme of gender differences was also present among single and married participants. The married couples in this study reported eating Indian foods and meals for as many as 2 meals a day. American type foods were limited to special occasions such as the weekends, or social gatherings. The wives, just like in India, reported being the main or the only cooks in the family. In contrast, many single participants, especially the males, described their food habits and eating patterns in America to be ‘sporadic’, ‘less traditional’, and ‘more westernized’. Eating Indian foods and meals were often limited to eating at the Indian restaurant, or during the weekends for these participants. Among the males, lacking the skill or the know-how to cook Indian meals was perceived to be the main constraint to eating in a more traditional manner. It was interesting to note that while the single, female participants also ate a slightly more westernized diet after coming to America, they listed other factors such as to a lack of time to cook Indian meals, and the decreased availability of Indian foods as their main reasons. Consider the following quotes by a single male, and a single female participant:

“I (Chetan, 22, male, single) don’t eat very traditionally anymore. Not the way I used to back home. My eating habits are very sporadic. Sometimes I don’t even cook anything. I just eat some toast and jelly and go to bed. But the thing is if I knew how to cook, I would have been better off”.

“...”
“I (Malathi, 26, female, single) don’t get the time to cook Indian food anymore. It’s tough. I do manage to cook during the weekends. Sometimes, even when I get home early, I am so exhausted that all I want to do is eat some cereal. And that’s what I do these days”.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that these women had been expected to learn to cook in India had given them an advantage over their male counterparts. Cooking Indian meals and eating in a traditional manner for the single women in this study was more a question of finding the time and resources to cook.

Some women also expressed a sense of guilt and disappointment at not being able to cook more often for their families. This appeared to stem from their perceptions that women were the primary caretakers, and that it was a woman’s responsibility to cook for her family.

Consider the following quotes from women who worked full time, and had children:

“It sucks that I have to do everything here. My mother only had to cook, and so she cooked a lot for us. I on the other hand, not only have to cook, but I also have other stuff to do. I have to go to work. I have deadlines to meet. I wish I could cook more for my kids, but unfortunately I can’t. If I have decided to be a career woman, then I guess I have to compromise”.

“I don’t believe in all those menstruating rules and all that. And I think in today’s modern society we are all equal – men and women. But I do feel that as women, we should be the caregivers for our families. For generations, we have been the cooks while the men have been the providers. So sometimes, I feel like I have to lose this aspect of mine if I decide to bring home some money as well”

It appears from these statements that these women felt compelled to compromise on their duties as a traditional Brahmin wife and mother. Even though they were proud of their achievements as career-minded Brahmin women, they also felt they were failing their duties as wives and mothers.
Theme 6: Perceptions Towards American, and Other Ethnic Foods

Sub-theme: “I think American foods are very different from…..”

All the participants described American foods as being “fast foods” and “convenient foods”. Some generational differences were also observed in the perceptions of these (American and other ethnic foods available in State College). The most widely available mainstream American foods such as sandwiches, pizzas, hamburgers, etc. were perceived as snacks rather than proper meals by the older participants. Mainstream American foods were, in their eyes, “light” “non-filling”, and “full of artificial ingredients”:

“I just don’t feel like I am actually sitting down to have a meal when I make a sandwich or something for dinner. I feel like I am eating a snack if I don’t have an Indian meal. I always feel hungry a couple of hours later. So eventually, I end up making some rice”.

Many also perceived the taste of American foods to be “cheese-like”, and “bland”, and reported to limiting their consumption to occasions such as social gatherings with American colleagues, while traveling on the road, and during out-of-town conferences. An interesting contradiction also emerged during the course of interviews with some participants. For instance, even though American foods appeared to be unappealing in taste and texture, they were reported as being healthier in comparison to traditional foods. This was felt to be particularly true of the North Indian foods that were available in the Indian restaurant in State College. Consider the following quotes:

“I grew up eating Indian food, so of course, I would eat Indian food every day, as I do now. But I think in general, American foods such as sandwiches, chicken soup, salads, etc. are healthier. They don’t have as much butter and cream as Indian foods do. They seem to be more fresh, and light”.

“Indian food can be a problem to cook since it takes so much time. It can also be very oily, and greasy, like in the restaurants. American foods on the other hand, tend to be more ‘raw’, like in their salads. Even the vegetables are not eaten boiled as in Indian
cooking. Boiling and over cooking vegetables leaves them with little nutrition I think. American foods don’t need that much cooking, so tend to be more healthy”.

The younger generation perceived American foods as a way to conform to the mainstream culture. Such consumption practices reflected adventurism on their part and an independence from their family’s rigid Brahmin eating habits back home. Consumption of mainstream American foods in America provided an opportunity to break from the routines of home and Indian culture and eat something different. For example, consider the following quotes from Akash (26, student, single) and Patnaik (28, student, single):

“Ever since I got here I have realized that it is actually so much easier to fix a meal here. The frozen dinners are so convenient. And I think American foods and meals are an easier alternative to cooking Indian everyday. All you do is stack some things together, and viola! You have a sandwich. And I am done with my dinner. My stomach’s full, and I have time on my hands. No wonder people here eat on the run”.

“I have eaten Indian food all my life. And so I like the fact that I am free to try out new things. And I like the variety here. You have so many options to choose from if you want to eat something. And it’s nice to break the monotony of eating Indian food all the time. So I make some pasta, or a sandwich, or macaroni and cheese. I think they taste good too. So I don’t have any problems eating them for dinner or something”.

Not only did eating American foods stem from a desire to have variety and break the routine, but the younger student generation also described them as being “tasty” and “filling”.

The concept of an American meal was also explored in this study. Nearly all the participants admitted that before coming to America, their idea or concept of American cuisine was limited to sandwiches, and other fast foods. When asked about their current concept of a typical American meal, it was described as one that consisted of a piece of meat, along with steamed vegetables, potatoes (baked or mashed), and some bread. Such a meal was perceived more as “different foods that were eaten together”, rather than as a “meal”. A ‘proper meal’ to
them was one that consisted of cooked meat and vegetables in a gravy form to be eaten with a staple. The concept of eating meat and vegetables that were not cooked and simmered in spices and sauce, with bread that was perceived as a breakfast food item was alien to the participants. Consider the following quote by Malathi (28, married, part-time professional):

“I find it a bit strange that people here consider having one baked chicken breast, some thawed vegetables, and a slice or two of bread a meal. That is like eating a few food items together on one plate. That’s all. I can eat that but for me a meal is something that is more saucy or gravy-like. I can them mix that with rice”.

Among their perceptions of the other ethnic foods that were available in State College such as Italian, Chinese, and Mexican, Italian foods were perceived as being very similar to mainstream American cuisine – “bland”. Almost all the participants had eaten Chinese food quite often even before coming to America. This was attributed to the fact that since India has been a home to many Chinese settlers since the 1970s, Chinese cuisine was often served in street-food joints, and restaurants, and had therefore been a common phenomenon. The Chinese food available in India however, was described as being spicier, more authentic, and less fatty than its American counterpart. Mexican food was appreciated by most participants. It was perceived as being “like Indian food in many respects”, “spicy”, and “filling”:

“I like Mexican food a lot. It’s a lot like Indian food. Its spicy, and its more like a meal. Rice and beans are so similar to our rajma-chaval. Sometimes, when I crave Indian food, and don’t have the time to cook it, then I order in some Mexican food”.

Category IV: Maintaining Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions in State College

The themes and sub-themes that made up this category revealed the factors that influenced the participants either retaining their traditional food choices or abandoning these for
American foods. A list of these factors, and the different strategies that the participants adopted in order to cope with these influencing factors can be found in Table 7.

Theme 7: Losing or Retaining Indian Traditions – Reasons

Sub theme A: “I really can’t afford to be a traditional Hindu Brahmin here…”

Preserving their Indian or Brahmin way of eating depended on many factors for the participants of this study. For some participants, especially for those who were students, financial considerations played an important role in influencing their food and eating habits in State College. American foods were not only perceived as being ‘convenient’, and ‘ready-to-eat’, they were also preferred for their relatively lower costs as opposed to Indian foods. Purchasing Indian food items at the Indian grocery store or at Giant’s Food Store was considered to be an expensive option than buying boxes of Macaroni and Cheese or Ramen Noodles. The fact that these students depended on meager stipends, and had no financial assistance from their friends or family back home influenced their daily food and eating habits to a great extent. Consider the example of Prakash (28, single, student):

“I live from paycheck to paycheck. And so I don’t spend too much money on food. I just eat whatever is cheaper, or whatever is on sale. I never ate beef back home. I couldn’t even think of it. But after coming here, I realized that sometimes one cannot stick to traditions if one wants to get by. Have you heard the saying “Do in Rome as the Romans so”? So I could either go with what I believe to be a Brahmin way of life, and continue not eating meat and beef, or just try to adjust as much as I can. And I choose to blend in rather than experience any inconvenience from it. A hamburger costs me $2, while buying the groceries for an Indian meal would cost me twice as much”.

Changing their food habits from a traditional, Indian one to a more mainstream, American one was perceived by the participants as being necessary to the adjustment, or the ‘blending in’ process in the United States. Therefore, even though the concepts of an Indian meal being a
‘fulfilling’ or a ‘complete’ meal, or the concepts of a ‘Brahmin way of life’ of not eating meat and beef, did not change after coming to State College, the actual foods chosen to eat did.

**Sub theme B: “My kids and my mother make me who I am here – a traditional Brahmin at times, and then very Americanized at other times…..”**

Family structure also played a major role in influencing the participants’ food habits. For example, participants who had older family members, young children, and teenagers living in their households described eating more traditional Indian or Brahmin style meals than other participants who were couples with no children or parents or grandparents living with them.

Consider the quote by Revathi (28, female, married with 2 daughters, age 7 and 12):

“My husband’s mother comes to live with us – every six months or so. And so she cooks a lot more than I do. Which is a relief. And she is a very traditional, orthodox woman. So when she’s with us, we eat Indian food ALL the time. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We even have tiffin. And when she’s not with us, then we just eat cereal for breakfast, my husband and I just eat out with our colleagues, while my daughters eat in their school cafeterias. But when she’s there, we eat dosas and idlis for breakfast, and have a packed lunch of rice and yogurt, and then have a little tiffin of roti and sabji, and then eat a traditional Indian meal for dinner. We love it. My daughters are especially happy then because they love Indian food, and since I work, I don’t get a whole lot of time to cook so much. My policy is to just throw in some food together and bake a boring casserole. The way they do here”.

Having an older family member in the house like a grandmother, mother, or mother-in-law was described as a welcoming change for several reasons: for one, it meant that the entire responsibility of cooking and feeding the family did not fall on the wife’s shoulders alone, even though only temporarily. But this practice was perceived more as keeping up with the traditions in a Brahmin household, and was therefore accepted without any hesitations. The traditional Brahmin household rule was that of the oldest woman in the family assuming the role of a cook.
It was not viewed merely as one visiting family member pitching in to help. The second reason for this change being perceived as a ‘relief’ lay in the fact that the family was able to enjoy the benefits of eating home-cooked, traditional, Indian meals. The practice of eating cereals, casseroles, and other mainstream, American foods were perceived as being ‘routine’, ‘Americanized’, and ‘boring’. The practice of eating traditional Indian meals was perceived as ‘normal’, ‘healthy’, and ‘the way it should be’.

It was interesting to note that participants who had visiting elderly family members even when they were back home in India described their family’s eating patterns to be very traditional. But unlike the families here who perceived this change as a welcoming one, the participants described their eating patterns back home at such times as being ‘routine’, and ‘orthodox’, and ‘boring’. Also, those who were raised in a nuclear family structure described their eating habits to be Indian, but one that was not restricted to cooking and eating one type of meal alone (south-Indian or north-Indian). Having a regionally diverse eating pattern that was a mix of south-Indian and north-Indian meals, and eating out occasionally was perceived as ‘unconventional’, ‘modern’, and ‘not very Brahmin’. For example, consider the quote by Mrinalini (45, female, married with two children):

“I remember my grandparents used to come and live with us once in a while. At such times we would eat only south-Indian food. It was so boring. We were not a very orthodox family. My family always enjoyed eating all kinds of foods. My mom would make pizzas once in a while, or kormas and dal. We were quite non-traditional that way”.

The presence of children and teenagers in a household also influenced the extent to which their traditional food habits from India were retained by the participants. All the participants talked about their children influencing the entire family’s eating habits to some extent. They also talked about the differences that evolved in their family’s eating habits and their attitudes towards these
as a result of their children growing up to be teenagers in America. Consider the following quotes:

“My kids were born here, and they are being raised here. So they are much more American than my husband and I are. They spend most of their day interacting with other Americans in school. They eat at the school cafeterias. So they eat American food all the time. At home of course, they eat an Indian meal once a day for at least 4 or 5 times a week. They enjoy that. They get bored of eating sandwiches and chips all the time. My daughter (age 8) sometimes begs me to make this curry or that. So yeah, she loves Indian food. But sometimes, she wants to eat macaroni and cheese, and won’t touch Indian food. I then have to make that for her”.

The participants viewed their children’s ‘Americanized’ eating behavior as a necessity to a successful assimilation process in the United States. The realization that their children’s past, present, and future lay in America made the children’s less than traditional eating patterns not only acceptable, but also more desirable. The desire to see their children ‘blending in’ as Americans was expressed by all the participants. Therefore, they were willing to design their entire family’s weekly meal patterns around this perception. However, just as ‘blending in’ was essential to a successful assimilation, an appreciation of their native culture was also considered as equally important. This combination of ‘Knowing one’s own traditions’ as well as ‘blending in’ was perceived as a ‘mixing’ of cultural identities in their children, although an acceptable ‘mix’.

Those participants who had teenagers discussed issues such as peer pressure and prejudice, and the influence of these on their own, and their children’s food habits. For example, consider the case of Sundari (51, female, married with a daughter, age 15):

“My daughter experiences a lot of the peer pressure to be accepted and to be considered as ‘normal’ by her friends. For example, when she was younger, she would happily take the packed lunch of rice and sambar I would give her. But slowly as she started getting older, she started asking me to pack a sandwich or something like that. She said it was
because she wanted to eat what everyone else in her class did. She didn’t want to stand out. Some of her classmates would joke about her ‘funny smelling food’. I think all that really made her very upset. I have been trying to tell her that she shouldn’t be bothered by it. It’s one thing if she doesn’t want to eat Indian food because she likes mac and cheese better. That’s understandable. After all she’s grown up here. But I don’t like her succumbing to peer pressure and all that. I would hate for her to turn out the way the kids here do. But to make it easier on myself so that I can pack the same lunch for all of us, we all take whatever it is that she wants to eat. I just want her to be well adjusted here after all”.

By expressing the concern that her daughter should not ‘turn out like the kids here do’, she was expressing what she considered as negative aspects of the American society – that of succumbing to factors such as peer pressure and prejudice. It was acceptable to her if her daughter made the choice of not eating Indian food out of her own preference and liking. However, what was not acceptable was being less traditional due to possible negative feedbacks from the host community. This concept was present as a theme of its own in this study and is outlined below.

Sub theme C: “I don’t want to be looked down upon or anything like that….”

The extent of contact with the host community played a major role in altering the participants’ traditional food and behaviors after coming to the U.S. All the participants talked about how their traditional food habits were viewed by their American friends and colleagues. These views were perceived by the participants as being both negative and positive, and influenced theirs and their family’s food choices and eating patterns at home, and at work differently. For example, consider the following quotes:

“I (Mrinali) work from home mostly. But once or twice a week I have to go to the university. When I’m home, I eat some rice and curry mostly. I very rarely eat a sandwich. When I go to work, I eat out with my colleagues. So I don’t eat anything Indian then. Sometimes we all have a potluck at work. Then I take some pasta dish or something. I have taken some Indian food once, and not many people ate it. They didn’t like the fact that there was no meat in it. They wonder what I eat at home if I don’t eat any meat at all”.

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The most common reactions described were those that made references to the composition, taste, and flavor of the cuisine. These reactions were not only perceived by the participants as being both negative and positive, but also as feedbacks that required food-related behavior changes accordingly. The fact that some of their guests did not appreciate a strictly vegetarian menu forced them to go to such lengths as including meat on their menu at house parties or other social get-togethers in their homes. Even though having meat on their dinner table was a source of much discomfort, being a part of the American social scene was perceived as being necessary to a successful adaptation in America. The need to ‘blend in’ or not be viewed as different by their American friends forced them to pack and eat American food for lunch, and prepare American dishes during social get-togethers. However, reactions such as appreciation, and liking the smell, and taste of Indian food was considered as a positive feedback that prompted including Indian dishes on their menus for parties, potlucks, and taking a packed lunch of Indian food for lunch.

Using their hands to eat food was another example of a traditional eating behavior that had changed for these participants due to the concern that it might cause a negative reaction from their American friends and colleagues. All the participants talked about eating more often with their hands back home in India. This practice was perceived as being ‘unique’, ‘a natural part of our culture’, and also as ‘essential’ to eating the ‘liquidy’ consistency of Indian cuisine. They explained that eating Indian food with their hands was also “necessary to enjoy the food”. It was perceived as being essential to providing them with a “feeling of satisfaction with the meal”. However, after coming to America, this practice was confined to the privacy of their own homes for fear of being looked down upon by Americans and other ethnic origins. They explained that eating with their hands in restaurants and other public places (including the Indian restaurants),
might be best to avoid since it might be considered as ‘crude’, and ‘dirty’ by Americans and people of other ethnicities. This practice of having to confine the traditional way of eating with their bare hands to the privacy of their homes was a source of embarrassment, and a source of prejudice and consternation for some others. For example, consider the following quotes:

“I don’t eat with my hands when I am out. I just feel embarrassed. It is not something that these people are used to. I remember when my mother-in-law came to visit and we took her to Taco Bell. She just started eating her burritos with her bare hands like she would eat chappathi and curry. I was really nervous and embarrassed about what others who were looking might think. I thought they might regard it as being crude, or unhygienic, and dirty. I’d rather eat the way they do here than stick out”.

“I don’t eat with my hands when I go out. I wish I felt more comfortable considering that if the Chinese can eat with the chopsticks and the Americans can be okay with it, so can we eat with our hands. After all, chopsticks are to the Chinese what our hands are to us at a dinner table. I don’t think that this is justified”.

Negative or positive reactions from Americans were also described as being consequences of factors such as the size of the town, and whether the town or city was a metropolitan one or not. The fact that State College was a small town, and was located in a rural state was thought of as being responsible for the ‘narrow-mindedness’ of its people. Small town people were perceived as being prejudiced, and unappreciative or not open to other cultures. Bigger, urban cities such as New York, and Philadelphia were perceived as being more eclectic, and diverse. This brings us to the next theme.

Sub theme D: “I ate American food even when I was back home. So it was not a huge transition for me…..”

The amount of exposure to American culture in India also played an important role in determining the participants’ food behavior after coming to America. The participants explained
that in bigger, metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, American movies, commercials, and American fast foods such as hamburgers and French fires were not only common, but were also considered as ‘novel’, ‘cool’ or ‘modern’ as opposed to the ‘routine’ everyday fare of Indian food. Eating a hamburger meant being ‘unorthodox’, and also symbolized status, and prestige. Therefore, for these participants, eating a hamburger for lunch everyday was not perceived as an undesirable change in their food habits. What did change for these participants however, were the perceptions of these foods. American foods had now become routine, while eating an Indian meal for lunch was a ‘luxury’ they couldn’t afford due to time and other constraints. In contrast, participants from the smaller and more rural towns and villages of India described their stay in America as being ‘difficult’ as far as maintaining a traditional Brahmin food behavior was concerned. Consider the quote below:

“We didn’t have any pizzas or burgers like that back home. If we ate out, it was still Indian food. And we never ate any meat or eggs even. When you ask about what American food I ate back home, the only thing I can think of is bread and jelly. So things have changed a lot for me after coming here. I can’t eat Indian food all the time even if I want to. If its not something like time, I have to think about the fact that my kids would prefer a ham and cheese sandwich to plain bread and butter, or that I can’t take sambar and rice to lunch”.

They explained that fast food chains such as McDonald’s or Pizza Hut did not exist in the smaller towns and villages of India. American movies and commercials advertising American foods were not common. Therefore, the fact that they had to resort to eating cereal for breakfast and sandwiches for lunch was a source of much discomfort to them, and a change that was viewed more as ‘required for blending in’ than as desirable.
Sub theme E: “I have been here for a long time. So my diet has changed considerably over time…….”

The number of years a participant had been in America influenced his or her food habits to some extent. In this study, those who had been in State College for more than a year but less than five years were all in their mid to late twenties. And those who had been in State College for more than five years ranged in their age from early thirties to late sixties. For the purposes of comparison, it would have been interesting to interview participants who were older, but had been in America for less than five years, and vice-versa. However, there were no Hindu Brahmin participants in State College who fit these latter criteria.

The younger generation who had been in America for more than a year but less than five years differed considerably in their food habits than those who were older and had lived in State College for longer than five years. Those who had been in State College for not more than 1 year described their food habits as being ‘a lot less traditional’. Even though they admitted to ‘craving’ Indian food more often than when they were back home, they explained that after coming to America, they ate out more, enjoyed the experience of eating cuisines other than Indian, and cooking or eating an Indian meal was limited to some weekdays and weekends. Those who had been in State College for longer than five years described their food habits as being ‘less traditional than in India but a lot more traditional before’. They admitted that eating American foods had been an ‘enjoyable’, ‘novel’, and a ‘different’ experience when they first arrived to State College. However, over time, the novelty had worn off, and American foods had become ‘routine’, and ‘ordinary’. Eating traditional Indian foods was not only what they preferred now, but it was also perceived as being essential to ‘maintaining’ or ‘preserving’ Indian culture in their homes.
Participants who had lived in State College for more than five years but were single, or widowed reported eating just the way they did when they first arrived in America – that is, more American foods than Indian. Consider the quotes below:

“I (Ashok, 61, widowed male) haven’t really changed much over the years. I mean it is definitely not the way I used to back home. When my wife was alive, she used to cook a lot of Indian food. She was a very good cook. And then she died. And now since I live alone, I just eat whatever is easier and fastest. When my daughters come to visit, they cook for me”.

“My kids are in college now. So my wife doesn’t cook all that often. But we still eat Indian food more now than we first got here. When I was younger, and before I got married, I would just eat hamburgers. My wife was that way too. We used to go out to eat American food once or twice a week for the kids. But now we prefer eating at home. And so its naturally Indian food”.

Therefore, being married or single, or widowed appeared to alter the pattern that emerged in this theme.

Theme 8: Strategies for Retaining Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions

All the participants talked about wanting to eat more Indian foods, and maintaining their traditional food and eating behavior. They also talked about the various strategies they had adopted to eat Indian foods. Frequent social get-togethers that centered on food were common occurrences.

“My husband and I have a lot of Indian friends. So we always have a potluck then. We eat Indian food, naturally. And they’re fun. One person makes the rice, another makes a dal, and somebody else makes the curry. So then we can all have a meal. I mean it’s hard for one person to make a whole meal. So by having it this way, we all get to eat a good, home-cooked Indian meal”.

All the female participants also talked about observing religious fasts once or twice a month. Praying for the good health of her family members through these fasts was considered a traditional rule for a Hindu Brahmin woman. Eating processed American foods containing
artificial ingredients such as coloring and additives was considered as “eating artificial and impure food”. Therefore, fasting on fresh fruit and water was perceived as “cleansing the body of impurities’. Many participants also talked about celebrating religious festivals in their homes, and with other Indians. All of these festivals were once again centered on food. Being a part of the American society, and availing of the opportunities in this ‘land of plenty’ were perceived as ‘god’s gracious gifts’. Therefore, huge feasts symbolized offering their gratitude to god. Celebrating festivals and rituals on a large scale, and with other Indians was described as being essential to not only preserving Indian culture in a foreign land, but also to maintain a sense of harmony and togetherness as a group.

“We celebrate all festivals here. I even go online to research on what kinds of foods are to be prepared, and how to prepare them. And I think it brings us all together. We all work together, and decorate the puja room, cook, and eat. After all, we are a minority here. So we should all be together. And celebrating festivals are a great way to do that”.

Eating at the Indian restaurants, purchasing ready-to-eat Indian foods such as rotis, and curries, as well as Indian spices and other foods from the Indian grocery stores, ordering Indian groceries online, driving up to bigger cities such as New York and Philadelphia to ‘better equipped’ Indian grocery stores, having their friends and families to stock up on Indian foods on their trip to India, and preparing Indian foods in bulk portions and freezing for later use were all part of participants’ strategies to eat Indian food, and to maintain ‘Indianness’.

While explaining the rules of Brahminism, the participants had described the practice of eating leftovers, and processed foods as being against the Brahmin rules of purity and hygiene. However, upon coming to America, the practices of freezing and eating leftovers, and eating ready-to-eat processed Indian foods were perceived more as being essential to ‘maintaining a traditional eating pattern’ than as being a ‘non-Brahmin’.
“Back home we never ate leftovers. But we can’t really follow all that here. If I want to continue eating Indian food, then this is the only option. Or I quit my job and live in the kitchen the way my mom did, and call myself a 100% Brahmin. I feel that it is important to preserve our culture. And if I am able to do that, then I’m happy”.

They explained that even though they believed in traditional Brahmin rules, they realize that the rules did not always apply in every setting. To them, living in America meant maintaining ‘Indianness’ which was a priority over maintaining ‘Brahminness’. Some participants also talked about modifying certain American and other ethnic recipes to make them ‘taste more Indian’, or ‘taste like Indian’. Consider the quotes below:

“I make my own versions of dal sometimes. I buy that Progresso Lentil Soup. To that I add some pasta sauce, and some chili powder. So that’s like adding tomatoes, and spices to dal. It tastes good. My mom would laugh if she heard that”.

“Sometimes I run out of ingredients. Then I buy some refried beans, and add some spices and seasonings to it. I make it into a curry and eat it with rice. At other times, I will buy a can of baked beans and add some garam masala to it. It then tastes like rajma”.

“I add some curry powder to everything. Even tomato soup or any other American food. I make potato curry with hash browns. And I also make thin, crispy dosas with pancake mix. They taste sweet, but I add some salt to it. Then it tastes just like dosas”.

Theme 9: The Future of an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin in America

All the participants, especially the newly arrived, younger generation students talked about their future as an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin in America. Consider the quotes below:

“I don’t think I’m going back. I really like it here. But I see my future as the way it is now. I eat pretty much everything except beef. And I continue to enjoy and eat Indian food as well. Maybe its not as often as it used to be back home. I don’t see myself eating American food all days day in and day out and not eating any Indian food at all. Its just not possible. How could I? Not even when I want to. I was raised a Brahmin, and on Indian food”.
“I think I might even become more Indian in my eating over time. Once I have a family, and kids, I would want my kids to be Indian, and a Brahmin. And so it would be important for them to eat and develop an appreciation for all that”.

“I am single now. And so I eat whatever I can get my hands on. But once I have a wife and kids, I am sure I would be eating more Indian food, and we would follow all the Brahmin rules. If I married an Indian girl that is. If I married an American girl, then I guess it would be a mix of both. But I am sure that I would still hanker after Indian food”.

Remaining in America was perceived as ‘being a mix’ – a mix of adopting foods of the American culture, but not giving up the foods of a culture that they were raised in. This balance of ‘being American’ and ‘being an Indian Hindu Brahmin’ was seen as being a ‘delicate’ one – one that could be affected by factors such as having an American or an Indian partner, family structure, and time and skill constraints involved in preparing Indian food. Having an American partner versus an Indian partner meant eating more American foods, and ‘not following’ all the Brahmin-related rules of eating. This was perceived more as a matter of ‘being practical’ than of relinquishing traditions. Consider the quote below:

“If I marry an American, then of course things are going to be different. I mean I can’t expect an American to give up beef, eat Satwik foods, and observe religious fasts. I have to respect her upbringing as well. So it’s a question of being practical. I’ll still be a Hindu Brahmin regardless of whether I follow all the rules or not. I was born one, and will always carry the values with me. So just because things in my home are not exactly the way things were done when I was growing up does not make me a non-Brahmin. It just makes me a Brahmin who does not follow all the rules”.

Having been raised in India as Hindu Brahmins meant that the traditions were an integral part of their identity that could not be erased over time, or by not following all the rules. Holding the same values and beliefs were perceived as being more important than actually following the rules. Being a Brahmin was perceived as following some rules even though not all.
Data from Participant Observations

In addition to the in-depth interviews, the data for this study was also collected through participant observations. The findings from these observations, and the interpretations of these are summarized in Table 2. During the process of these observations, it appeared as if some participants had made drastic changes in their traditional behaviors. However, a closer examination, and a contextual interpretation of these actions indicated more than just a simple shift from traditional choices. In fact, an alteration in a traditional behavior or food choice did not necessarily imply a change in their belief system. For example, it was observed that every time some participants needed to stir a dish they were cooking, or were eating something, they used their right hands almost exclusively – even while cooking pasta or chicken soup. Similarly, behaviors such as observing a fast by eating nothing more than a piece of fruit for a meal, placing pictures or idols of gods and goddesses in the kitchen area, removing one’s shoes before stepping into the kitchen area as a sign of respect to the presence of god, and not using leftovers as part of a new recipe all seemed to indicate one thing: even though their food choices were no longer strictly Indian, certain Brahmin concepts of religiosity, maintaining purity and avoiding pollution continued to be an integral part of their belief system. However, exactly which concepts were retained, and which were not, and to what extent, appeared to depend entirely on that individual. For example, for some participants, the Brahmin belief system included the avoidance of beef, while for others it included the avoidance of meat altogether.

Some Bengali participants in this study were observed as using some salmon to make a traditional Bengali ‘fish curry’ commonly known as ‘Macher Jhol’. Traditionally, Bengalis use a fish of the herring family, and specific spices such as fresh ground mustard and asafetida to make this unique dish (researcher’s personal knowledge). When asked if they had used the same type
of fish back home, all of these participants reported that this was only due to the unavailability of
the traditional variety of fish in State College. However, it was interesting to see that the use of
the other traditional spices and ingredients remained unchanged by all of them. It appeared that a
Macher Jhol continued to be one for these Bengalis as long as it consisted of some form of
seafood, and the specific spices that the recipe called for. Similarly, there were others who were
observed as using chili powder and salsa in place of ingredients such as cayenne pepper and
tomato puree to make a traditional Masoor Dhal (Red lentil sauce). These observations indicated
that as long as a recipe had at least one original, basic ingredient, and the substitution of some
ingredients with other non-traditional ingredients did not alter the taste of the dish too much, it
continued to be perceived and eaten as a traditional Indian recipe.

There were some who were observed as eating corn tortillas with a vegetable curry using
the same traditional techniques as with the Indian roti – the right hand was used to tear a small
piece off the tortilla, which was then used as a scoop for the curry. The fact that a tortilla did not
consist of the same ingredients as a roti did not seem to matter for these participants. A corn
tortilla in place of a wheat roti appeared to be acceptable as long as it served the purposes of
being a starchy accompaniment, and as a scoop for the vegetables. One participant was also seen
as replacing papadams with potato chips in a traditional meal. This participant had reported in
her interview that she never ate a meal without papadams back home in India – something she
was unable to purchase in State College. It appeared that she used potato chips as a substitute
because just like papadams, the potato chips might have contributed to the crunchy texture of the
meal. Many South Indian Hindu Brahmins were observed as expressing the need to ‘finish off’ a
meal with some rice and yogurt despite reporting that they were ‘feeling full’ during a meal. The
concept of a ‘complete’ meal appeared to be related to not only whether the meal consisted of
any Indian dishes or not, but also to the specific combination of foods that completed the very act of eating that meal.

Those participants who had children were observed cooking or serving standard American fare such as macaroni and cheese or a peanut and butter jelly sandwich to their children along with some Indian food as part of the same meal. This appeared to be an attempt on their part to encourage their children to maintain a traditional eating pattern at home while at the same time be comfortable with eating American foods. It was important for these participants that their children recognize their cultural heritage, and yet be able to adapt successfully into the American society. Still others were observed cooking rice in a traditional Indian style pressure cooker, and using traditional tongs while cooking despite possessing an obvious time-saver such as an electric rice cooker, and oven mittens. The use of these traditional cookware was being retained either because they were familiar and more comfortable using them, or possibly as an attempt to maintain traditional cooking techniques and practices. Eating or cooking a traditional dish despite some non-traditional alterations indicated an attempt to retain their traditions as much as possible.

Thus, all of the above mentioned observation data was not only helpful as physical evidence in corroborating the verbal reports given by the participants during their interviews, but it also helped to give the emergent themes and sub-themes a more concrete, unambiguous, and descriptive language.
Chapter V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUMMARY

This study explored the food-related experience of a group of Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins who lived in the State College area. The study focused on their perceptions in the process of adjustment to the new cultural milieu, the food-related changes they made in response to their new situations, their emotional responses to these changes, and the problems and conflicts that arose in the process. In this chapter, these findings will be discussed with references to existing literature on the area, followed by conclusions that will outline the theoretical framework of the process of food-related acculturation as it emerged in this study. The chapter will also include a brief summary, some of the limitations of this study, some practical implications and recommendations, and finally, a few suggestions for future research in this area.

Discussion

Theme 1: Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings in India

The most-noted general divisions in culinary traditions in this study were between the north and the south; between wheat and rice zones; and between regions that lacked fish and those where it was available. These findings are comparable to what researchers have shown before - that it is difficult to generalize about Indian cuisine because of the diverse geography and population of the country. Foods in India vary from North to South, East to West, and region to region, and depend to a large extent on the agricultural conditions in the area (Henderson, 2002).
The use of wheat, tea, a large number of eggs, garlic, dried or pickled fruits and vegetables, and use of dry masalas (spices) by the participants from the northern areas was typical of a cooler climate where wheat grows better than rice and fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices are available only seasonally. The use of frying, and thick gravyed curries was a traditional form of cooking also known to suit a cooler climate. For the participants from the south on the other hand, the more hot and humid weather conditions in this region, and which favors the growth of rice, the use of items such as steamed rice, yogurt and the “wet” sambar and rasam masalas were typical of a warmer climate (Henderson, 2002).

Regarding the consumption of fish and other meats by the coastal area Brahmins, Jambunathan (2002) stated that that there can be a two-fold classification of Hindu Brahmins based on whether flesh foods are consumed or not, and on the types of flesh foods consumed. The influence of the vedic religion, the availability of fish, and later the influx of outsiders may have caused the Hindu Brahmins in the coastal areas to become non-vegetarians. Kilara (1992) has also stated that in Bengal, Orissa, Assam, parts of Maharshtra, and Kerala eating flesh by Brahmins is acceptable. They suggested that meat-eating Brahmins hail from the areas where fish may have been the only source of protein in times of famine and drought. This factor may be responsible for the lack of religious sanctions against eating fish and other flesh foods for this group of Brahmins.

In this study as well, the participants explained that fish eating was not only acceptable for the Brahmins from coastal areas, but a practice that arose out of necessity in ancient times – the only source of protein, especially during ‘lean times’. They defined fish as being “a vegetable of the sea”. Consequently, fish and other seafood were perceived as a ‘vegetarian source of protein’. It was also for this reason that the preparation and consumption of dishes such as fish
curries were permitted even during religious ceremonies, and other meats were not. Religious ceremonies in India are periods of intensified prayers and ritual interaction, and are usually focused on local shrines and gods. Henderson (2002) noted that the religious ceremonies in India revolved around a concept of a ‘sacred’ time and space. The presence of god in this ‘sacred’ time and space symbolized ‘purity’ and an environment free from pollution. Therefore, food offerings to god were also based on these notions of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’. In this study, the fact that the coastal Brahmins considered other meats as impermissible during religious ceremonies indicated that these foods were perceived as being ‘impure’ foods with a potential to ‘pollute’ a ‘sacred’ time and space.

An interesting revelation in this study was that some older Hindu Brahmin participants in this study who described themselves as being ‘orthodox’ Brahmins while in India reported to frequently consuming street foods that were sold by vendors belonging to a lower class. They reported that on occasions such as a festival, or when eating a home cooked meal was not possible, eating some chaat (a mix of spiced nuts and uncooked lentils) at a ‘road-side stall’ was only ‘natural’. This appeared to be an apparent contradiction of Brahmin beliefs of purity and pollution since traditional rules forbade Brahmins from accepting any food prepared by non-Brahmins. Although the participants in this study were well aware of the fact that the food handlers themselves were non-Brahmins, they did not perceive this particular behavior as breaking a Brahmin code. A few studies have been conducted in the recent past on the flourishing street food industry in several countries, and may help in understanding the contradiction revealed in the current study. For example, a study conducted by the Food and Agricultural Organization (Chakravarty and Canet, 1996) revealed that in developing countries such as India and China, street foods are one of the least expensive means of obtaining a
nutritionally balanced meal outside the home. However, such foods are also prone to microbial contamination due to the fact that they are not regulated, and are not governed by any food safety laws. Henderson (2002), in her study on the practice of consumption of street foods in India found that in many Indian cities, the street food trade had shed its disorganized, lower-class image and had become a viable, important informal-sector industry. Street food vending provided a medium for integrating rural and urban areas economically, socially and culturally, and especially during large-scale, municipal-organized festivals, and functions. She also found that completely raw foods, such as uncooked grains, fresh unpeeled bananas, mangoes, and uncooked vegetables can be accepted by anyone from anyone else, regardless of relative status. Toasted or parched foods, such as roasted peanuts, can also be accepted from anyone without ritual or social repercussions. Even though the participants of this study themselves did not bring forth any of the above points, the fact that they may have been responsible for behaviors that seemingly contradicted their Brahmin concepts of purity and pollution cannot be ruled out as a possibility.

**Theme 2: Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings in State College**

Many changes in the frequency of foods consumed were identified with immigration to the United States. The changes were manifested in the form of a change in the frequencies of use of ethnic foods, as well as foods from other cultures available in America. Foods that subjects reported using frequently in India but that were only moderately used in the United States were ghee, yogurt, dal, roti, rice dishes, and tea. Foods that were used only moderately in India but were frequently used in the United States were fruit juice, canned or frozen vegetables, American bread (white), dry cereals, cheese and cheese dishes, and soft
drinks. Coffee consumption had decreased. Factors such as the low cost of American foods, decreased availability of Indian foods especially all the varieties of vegetables, increased cost of Indian foods such as spices and condiments, and the pressures of a faster-paced lifestyle were all cited as reasons for these changes. These findings were comparable with earlier studies on Asian Indians that showed a decline in the frequency of use of some Asian Indian foods, and an increase in the consumption of other ethnic foods upon immigration. For example, Gupta (1975) in his study on Indians in Pennsylvania reported that many ate hamburgers and other American foods because of their low cost and easy availability. A study of Indians living in Cincinnati found several changes in the types of foods they ate (Karim et al., 1986). There was a large decrease in the consumption of traditional dishes that included a variety of vegetables, lentils, and rice as ingredients. Raj et al. (1999) in her study on the dietary habits of Asian Indians found that consumption of fruit juice, chips, fruits, margarine, cola, and alcoholic beverages increased. Widespread availability and the relatively low cost of these items compared to India were likely to favor their increased consumption in the US.

The changes in the food habits of the participants in this study reflected different degrees of retention and abandonment of traditional food. For example, even though the consumption of certain traditional breakfast and lunch food items such as dosais, idlis, upma, puris, parathas, rotis, and tea had decreased, the consumption of other foods such as rice and rice dishes, sambar, rasam, vegetable, and bean curries, yogurt, and pickles had been retained. Similarly, even though the consumption of less traditional food items such as ready-to-eat cereals, white bread, fruit juice, fast foods, tortillas, ketchup, hot sauce, and soda had increased, the use of other less traditional foods such as frozen dinners, pasta, margarine, mayonnaise, and flavored yogurt had not. Raj et al. (1999) also found differences in the retention and abandonment of traditional food items.
foods, but determined that these were related to the length of residence in the US. In the current study however, this was not the case. Differences in the degrees of retention and abandonment of traditional foods were found to be more likely to be influenced by the participants’ work schedules. For instance, regardless of their length of US residence, a majority of the participants talked about favoring American foods such as ready-to-eat cereals, pop tarts, instant oatmeals, and sandwiches for breakfast and lunch, while traditional Indian foods such as rice, rotis, vegetables, and dhal were reserved for dinner. The busy, rush hours in the morning during the week left them with no time for a traditional Indian breakfast of dosais, and idlis. The preparation of these foods entailed a lot of planning, as well as a commitment of their time. However, preparing an Indian meal for dinner, and during the weekends was more feasible due to the availability of more time, and a relaxed schedule during the weekends and holidays. Cooking and eating an Indian meal at least once a day, or during the weekends also provided them with a feeling of maintaining their cultural values and traditions.

These trends were consistent with the one found in a study by Lee et al. (1999). The Korean Americans in the study adopted American foods most for breakfast and lunch, and least for dinner. Korean meals were retained for the major meal at dinner, which were found to have a higher emotional attachment. Eating a traditional Korean meal at the end of the day with their family members symbolized family and cultural harmony, maintaining good health, and maintaining cultural traditions.

Many participants, especially those who were still students at the university reported snacking more frequently, particularly on vending machine foods such as chips, candies, sodas, etc. The participants perceived themselves as being helpless victims in a snacking society where factors such as the widespread prevalence of vending machines, the low cost and easy
availability of snack foods, and the lack of time to prepare, pack, or eat a meal were all responsible for the decrease in the overall quality of their diet. However, it was interesting to note that even though the practice of snacking from vending machines was not condoned by any of the participants, and was in fact perceived as being less conducive to “good health”, American snack foods themselves held positive connotations for them. For example, they were perceived as being a more hygienic alternative to their Indian counterparts. American foods such as cookies, candies, and chips were not only considered more sanitary than Indian street foods, they were also perceived as being ‘novel’ or different, cheap, and easily available alternatives to not being able to eat a meal during a tightly scheduled working day.

Such findings also reflect the Food Patterning model of dietary change proposed by Kokturk-Renefors (1991), in their extensive study on immigrant food behavior. The fact that traditional staple foods such as rice, and lentils were retained while American staples such as ready-to-eat cereals, and bread were adopted signify that the latter were not considered as ‘real’ foods, or foods that make a ‘complete meal’. Therefore, the inclusion of American foods did not symbolize a drastic deviation from traditional food behavior. However, the fact remains that despite unaltered traditional food behavior at the level of most staple foods, these immigrants no longer eat the same way as in their country of origin.

Theme 3: Being a Brahmin in India

In addition to region, religious affiliation has been shown to greatly influence diet in India. A Hindu Brahmin is defined as one who abides by the rules of Brahminism. Brahmin-related rules are seen as linking food, medical perspectives, and concepts of purity and pollution. These rules reflect a food’s intrinsic aspects, plus who prepares it, how it is prepared, and how it
is served and eaten (Kilara, 1992). This study hoped to delineate these rules, and reflect the food habits of this religious group as described by its participants. However, while many of the participants in this study, both young and old, were able to describe these rules and the various Brahmin-related religious prescriptions regarding food and eating, they claimed to have none or very little knowledge of specific definitions and terms. In addition, a majority of the younger generation participants claimed that they did not believe in most of the rules, and that they were practicing Brahmins in India only as a result of having to live with their parents.

The above finding was consistent with what political analysts have already known. For example, in India today, the commercial demands of global capitalism, complete with the western notions of rationalism, liberalism and individualism, are challenging and changing some of the central tenets of classical Hinduism and, by association, the very nature of Indian society. Secular forces of the kind that are common to all developing societies in a technological age are now at work to undermine the barriers of caste and sub-caste (Jambunathan, 2002). Life in the cities and in the growing industrialized areas has made the observance of caste distinction difficult, if not virtually impossible (Henderson, 2002). Even in the rural areas these same modernizing forces are at work. Thus the youth of today’s India have been known to become more flexible in their caste system customs. In general the urban people in India are less strict about the caste system.

With the exception of the Brahmins from the coastal areas, a majority of the participants reported that not eating any meat or meat products was a Brahmin rule. Kilara (1992) has shown that vegetarianism in India is firmly rooted in the idea of ahimsa, or the need to respect life and not cause harm to living beings. For the older generation, this was reported as the prevailing
cause of being a vegetarian back home. The younger participants admitted to not believing in ahimsa, and reported eating meat and eggs on a frequent basis while home. However, such foods they added, were not cooked at home, and were cooked (in backyards) and consumed outside of their homes. Henderson (2002) reported that in a strict Brahmin household, mealtime etiquette is a balance among purity-producing and pollution-producing events. Foods such as meat and meat products were avoided in the eating area since they symbolized purity and pollution.

A majority of the participants, even the younger generation who admitted to not believing in Brahmin rules and consuming meat, as well as the coastal Brahmins who claimed to have no religious sanctions against meat and fish, reported that they did not consume beef. The main reasons cited were that they equated the cow with worship, and therefore killing and eating a cow was not a part of their identity as Hindus, and that it “didn’t quite feel right”. Harris (1961) reported that the taboo against eating beef in the Hindu religion stems from three sources: for one, in the subsistence agriculture that exists in India, the cow becomes a source of producing bullocks to be used for work as well as for producing milk and other products such as ghee and paneer (Indian cottage cheese). Secondly, in the ancient texts, mention of sacrificing unproductive animals has been cited. Third, in ancient Hindu mythology, the cow was believed to be the vehicle or the main mode of transportation for the god, Shiva. Due to these reasons, the cow had become a symbol of worship and generosity to Hindu Brahmins all over India. Thus, for most participants in this study, having been raised in a society where the worship of cows with garlands and incense was a common and everyday sight, eating the meat of this animal was perceived as disrespecting god himself.

The participants also talked about foods that had been avoided back home. For example, the foods that they reported as being avoided were meat, and certain vegetables such as onions,
garlic, and mushrooms. While some described these foods as “being meat like”, or as being “associated with meat”, others reported that Brahmin rules regarded these foods as being “impure” and as “unfit for Brahmins”. In his study on Hindu beliefs and practices, Pandey (1969) reported that the classification of foods for the Hindus were three-fold, and were based on the concepts of the caste system. Thus, Satwik foods (grains, fruit, and most vegetables) were those that were chosen exclusively by the Hindu Brahmins, the priestly class who dedicated their lives to worship and learning. This was due to the fact that these foods were perceived as being conducive to overall health and spiritual well being, and were therefore deemed as being fit for consumption by the Brahmins. Tamasik foods (vegetarian or non-vegetarian that are prepared with excess spices, salts and hot seasonings) were intended for those belonging to the Vaishya caste, or the merchants and traders. These foods were thought to perpetuate laziness and people eating these were perceived as being characterized by a shrewd, and clever temperament. Onions, garlic, and mushrooms also fell into this category. Finally, Rajasik foods (fried, highly seasoned, or baked foods, alcoholic and processed beverages, meats, as well as sweets) were perceived as fit for consumption by the Kshatriyas or the warriors due to the fact that they contributed to an aggressive and energetic disposition. Once again, most of the younger participants in the current study reported to have consumed these foods outside of their homes while the older generation did not.

Some participants also mentioned that foods were classified as being “hot” or “cold”, and that “hot” foods were neither consumed nor touched by the menstruating women in their families. They also mentioned that such a concept had to do with the fact that menstruating women were regarded as being in a “pitta” state of health. Jambunathan (2002) studied these concepts of “hot” and “cold” food beliefs in an Indian community, and reported on their
significance. Hot foods such as milk, yogurt, and cheese were thought of as ‘heat-producing’ foods, ‘spoiling easily’, and ‘not conducive to good health’ if consumed in excess. Similarly, cold foods such as sugar, honey, nuts, and seeds were thought of as ‘cool-producing’ foods, and also not conducive to good health in excess. An ideal state of health was achieved through a balance of these foods.

Jambunathan (2002) also reported that the Ayurvedic principles of Indian medicine were closely linked to these food classifications. A person in a ‘Vatta’ state was thought to be in a state of optimum health – an optimum balance of inner heat and cool. A person in a ‘Pitta state’, such as a menstruating woman, was thought to be in a temporary state of imbalance between health and disease – too much body heat. Finally, a person in a ‘Kappa’ state was thought to be sick or diseased – the body was too cool. Therefore, if a person was in a ‘pitta’ state, he or she could not consume any hot foods since these would only increase the already high amount of body heat in that person. Similarly, he or she could not come into any physical contact with such foods since the excess heat from their bodies might lead to spoilage of the “hot” or easily perishable foods, especially in a country where refrigeration was not common (Henderson, 2002).

Brahmin-related rules regarding the characteristics of the primary food provider or the cook, meal time etiquette, cooking and storage practices were also described by the participants in this study. Many researchers have studied the meanings and concepts behind these rules, rituals, and practices. The common observation has been that for a Hindu Brahmin, these rules and practices are closely linked to notions of purity and pollution, and that rituals related to food are believed to transform a food’s purity. In other words, a food becomes more pure or impure depending on what food-related rituals are performed, who performs them, and how they are
performed. For example, rituals described by the participants in this study, such as barring any contact with a menstruating woman, having a Brahmin cook, washing and bathing before a meal, and cleaning the areas of worship and cooking thoroughly are all believed to increase a food’s purity. In contrast, broken rules such as allowing a menstruating woman to enter an area of cooking or worship, having a non-Brahmin cook, not dipping one’s hand in a bowl containing water in between touching different foods, allowing one’s plate of food to touch another’s, and using one’s left hand to eat food are all believed to pollute a food, or render it impure (Pandey, 1969; Kilara, 1992).

Although modernization in recent years has been shown to replace traditional beliefs with more simple versions and modern hygienic practices in many developing countries including India, ritual purity practices have been shown to prevail at special occasions (Jambunathan, 2002). For the participants in this study as well, religious festivals and ceremonies, and fasts were not only described as being periods of intensified social and ritual interaction, but were also seen as an opportunity to exit the routines of daily life. Practices such as avoiding meat and meat products, placing offerings of food before idols of god to symbolize gratitude, eating off of fresh banana leaves, and observing fasts to symbolize self-sacrifice and dedication to god were all examples of the above.

Theme 4: Being a Brahmin in America

Immigration to America, and State College in particular, had resulted in a change in the rituals that had been practiced back home. Along with the changes in traditional food practices, there was also a change in their conceptualizations of these practices. For example, a majority of the older participants who had been observing Brahmin rules in India out of their own
convictions and beliefs in these, admitted to adopting many American ways of eating after coming to State College. They described themselves as being “victims of a society where Brahminism holds no value”. They attributed their changing food behaviors to a decreased availability of Indian foods and the relatively high cost of ‘Satwik’ foods such as traditional whole grains, beans and lentils, fresh fruits and vegetables. Also despite their efforts to avoid meat, the presence of meat extracts in all ‘supposedly vegetarian’ foods, and the serving of meat dishes as vegetarian dishes after rendering them manually meatless made eating a meatless dish somewhat of a fiction. These factors were described as being ‘challenges’ to a practicing Brahmin. They admitted to altering their traditional food practices in order ‘accommodate’ these factors. These alternative practices included relying on eggs for sources of protein, eating more traditional Indian meals for dinner, limiting the use of meat to traveling, and continuing to avoid beef. These were seen more as ‘adaptations’ to a western culture rather than as ‘relinquishing’ their Brahmin values. These findings are consistent with earlier studies in the area. Tan and Wheeler (1983), and Jamal (1998) found that even though the older generation immigrants in their studies had adopted some of the host culture’s dietary practices, they reported ‘still holding on’ to their traditional beliefs. For the younger participants, the fact that they had described themselves as not believing in Brahmin rules may have played a major role in their transition to a less traditional diet. Jambunathan (2002) also reported that Asian Indian youth are often westernized even before their arrival in the United States. They have already been exposed to the American and European lifestyles in India. They consider traditional rules outdated.

Other Brahmin food-related rules and rituals such as those pertaining to menstruation, characteristics of the cook, cooking and storage practices, meal time etiquette, and eating leftovers were found to be abandoned by even the older participants after coming to America. On
the other hand, rituals such as observing fasts, and celebrating religious ceremonies and festivals continued to be a part of their lives – the young and the old. Such a contradiction can only be explained by examining the underlying reasons for why some rituals and traditions are abandoned, while some are retained. For example, the rule that a menstruating woman cannot cook was considered not feasible by the older participants due to the fact that their families in America were nuclear, and that the wife did not have a substitute to take over her role at such times. Back home however, their families were typically extended, and therefore, grandmothers or aunts could replace the mother during this time. It was interesting to note that despite these practical considerations, the significance of abstaining from household chores during menstruation, and its importance in maintaining a ‘Brahmin way of life’ was not lost for most of the older participants in this study. Tran (1991) observed a similar trend in the relation between maintaining traditional food practices and the structure of the family. Among the extended Vietnamese families living in Florida, those with more than one woman to take over the responsibilities of cooking were found to be eat more traditional foods. In the nuclear families however, where both the men and their wives worked, American convenience foods were eaten more often.

For the younger generation, most Brahmin rules had been intellectualized to being ‘ancient’, ‘outdated’, and ‘impractical’ in today’s modern society. It was interesting to note that these very same younger students went on to explain the possibility of a scientific rationale behind the traditions. For example, even though they reported that the ancient practice of refraining from handling food during one’s menses was an impractical one to follow in America, the origin of this rule might have some validity. They explained that a higher than normal body temperature in a woman at this time could have indeed resulted in spoilage of food by
microorganisms that are able to grow in a higher temperature medium, especially in a country where refrigeration and freezing options were not common. These are not necessarily true but rather seem to be an attempt to reconcile the scientific standards used in the U.S. against traditions in India.

Regarding the rule of eating leftovers, the participants argued that such a rule was ‘redundant’ not only in America but also in India where the common availability of refrigerators today give the option of preventing spoilage of cooked food. They were also quick to explain that the origins of this Brahmin rule lay in the fact that refrigeration was not an option for Indians until a few decades ago. Therefore, the notion that leftovers were ‘impure’ and ‘unfit for Brahmin consumption’ in ancient times might have resulted from the risk of eating spoilt foods. Henderson (2002) also found that modernization in modern India has undercut many aspects of the model of rituals and replaced it with simplified versions and modern hygienic practices.

Religious ceremonies and festivals were perceived as social opportunities to strengthen solidarity among a minority group such as theirs in a foreign land. In addition, these social get-togethers were also opportunities to cook and eat Indian food, and thus preserve their identity as Indians. This trend was similar to the one observed by Gandhi (1970) in his study on an Indian student community in Minnesota. He found that the observance of religious festivals and feasts by all Indians regardless of their caste, or religion was a means of enhancing solidarity within this group.

Themes 5 and 6: Perceptions Towards Indian and American Foods

Like the previous themes, some important generational differences were observed in the participants’ perceptions towards Indian and American foods. These perceptions also depended
on the intrinsic qualities of the foods themselves, and indicated changes between before and after immigration. For example, those participants who were much older (45-60 years) perceived the consumption of Indian foods as reflecting family unity, and as ‘maintaining one’s culture’ both in India as well as in America. These findings are consistent with studies that have reported generational differences in the acculturation patterns of food choices and concepts among immigrants. For example, Tran (1991) found that while in Vietnam, the older parents and grandparents in the families had exclusively eaten traditional Vietnamese foods. Following this pattern in America was perceived by them as a connection to their homeland.

The younger, student generation (24 to 30 years) had perceived Indian foods to be ‘routine’ ‘boring’, and ‘unconventional’ in India, but upon immigration ascribed the need to eat more Indian foods and meals to a ‘natural part of their upbringing’. Those participants who had eventually married, and had gone on to lead professional lives in America had changed their food behavior practices from the time that they had recently arrived as younger students. They mentioned that a less traditional eating pattern in their younger, student days had been largely dependent on their perceptions of American foods as being ‘new’, ‘exciting’, ‘fast’, and ‘easy’. Having a partner and children had changed their perceptions in that Indian foods symbolized ‘continuing traditions’, while American foods symbolized ‘becoming more American’.

Gender differences were also seen in the perceptions of foods among the participants of this study. For instance, the men described cooking an Indian meal as being ‘difficult’ and ‘problematic’. They also admitted to not knowing how to cook a traditional meal owing to the fact that they had been raised in a traditional Brahmin household wherein their mothers, or grandmothers had been the cooks. Therefore, being single was equated with the forced option of having to eat out more often, and eat more American foods while being married was equated
with their wives cooking for them. It was therefore, not surprising to find the men in this study adopting American foods more readily and more frequently than the women. Observations of the males in this study during food-related activities such as cooking, and cleaning also revealed an interesting finding: even though some of these males had been able to articulate and explain the Brahmin rules regarding food preparation, they did not appear to follow the typical rules that the women had. For example, Brahmin rules such as the use of right hand while stirring a pot, washing one’s right hand before cooking, the presence of idols in the kitchen, and removing their shoes before entering the kitchen area were almost exclusively seen among the women in this study.

Even though most women in this sample believed that the Brahmin rules pertaining to menstruation and leftovers were ‘redundant’ in a casteless, modern American society, they continued to believe that it was their primary responsibility to cook for their families. Eating less traditionally and adopting American foods for them had more to do with the time constraints placed by a career. Such constraints were seen as barriers to fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers successfully. It appeared that these women carried a sense of guilt over their ‘under achievement’ in the home front, while at the same time, a sense of achievement and progress as women who were able to contribute to their family’s income. Such a trend can only be explained by a closer look at the position of these women in their own native society. The denial of education to females in India was in effect until the year 1947. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian constitutional law then underwent what is considered a progressive reform. The numerous disparate traditions and practices that existed throughout Hindu India were brought together, codified, and partly harmonized with a more modern constitutional tradition articulated by the ruling British. Since then, women have been provided
with equal opportunities in education as their male counterparts. Despite these reforms, research shows that the Hindu laws that govern marriage, minority rights, and guardianship today continue to support gender inequality in the family (Marquand, 1999). Women are given equal protection under the law, but only in the traditional role of wife and mother, and never on an equal footing with husbands or fathers. Thus, even though the Hindu Brahmin women interviewed in this study apparently no longer faced any barriers as far as education was concerned, and seemed to be proud about their roles in contributing to the families’ income levels, it appears as if their feelings of guilt may have to do with their own and their families’ traditional expectations of Hindu Brahmin women as being exclusive caretakers and cooks in their households. Gender differences were also observed by Gupta (1975) in his study on the food habits of a group of Asian Indians in Pennsylvania. He found that most Indian women in his sample appeared to be satisfied with eating traditional foods and traditional ways of cooking and showed a limited interest in changing them. The difference in attitudes was attributed to the fact that the women in the study, who were in compliance with their traditional role expectations, were comfortable cooking Indian foods. The men in the study admitted to not knowing how to cook.

Some similarities in perceptions were observed in this study regardless of the age and gender of the participants. For example, for both the older and younger participants, their perceptions of American foods had been limited to ‘fast foods’ such as hamburgers, soda, and French fries in India. Upon immigration however, these perceptions had changed to include other foods such as sandwiches, pasta, meat, and potatoes. Indian foods were perceived as being ‘spicy’ and ‘tasty’, and American foods were thought to be too ‘cheesy’ (as in containing too much cheese), and ‘bland’. Finally, Indian foods were perceived as being ‘heavy’ but ‘filling’,

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while American foods were perceived as being ‘light’ but ‘healthy’. Such positive connotations were attributed to factors such as the inclusion of fresh fruits and vegetables (salads), and the low amounts of salt and seasonings present in these foods. Jamal (1998) in his study on British-Pakistanis also reported similar results. The ‘healthy’ aspect of American foods was attributed to the inclusion of fresh salads and soups in an American menu. The participants in this study were of this view as well. Despite the similarities in perceptions, the younger generation ate less traditional foods than the older generation. This was due to the influence of other factors for the younger generation, but was not relevant for the older generation. The influence of these factors such as the marital status, extent of contact of contact with other Americans, and family structure are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The participants’ concepts of an Indian meal versus an American meal were also revealed in this study. For example, conditions such as eating breakfast food items during lunch time or eating lunch food items at breakfast time, eating snack or tiffin food items, eating ‘junk’ foods, eating a meal outside of their homes that consisted of items other than a staple and two accompaniments, not eating a home-cooked meal, and skipping a meal were all considered as not being a ‘proper meal’. A proper meal in India had consisted of eating rice or roti with some curry. Roti and rice were the staple foods, and curry was the complement – both had to be combined to give meaning to a proper meal. In this sense, rice and roti had a central importance in the Hindu meal – they were staples. Items like sambar, dal, rasam, and curry were considered as accompaniments to a proper meal. Thus, if the food items that were included in a meal were consistent with the above norms, and represented the meal adequately, the meal was also perceived as being ‘filling’, ‘typical’, and ‘complete’.
Constraints such as lack of time, availability of Indian vegetables, spices, and condiments, and in the case of male participants, a lack of know-how to cook Indian dishes had resulted in a dinner or lunch (on the weekends) consisting of rice (more often than roti), and one vegetable curry. Therefore, such a meal came to be regarded as an “incomplete” meal. Murcott (1992) in her study on the concept of a ‘proper meal’ among the British stated: “people in all societies have clear ideas of what constitutes a proper meal, not just for special occasions but also for everyday”. In the British context, a cooked dinner with “meat and two vegetables” (with some specific rules concerning the proper way of cooking and presenting these) can be described as a proper meal.

For the participants in this study, a meal consisting of one staple and one accompaniment may not have been “complete”. However, the fact that it was described as “at least somewhat Indian” or “traditional” was perceived as being important to “maintain tradition”. Therefore, what ceased to matter was the size of the meal. What mattered in a foreign land instead was whether the meal consisted of any Indian food items or not. Even if the meal was not a “complete” one with rice or roti, and more varieties of side dishes, it was still perceived as being “traditional” because it consisted of a dal or curry. Such a trend that reveals an alteration in a traditional concept of a meal has not been reported so far among the Asian Indian immigrant population in the United States. However, studies on changes in the traditional diet of other immigrant populations have shown that a substitution of traditional foods for less traditional foods have resulted in a change in perceptions as well. The more Americanized diets were regarded as more healthy or nutritious than the traditional diets (Crane, 1980; Romero-Gwynn et al., 1993).
Differences in the participants’ concepts of an American meal were also highlighted in this study. Their initial understanding was closely linked to how familiar they were to American foods, values, and behaviors. For example, those who had arrived in State College some seven to ten years ago explained that their concept of an American meal at the time had been limited to fast foods such as hamburgers, sandwiches, soda, and fries. Upon immigration, they were able to make a clear distinction between fast foods and a meal. Among the more recent immigrants who had arrived less than five years ago, the exposure to American culture had been greater in India. Therefore, their concepts of American eating behaviors had included foods other than fast foods. An American meal was described as consisting of a piece of meat, a vegetable, and some potatoes, or some pasta and marinara sauce.

This difference in concepts related to the degree of exposure to American culture is further corroborated by Gupta’s (1975) study on Asian Indian students in Pennsylvania. At the time, he found that the knowledge of American food habits among the students was limited to hamburgers, hot dogs, and French fries and they held ambivalent attitudes towards American culture and also food habits. He also found that among those Indians who had been in the U.S for at least 4 to 15 years, the familiarity with American culture, values, and food habits was greater. In the current study however, the need for familiarization after immigration did not arise. The effects of globalization and modernization in the country (India) since then (1969) may have contributed to the increase in the amount of exposure to American culture among these immigrants, and thus paved the way for an easier acculturation experience.

It was interesting to note that regardless of the level of familiarity and exposure to American culture, all the participants perceived an American meal was being “no more than a combination of separate food items” or other ethnic foods. The fact that the meal was thought of
consisting no mixed dishes containing different kinds of vegetables as in a traditional Indian curry was responsible for this perception.

**Themes 7: Losing Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions - Reasons**

Several factors were cited as being responsible for the changes in traditional food practices and perceptions of the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in this study. Among the younger participants who were all students, and had lived in State College for five years or less, the fact that they had been exposed to American foods and American culture even prior to immigration only compounded the decrease in traditional food behaviors. After coming to America, eating Indian foods for every meal of the day for the participants meant either eating out at the Indian restaurant, or cooking an Indian meal at home. But the higher cost of traditional foods and ingredients at both the Indian restaurant and at the Indian grocery store in State College were perceived as some of the main barriers to maintaining a traditional food behavior in the U.S. Tran (1991) also found that being financially secure meant being able to afford the higher cost traditional food items.

For the older participants who were all either retired, or professionals, the barriers pertaining to financial status and the inability to purchase the higher cost Indian food items did not exist. For these people, the decreased availability of Indian foods and ingredients at the Indian grocery store in State College was cited as the main barrier to their eating traditional foods. This ‘problem’ was reported by all the participants of this study. The findings on availability of Indian foods in the current study were not comparable with earlier studies that
have found a reported 100% availability of Indian foods among Asian Indians (Karim et al., 1986; Thomas et al., 1986; Raj et al., 1999).

The Indian grocery store in State College was described by the current study’s participants as being limited in not only the many varieties of traditional vegetables, lentils, and spices, but also in its stock of ready-to-eat Indian meals and foods. They argued that such foods were common in some of the other bigger cities of America such as New York, and Philadelphia. Many were also quoted as saying that “things might have been different if they had lived in New York or Philadelphia, and not in the small town of State College, Pennsylvania”. This implied a higher use of traditional foods in this population had they not lived in State College.

Therefore, the discrepancy in the results between this study and the results from earlier studies may have to do with the fact the latter were conducted in some of the bigger cities of America such as New York, Jersey City, Boston, and Philadelphia. The presence of Indian restaurants, grocery stores, and small takeout joints for Indian food in these cities has been shown to be as ubiquitous as Chinese takeouts. Such a scenario has been attributed to factors such as the burgeoning immigrant population, a more adventurous American mainstream, and a higher demand for cuisines belonging to other ethnic groups in these cities (Melwani, 1999).

Other factors that were cited as being influential in a more Americanized food behavior upon immigration included a hectic work or school schedule that provided with little time for shopping and cooking traditional Indian foods. The family structure of the participant such as the lack of ‘orthodox’ older parents or grandparents or a wife (for the male participants) who might have cooked more traditional Indian meals was also perceived as an important barrier to eating more traditional foods by all the participants. These findings were similar to earlier studies.
conducted on Asian Indians (Gupta, 1975; Kittler and Sucher, 1989; Karim et al., 1986; Thomas et al., 1986; Raj et al., 1999; Henderson, 2002), as well as other immigrant groups in America (Lee et al., 1999; Shultz et al., 1994; Romero-Gwynn et al., 1993; Tran, 1991; Tan and Wheeler, 1983). The above findings are also in agreement with the Gatekeeper Theory (Lewin, 1943). The food behaviors of an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin family also depended upon the primary person who was responsible for food selection and procurement. An older grandmother or a wife in the family contributed to a more traditional diet.

In addition to the above, the effects of some other notable factors on the participants’ traditional food behavior such as the extent of exposure to American media and foods back home, the extent of contact with the American community in America, and the type of feedback received from the host community were also highlighted in the current study. For example, almost all of the younger, student, short-term resident participants reported consuming American fast foods such as pizzas, hamburgers, soda, French fries, and fried chicken at least once a week while in India. It was therefore, not surprising to find that these students also reported an “easy” transition from a mostly traditional food pattern back home to a mostly American food pattern upon immigration.

In contrast, the older participants who had arrived in State College even as earlier as five years ago reported that their exposure to American foods had been limited to sandwiches. They described their transition from a purely traditional, or Indian diet to one that included some American foods for lunch and breakfast as ‘hard’. This discrepancy among the participants might have to do with the recent ‘explosion’ of the fast food business in India in the last five years. Globalization and economic liberalization has resulted in a proliferation of fast food chains such
as McDonald's, Domino’s Pizza, Pizza Hut, and Subway, which have so far opened more than a 100 stores across the country (Bajpai, 2003). Even though such outlets are far more expensive than other informal traditional food options, they seem to carry some cachet among the Indians of today. Eating American foods was described as an ‘entertainment’ by all those who had been exposed to them.

Some participants also attributed their less traditional eating behavior to having received a negative feedback from their American friends and co-workers. Practices such as eating American foods at local restaurants for lunch instead of carrying a packed Indian lunch, using forks to eat Indian food even at Indian restaurants instead of the usual practice of eating with their hands, serving meat in their homes to American guests despite expressing disgust at the sight or smell of meat, serving American food to their children more often than serving Indian food had all been adopted owing to receiving negative feedback or prejudiced treatment from their American counterparts. However, their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding eating or serving meat, eating traditional Indian meals, and using their hands to eat food had not changed. Changing their practices was viewed more as a need to ‘blend in’ or assimilate themselves or as in the case of participants with children, socialize and assimilate their children into the American society successfully.

Previous studies in this area have also shown similar such trends. For example, among a group of Vietnamese Americans in Minnesota, the consumption of traditional foods such as dog meat, snakes, rice field rats, and organ meats (hear, liver) had decreased substantially. Even though such foods were available, and were perceived as being ‘nutritious’, purchasing them was thought of as bringing public disapproval. Consequently, these foods had been replaced by more
American foods and meats such as beef, ham, and chicken (Tran, 1991). Similarly, Tan and Wheeler (1983) in their study on Chinese immigrant women in London showed that even though most of them had altered their traditional dietary practices to a small extent, they had held on to the Chinese concepts of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ foods. Eating American foods for them was limited to eating out on occasions. Their traditional concepts of eating hot and cold foods took precedence especially during periods of sickness, and disease. But when it came to their children, the women were reported as going to great lengths to cook both Chinese and American foods at home. Their belief was that their children needed to be socialized into English as well as Chinese eating patterns.

For the participants in this study as well, and who had children, the desire to see their children assimilate into the American society was greater than the need to maintain traditional practices. Their own concepts of traditional rules and practices however, had not changed. The fact that they expressed disgust at having to serve meat to their American guests implied that their own traditional concepts of purity and pollution regarding foods had not changed. Similarly not being able to eat with their hands at the Indian restaurant was seen more as an ‘adjustment’. The notion that one’s hand made the food ‘tastier’, or the concept that eating with the right hand symbolized purity had not changed.

Finally, the length of stay in State College was also seen as affecting the participants’ traditional food behavior. For example, those who had been living in State College for as long as five to fifteen years or more reported eating more traditional foods and meals. For some of these participants, especially those older than 45 years, eating Indian food was not only a matter of preserving and maintaining their traditions, but they also reported that trying new or other
American foods did not hold any interest for them. Jamal (1998) in his study on British-Pakistanis also found differences being linked to the age of the immigrants. He found that first-generation, older Pakistanis were more reluctant to consume mainstream English foods on a regular basis. Pakistani foods were perceived by them as being traditional, and as a means to preserve their identity.

The findings in the current study and Jamal’s study on age could be the basis for Jamal’s (1998) theory on age and food behaviors. He postulated that, “in food consumption, as in anything else, the habits, behavior, and preferences acquired in childhood shape those of adulthood – creating patterns that over time become resistant to change”. Therefore, the fact that the older participants in the current study, as well as the older participants in Jamal’s (1998) study described trying new foods or American foods as ‘no longer holding any interest or appeal’ could be due to their resistance to change. For some other participants who had been in State College for longer than five years but less than fifteen years, American foods simply no longer seemed to hold the same ‘novelty’. In other words, they had become ‘routine’ or ‘boring’ over the years. Such a trend was reported by Jamal (1998) as well.

In contrast, those had been living in State College for five years or less reported eating less traditionally. The decrease in the consumption of traditional foods was not only influenced by other more tangible factors such as decreased time and availability of Indian foods for these participants, but eating out and eating American and other foods was described as being an enjoyable experience. Maintaining their traditions was not a priority for them.

The fact that a longer length of stay was found to cause an increase in traditional food behavior is similar to what Raj et al. (1999) found in their study on the food habits of Asian Indians in relation to their length of stay. Recent immigrants were found to have more
Americanized food habits than other long-time residents. The fact that the recent immigrants may have acquired a taste for American food items even before coming to America was listed as one of the reasons for this difference. This could hold true among the participants of this study as well. After all, the recent Asian Indian Hindu Brahmans in this study had admitted to consuming American foods on a frequent basis even before coming to State College.

**Theme 8: Strategies for Retaining the Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions**

Several strategies were adopted to counter situations where eating a traditional meal or food might not have been possible. For example, for almost all the participants, a decreased availability, and a higher cost of Indian foods in State College necessitated stocking up on Indian foods and ingredients during their trips to bigger cities in America as well as to India. This finding was also reported by Karim et al. (1986) in their study on a group of Asian Indian students in Cincinnati. The students commonly adopted the practice of ‘hoarding’ traditional foods and ingredients as and when the conditions permitted.

Due to constraints such as lack of time to prepare Indian meals, many participants resorted to preparing bulk portions of Indian foods over the weekends, and freezing leftovers for later use. They were however divided in their perceptions. For example, the younger generation, single, student population described this strategy as crucial to eating what they ‘craved’, a traditional Indian meal. Those participants who were working full time, and had children described the practice as being ‘contradictory’ to the traditional Brahmin rule of not eating leftovers. They emphatically explained that they would not have indulged in such a behavior had they been in India living with their in-laws or when their older friends or family members came
to visit. Older family members or friends from India were described as being orthodox, and as strongholds for continuing Brahmin traditions. However, for these participants in America, the practical aspects of having excellent refrigeration and freezer facilities in this country had rendered the concept of leftovers as being ‘spoilt’ and ‘impure’ void. For the older, long-time residents in this study, this practice was still perceived as being against the rules. They insisted on preparing ‘fresh’ meals each day. They argued that cooking a ‘fresh’ meal for dinner each day was not a constraint on their time since they had retired, and had plenty of time on their hands to cook. However, they admitted to eating leftovers “every now and then in the younger days”. They attributed it to time and financial constraints.

Other strategies included celebrating festivals, and other religious ceremonies that centered on food. Gandhi (1970) in his study on an Asian Indian student community in Minnesota also reported a similar trend. He found that these students often organized social get-togethers that revolved around food in an effort to share customs and foods. Even though these festivals and ceremonies had held little or no meaning back home for the younger participants in this study, they were described as serving two purposes in America: 1) as ‘strengthening solidarity within a minority group in a foreign land’, and also 2) as a means to socialize. For some older participants who were long-time residents, and had children or parents living with them, celebrating festivals were not only associated with observing religious proscriptions, but it also symbolized ‘preserving and continuing traditions in a foreign land’. These women also talked about observing religious fasts once every week or so. By eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables during these fasts, and abstaining from any other foods, the women explained that they were in fact maintaining their traditional Brahmin rules of eating a Satwik meal. Such a meal not only symbolized a meal ‘fit for Brahmin consumption’, but continued to be seen as
‘cleaning’ their bodies of ‘impurities’ such as additives and preservatives ‘typical of American foods’.

Many participants also talked about similarities between other ethnic foods and Indian food, and how these were often altered to ‘make them taste more Indian’. Mexican and Chinese foods ranked the highest in similarity to Indian foods. The male participants in this study even admitted to adding Indian spices and seasonings to foods such as lentil soups and baked beans. These were part of their strategies to eat more Indian foods, and compensate for their lack of skill in cooking an Indian meal. Although all of the above strategies have been reported in earlier studies on Asian Indians (Gupta, 1975; Kittler and Sucher, 1989; Karim et al., 1986; Thomas et al., 1986; Raj et al., 1999; Henderson, 2002), the participants’ perceptions towards these have seldom been reported.

Theme 9: The Future of an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin in America

All the participants reflected on their future as an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin in America. All the participants perceived their futures as ‘being a mix’, or a combination of both Indian and American cultures. This meant eating foods that were both Indian and American. However, the extent to which these traditional food behaviors will be retained or abandoned, and which specific behaviors will be retained over some of the others were seen as being dependent on factors such as their marital status, their potential mate’s race, having kids, work schedules, the city they lived in, their family structure, and the amount of time they had lived in America.

For the younger, student generation, who were single, and had no children, and had been in State College from two to five years, the possibility of eating less traditional foods in
situations such as above was perceived more as a matter of ‘being practical’ than of relinquishing traditions. “Do in Rome as the Romans do” was quoted by a participant to imply that being in a foreign country was a natural predecessor to altering one’s cultural identity. The future for these participants was seen as being ‘the best of both cultures’, and as being dependent on several factors. For example, having a family consisting of older parents or young children meant eating more traditional foods. Older family members were seen as influencing their food habits by preparing more Indian food at home, and observing religious fasts and ceremonies. At the same time, it was also important to them that their children were assimilated into the American culture. Therefore, having children also meant ‘maintaining a balance between eating Indian foods and eating American foods’. Having an American partner versus an Indian partner in the future on the other hand, meant eating more American foods, and ‘not following’ all the Brahmin-related rules of eating. This balance however, was perceived as ‘being an equal mix’ in case of facing both the above conditions – children, and an American partner. In other words, both children and older Indian family members in the household were associated with cooking and eating traditional foods at home.

However, for the older, more long-time residents with children or teenagers in their households, being widowed or not having a wife or husband to cook and share traditional meals with, or not having their children or older parents live with them also meant eating less traditional foods. In the present, their mates, children, and older parents had contributed to a more traditional eating pattern. In addition, these participants perceived their present and their future as ‘an ongoing’, and a ‘continuing struggle’. ‘Inculcating or retaining Brahmin values’ in their children, and yet ‘encourage blending in’ as Americans was perceived as a ‘struggle’ not only in the present, but also for the future. This struggle was not just limited to them having or
not having children. The participants’ own desire to ‘preserve’ traditions, yet ‘blend in as Americans’ was seen as a challenge as immigrants in America. For all the participants, other factors such as hectic work schedules, and living in a small town in America where there might be a decreased availability of Indian foods also meant eating less traditional foods, and more American foods.

**Conclusions**

The major findings in this study were that three different sets of factors influenced to varying degrees, the retention or abandonment of traditional food meanings and food choices among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins of State College, Pennsylvania:

1. Individual characteristics of the participants (age, gender, occupation, income level, marital status, family structure, personal Brahmin-related values and beliefs, personal values, beliefs, and perceptions towards American and other ethnic foods, length of stay in the U.S., exposure to American foods and media while in India, extent of contact with Americans in America, and perceptions of the State College area and its community),

2. Group characteristics of the Asian Indian community (extent of solidarity between members, attitudes toward one another, and perceptions of themselves as a group living in State College, Pennsylvania), and

3. Characteristics of the State College area and its community (type of feedback received from the host community, and the availability of information and other resources such as Indian foods and spices, Indian restaurants, etc.).
The findings of this study are summarized in Table 8. Based on these findings, and on the theoretical perspectives provided by the system’s approach, the process of food-related acculturation among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College, PA can be seen as a bi-directional continuum involving two dimensions: degree of adoption of American foods and the degree of retention of traditional food meanings and food choices. A participant’s location and movement along this continuum was determined by several factors that were related to the individual characteristics of the participant, the group characteristics of the Asian Indian community, and finally, the characteristics of the State College area and its community (Figure 3). For example, it appeared that those who had only recently arrived at State College consumed more American foods than they did traditional foods. While it was true that all of them needed the time to settle in, and become aware of where to find and purchase traditional foods and spices, for some of these newly arrived participants, the transition to adopting American foods was achieved more easily than for others. The perception that American foods were ‘novel’, ‘different’, or ‘exciting’, and the fact that eating foods that were not traditional symbolized a sense of independence, and non-conformation may have been responsible for the increased consumption of such foods for these participants during this early period. However, once the so-called ‘novelty’ of these foods wore off, the desire for familiarity appeared to motivate them to prepare and eat more traditional foods.

Being young, single, or male seemed to be associated with consuming less traditional foods. For those participants who had arrived in State College as students or professionals, and were single, achieving their education or career goals was more important at this stage of their life than maintaining their traditional dietary behaviors. Their tightly packed schedules during a working week left them little time for preparing Indian foods. Therefore, foods such as ready-to-
eat cereals, sandwiches, and pita breads and tortillas were easy and convenient substitutes for dosas, idlis, rice, and lentils. The males in this study appeared to eat less traditionally mainly due to a reported lack of traditional cooking skills. They reported Indian cooking as being ‘problematic’, ‘difficult’, and ‘complicated’. Assembling a sandwich for a meal was not merely a matter of saving time on a busy day for these men, but also an easier way out of a situation they felt they had no control of – a lack of know-how. If the males in this study were married, their wives were found to be the primary cooks in their households, and if they were unmarried, they expected their future wives to take on this role, eventually. Women on the other hand, married or unmarried, reported that Indian cooking for them was not so much a matter of being ‘complicated’ or ‘difficult’ as it was of ‘time-consuming’. The married women also reported a sense of guilt and disappointment over the fact that they did not cook as many meals a day as their mothers had back home in India. It appeared that although they were proud of themselves for contributing to their families’ income levels, they were also of the view that they were failing in their duties as a wife and a mother. It seemed that they continued to believe in the traditional Brahmin concept that men were the providers, and women were the exclusive cooks in a household. Living in America as an educated, career-minded woman was perceived as being a barrier to fulfilling the role of a Brahmin wife and mother. Some participants were really grateful for their parents or grandparents visiting from India so they could get traditional Indian meals. In accordance with the Brahmin norm, the visiting mother, mother-in-law, or grandmother took over the role of the cook, and prepared three meals a day, much to the relief of the time-strapped working couple.

Many participants equated the need to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions with growing older, getting married, and having children. In concurrence with this perception, a trend
of an increased consumption of traditional foods for participants in these stages of life than for those who were single, unmarried, or younger was observed in this study. This indicated a gradual shift in the continuum from consuming more American foods to retaining more traditional foods and practices over the years. Some individuals however, over the course of their stay in State College, had either been widowed, or their children no longer lived with them. They admitted to eating less traditionally than when their spouses or children had been living with them. There appeared to be a lesser degree of infection with maintaining traditional eating practices among these individuals for obvious reasons. Widowed individuals, especially the men in this study, no longer had their wives to rely on for a traditional meal. Similarly, for those who no longer had their children living with them, the need to pass on their cultural heritage through their children by retaining traditional practices had become redundant. Such individuals can be seen as moving in the other direction of the continuum over the years, namely, from retaining traditional food behaviors to adopting American food behaviors during the process of acculturation.

A participant’s personal Brahmin-related values and concepts appeared to play an important role in his or her location and movement on the continuum of food-related acculturation process as well. Most participants felt that there was a rather complicated definition of Brahminism. A Brahmin was not only required to avoid eating any meat or meat products (with the exception of fish by the coastal Brahmins), but also follow specific food handling practices such as using the right hand during cooking, and eating, refraining from eating leftovers, and observing religious fasts and ceremonies. However, there seemed to exist degrees of religiosity in the current sample, with some participants merely remembering certain tenets and not practicing them, and others continuing to practice some or most of them. The stronger
their beliefs in the Brahmin tenets were, the harder it was to move to alternatives. For example, there were those who freely admitted to not believing in many of the Brahmin rules and traditions. Instead they sought scientific rationales for many of these. Such participants also reported to consuming more American foods, including meat and meat products since their arrival at State College. On the other hand, there were those who had followed a strictly vegetarian, traditional Brahmin diet in India with a more strict definition of vegetarianism than those actually practiced in American restaurants and eateries. Situations such as traveling that entailed eating out especially proved to be a problem for them. Eating vegetarian lasagna that contained sauce with meat extracts, or eating at a restaurant where meats and vegetarian foods were cooked in the same utensils contradicted their Brahmin values of ahimsa, purity, and pollution. Thus, the transition from eating more traditional foods to more American foods may have been a difficult one for these participants.

Most participants described State College as “a small town in rural Pennsylvania” – a town where a variety of Indian foods and ingredients was reported as not being available as opposed to a bigger city such as New York or Philadelphia. This in turn was felt to be the primary reason for the high cost of traditional foods in the area. Having to rely on buying traditional foods during their trips to India and other bigger nearby cities, and substituting American and other ingredients such as chilli powder for cayenne pepper, and tofu for Indian cottage cheese in Indian recipes were cited as examples by the participants to prove how living in State College was a barrier to maintaining their traditional food behaviors. Americans, particularly those in State College were perceived as being narrow-minded, or not very accepting of Indian traditional practices. Therefore, in order to avoid possible discrimination, and ‘blend in successfully’ into the American society, the participants limited eating or cooking traditional
foods, and eating with their hands to the confines of their own homes. American foods and silverware were opted for in public, and during occasions that involved socializing with their American colleagues and friends.

This study also showed how the American, and their own native cultural contexts influenced the traditionally held meanings of foods and food choices for the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins of State College, PA. America is often called the ‘melting pot’ of the World. This is because it is believed that people from all over the world come to the United States, loose their cultural identity, and 'melt' into or assimilate into the American culture. However, researchers have shown that United States today is experiencing its second great wave of immigration - a movement of people who place more emphasis on preserving one's ethnic identity, of finding ways to highlight and defend one's cultural roots. Although even large coastal cities have seen sharp changes in their racial and ethnic mix in the past two decades, most immigrants continue to cluster into small college towns (Booth, 2002). But even as the immigrants arrive, many American-born citizens have also been shown to pour out of the larger cities in search of new homes in more homogeneous, mostly smaller towns and smaller cities and rural areas. Most of the people leaving the big cities are white and they tend to working class (Branigin, 2003).

Although at first glimpse, State College appears to be a ‘mini-melting pot’ – one that has experienced ethnic growth and diversity through Penn State, the findings of this study are more consistent with those of Booth’s and Branigin’s. To the Hindu Brahmin immigrants in this sample, State College represents a ‘homogenous’, ‘mostly white’, ‘less urban’, ‘small town’ located in central Pennsylvania, whose ‘narrow-minded’ residents care deeply about English as the official language and about preserving Social Security. Such a town is further believed to be
in sharp contrast to the more ‘urban’, ‘multicultural’, and ‘multiethnic’ cities such as New York and Philadelphia, where an emphasis is on retaining affirmative action and bilingual education.

With a myriad of ethnic restaurants, stores, and other cultural organizations in the area, it seems that the Asian Indian culture is in fact trying hard to voice its distinction amongst the overall American culture. The Hindu Brahmin immigrants in this sample saw ‘blending’ into the larger American society, especially as far as food habits were concerned, as being ‘difficult’. Unlike most other castes, the food choices of Hindu Brahmans are dictated by complex, religious proscriptions. Therefore, following traditional customs seemed to bring in the possibility of ‘standing out’ more easily for these participants. They are facing the challenge of somehow fitting in—of juggling their heritage and their identity with participation in the mainstream. They are faced with the eternal question of whether they should cling to their cultural roots or try to become American as quickly as possible. While some participants seemed to have retained a kernel of their Brahmin beliefs (despite an obvious change in their traditional eating habits), the cultural context of State College, PA, and of America in general, had prompted most of them to retain their identity more as Asian Indians rather than as Hindu Brahmans. For example, a much simpler definition of the concept of ‘a complete Brahmin meal’ had become acceptable upon their arrival to State College. A ‘complete Brahmin meal’ in India had consisted of a staple such as rice or rotis, a dal or sambar, and two or three different kinds of vegetables. A meal in State College was considered ‘complete’ as long as it had a traditional staple such as rice, one vegetable or lentil curry, and most importantly, as long as it was ‘Indian’ in nature.

Despite acknowledging their diversity as Hindu Brahmans among all the castes that resided in State College, PA, the participants in this sample perceived themselves as a single minority group— as Asian Indians in America. They were willing to adapt or ‘blend in’ into the
American society, but at the same time, expressed the need to preserve their cultural heritage. Driven by this need to preserve a sense of cultural identity, and to facilitate the transmission of cultural traditions to the next generation, they appeared to have focused on finding and creating a place for themselves within the boundaries of the culture of State College. Consequently, a support structure developed within the group in the form of the *Krishan* Indian grocery store, the Indian restaurants, and the celebration of festivals and other religious practices. Their cultural identity can also be seen as being reinforced by their frequent return trips to India, the tendency of the women to take on the exclusive role of cooks in their households, etc. Practically every participant that was interviewed in this study was found to socialize with his/her own ethnic community members. Developing stable voluntary associations with their own ethnic group has helped to build the social structure of an Asian Indian community that now exists in State College.

The systems approach such as the one that guided this study, offered a viable alternative to understanding the processes by which food habits change within an immigrant community. Based on the findings in this study, the hypothesis or presumption that the food behavior of Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins residing in State College, PA will be affected by the individual characteristics of the participants, the group characteristics of the Asian Indian community, and the characteristics of the State College area and its community can be accepted. The bi-directional continuum model of the degree of retention or abandonment of traditional foods, and the overall theoretical framework that emerged in this study were drawn directly from the data. Although the findings from this study are not statistically generalizable in the sense of a quantitative study, they are theoretically generalizable. In other words, even though the participants in this study are not representative of the larger population of Asian Indian Hindu
Brahmins across the United States, they are representative of the phenomenon of changing food meanings and food choices among Hindu Brahmins in State College, PA. Therefore, the themes developed in this study can be tested in a similar setting, and transferred to predict and explain the process of food-related acculturation in similar situations.

Reflections of the Investigator

During my interviews, I found participants’ responses to support as well as contradict Holmes and Clark’s (1992) “Victims of Progress” and “Secular” trend theory of social scientists. Regarding the “Secular” trend, I am of the view that the dietary changes in this community were positive, and that the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College changed their diets due to better western modes of food production and consumption. In contrast, regarding the “Victims of progress” trend, I am of the view that the westernization of the diets of this group of people was a negative change. However, as an objective observer in this study, I believe that the advantages and disadvantages of dietary change in this community are not so easily categorized. For instance, the fact that the participants had adopted some American food behaviors was a positive change in that these changes had helped them to ‘adjust’ or ‘assimilate’ better in the American society. The participants’ own words such as “I like it here”, “I don’t intend going back”, and “I have to make some adjustments if I plan on being here, and so I don’t see that as being a negative thing”, make me believe that for these participants, the changes were ultimately for the better. On the other hand, words such as, “I think it is a struggle to remain here”, “I find that it is really hard to balance being an Indian and an Asian American at the same time”, and “I wish things could be easier to find an equal mix…it’s hard”, lead me to believe that for these participants, the changes were negative. Thus the fact that the data did not specifically point to
either negative or positive outcomes makes my taking a stance for one or the other trend impossible.

My belonging to the same ethnic group as the participants of this study was a mixed blessing. Separating the participants’ reality from my own views and perceptions was a challenging task, and I went to great lengths to compensate for my cultural closeness to the participants. On the other hand, this process helped me re-evaluate my immigration experience and become aware of the extent of my own acculturation in the United States. I emigrated six years ago and at the time of the interviews, I felt comfortably bilingual and enjoyed social connections with Indian- and English-speaking friends and acquaintances. I visited India only once since I have been here. I have limited, mostly second-hand information about the changes that occurred there in my absence. So my participants’ interviews provided me with information that was significantly different from my experience.

My fluent Hindi and Tamil was an asset in establishing rapport with the older participants. However, our shared cultural background took its toll on the participants’ ability to explicate their experience in depth. No matter how many times I explained to them that my life story is different from theirs, they kept making shortcuts with an assured comment, “You know how it is” and sounded surprised when I asked them to explain their statements.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study leaves many unanswered questions about how the participants will deal with the conflicts between the old and new cultural norms and how they will cope with the challenges presented by their new social milieu. Will the currently single participants continue eating a traditional Indian meal for dinner if they married an American partner in the future? Will such
participants raise their children on Brahmin values of eating? Will these same participants eat more traditional foods if they lived in a bigger city in America? Will their food habits become more traditional as they grew older? How will their food habits be if they moved back to India? An interesting study will be to follow these and similar participants to try to provide some answers to these and other questions.

The participants in this study are not representative of the entire population of immigrants from India. A majority (25 out of 28) of the participants that volunteered for this study were from the more urban areas of India such as the metropolitan cities of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Bangalore, and Madras. Such people are likely to be generally more westernized in their eating habits than those from some of the rural towns and cities of India. A study of participants from rural areas of India will be most interesting, as the same type of research might provide different results such as a different degree of acculturation with different participants.

Many Asian Indians Hindu Brahmans (twelve) in this study were students, and described themselves as belonging to a lower socioeconomic status in America. They attributed their more Americanized food habits to a lower cost of American fast foods as compared to Indian ingredients. Will having more money mean eating more Indian foods for these participants? Literature suggests that the ability to afford the often higher priced traditional foods in America presents a major barrier to maintaining a traditional food behavior among immigrant groups (Romero-Gwynn et al., 1993). A longitudinal research following immigrants could answer these questions which arose in the course of this study.

A study of immigrants in other parts of the United States, especially those with larger populations of Asian Indians of India would be valuable. Some studies of food habits among Asian Indians were conducted in the U.S (Gupta, 1969; Kittler and Sucher, 1989; Karim et al.,
1986; Thomas et al., 1986; Raj et al., 1999; Henderson, 2002), but food symbolism and meaning-related issues, especially in a Hindu Brahmin population are much less researched.

One participant reported her daughter’s painful adjustment, involving teasing and prejudice against Asian Indian eating habits in middle and elementary school. A study of immigrant school children would provide information about how they function and cope in academic and social situations.

This study also raises questions about the role of women in the immigrant community or families and the particular family dynamics which lead to the formation of their gender attitudes regarding cooking and eating Indian foods. It would be of interest to compare full time working women and part time or unemployed women in Asian Indian immigrant families. Also, a study focusing on the role of men in cooking and shopping in Asian Indian families might look at the influence of acculturation in their family’s eating habits, and the changes, if any, in their overall conception of traditional food behavior.

Literature points out to the effects of generation on abandoning and retaining traditional food habits. Jamal (1998) found in his study on British-Pakistanis that the first-generation informants perceived English foods as being light and healthy, but were reluctant to consume them on a regular basis. In the present study, this trend was similar in that the older participants perceived American foods as being healthier than Indian foods, and yet consumed more traditional Indian foods. It would be interesting to investigate the reasons for this tendency and to collect data about the influence of generation on food habits in the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin population.

Three participants reported they consumed beef after coming to America. Two reported consuming beef even prior to immigration. Overall, all of these five participants attributed the
changes to a lack of beliefs in Brahmin values of worshipping a cow. Nevertheless, these participants spoke about this with a mixed sense of guilt and satisfaction at having had easy transitions in America. It would be interesting to look at people who had believed in these values and yet started consuming beef after coming to America.

Some participants indicated that having an older family visitor from India use his or her hands to eat in American eating places was a major source of their feelings of embarrassment even when they felt that such a practice was justified as being part of their cultural identity. They mentioned that in restaurants, they often felt embarrassed and nervous when an old grandmother or mother would use her hands to eat a sandwich. It would be interesting to look closer at immigrants who achieved a sense of comfort in this practice, and to investigate factors that were conducive to the successful acceptance of their unconventional cultural practices in a new cultural milieu.

Finally, the use of grounded theory has its limitations in research, as does any one single research method. For one, the method does not allow for an accurate assessment of the universality or specificity of any of the themes that were expressed by the participants. The technique of purposive sampling does not ensure the generalizability of the findings to a larger population (Patton, 1990). The selection of participants is such that they are representative of the phenomenon rather than a larger population. However, it is possible to test the workability of the thematic framework to other similar phenomena or experiences. Also, the fact that a particular theme was not provided by a participant did not necessarily indicate its irrelevance. Some other limitations of this study included possible incorrectly reported information by the participants, and biases on part of the researcher.
Because of the nature of the qualitative work, the findings that were reported in this study are time and context bound. Having said this, a comprehensive understanding of the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin community in State College suggests that many of the issues discussed in this study could be applicable to a large part of the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin community. However, it is suggested that further investigations in this area should attempt to employ a longitudinal type of research design if possible in order to study trends in the acculturation of food habits as they are subjected to the test of time.

Implications and Recommendations

Asian Indians are the fastest growing group of immigrants in the United States according to the 2002 census report. Since the inception of this study, the number of people emigrating from India has been steadily increasing, and Indians have formed sizeable enclaves in many American cities (U.S. Census, 2002). Despite its small sample size, this study has identified trends that are likely to occur in the larger Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin community. For instance, the Indian or Brahmin definition of a meal is different from an American one. Perceptions of Indian foods differ from perceptions of American and other ethnic foods. Some American foods may even hold negative connotations but will continued to be included in their daily diets. Home cooked Indian meals are considered healthier than the foods available at ethnic restaurants. Ideas of what is healthy or nutritious may not exactly match standard American concepts of health and nutrition. Men are unlikely to make any dietary changes in a household since the woman is considered as the primary caretaker of the family. Thus, the decisions to make any dietary changes will depend on the woman’s willingness to adopt them. Due to all these reasons, health care professionals such as dietitians need to recognize that any nutritional
advice for an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin client should be individualized. It is important for them to listen to the client’s own description of his or her diet to ascertain which foods can play a role in meal planning.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of changing food choices and food meanings among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin immigrants in State College, Pennsylvania. In order to understand the process by which their traditional food habits changed, a systems approach was used. This approach dictated paying close attention to not only the characteristics of the individual participants themselves but also to the group characteristics of the Asian Indian community, and the social context in which these participants found themselves. A review of literature on Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin traditions was presented and incorporated in the understanding of the experience of the participants. Twenty-eight in-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted to collect the data for this study. Data analysis procedures were concurrent with the grounded theory approach outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

The findings of this study indicate that Hindu Brahmins in the United States may include many American foods in their meal plans, yet continue to eat many traditional foods, possibly in an effort to retain their Brahmin identity. The degree of use of American and traditional foods can be variable and likely to be influenced by many factors, including the personal characteristics of the individuals themselves (age, gender, marital status, family structure, occupation, personal Brahmin-related beliefs and values about foods, etc), the group characteristics of the Asian Indian community (extent of solidarity between the members), and
the characteristics of the host community (the type of feedback received, the availability of information and resources in that area, etc.). Based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged in this study, the process of food-related acculturation for the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins of State College has been theorized as a bi-directional continuum involving two dimensions: degree of adoption of American foods and the degree of retention of traditional food meanings and food choices. A participant’s location and movement along this continuum was determined by several factors that were related to the individual characteristics of the participant, the group characteristics of the Asian Indian community, and finally, the characteristics of the State College area and its community.

Even though the participants in this study are not representative of the larger population of Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins across the United States, they are representative of the phenomenon of changing food meanings and food choices among Hindu Brahmins in State College, PA. Therefore, the theoretical framework that emerged in this study can be tested in a similar setting, and transferred to predict and explain the process of food-related acculturation for Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in similar such situations.


Daly, K. (1992). The fit between qualitative research and characteristics of families. In J.F. Gilgun, K. Daly, & G. Handel (Eds.), Qualitative methods in family research, (pp. 3-11). Sage Publications.


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Edu</th>
<th>Living situation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Stay in U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Bombay</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Roommates</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>B.A</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>20 yrs</td>
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<td>1 yr</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Calcutta</td>
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<td>Spouse</td>
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<td>Madras</td>
<td>3 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Student</td>
<td>B.S</td>
<td>Roommates</td>
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<td>2 yrs</td>
</tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Ret. Faculty</td>
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<td>2c</td>
<td>Mangalore</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Kanpur</td>
<td>6 mths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>M.S</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tiruchi</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>B.S</td>
<td>Spouse, kids, mother-in-law</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>5 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Roommates</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>Jodhpur</td>
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<td>Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>Spouse, kids</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>3 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>B.A</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2c</td>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>Roommates</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Edu</td>
<td>Living Situation</td>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Place of Origin</td>
<td>Stay in U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>Spouse, kids</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>10 mths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>M.S</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>3 ½ mths</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>Bombay</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Student(^a)</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Roommates</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>Spouse, kids</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>10 mths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>3 ½ mths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Undergraduate Student; all others were graduate students.  
\(^b\) Roommates were American, or other ethnic groups; all others lived with Indians.  
\(^c\) Children were older, and lived away from home in other towns or cities.  
\(^d\) Places of origin were smaller towns or rural villages located on the outskirts of bigger cities.
### TABLE 2: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed Behaviors</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using chili powder, and salsa in masoor dhal (Red lentil sauce) in place of traditional ingredients such as cayenne pepper and tomato puree</td>
<td>It appeared that as long as a recipe had at least one original, basic ingredient (the red lentils), it continued to be a traditional Indian recipe. Using non-traditional seasonings was acceptable as long as they contained some basic spices such as red peppers and tomatoes, and did not alter the taste too widely.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods; Strategies for Maintaining Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating corn tortillas and a vegetable curry for lunch</td>
<td>The tortillas were eaten in much the same manner as a roti – the right hand was used to tear a small piece off the tortilla, which was then used as a scoop for the curry. The fact that a tortilla did not consist of the same ingredients as a roti did not seem to matter for these participants. A corn tortilla in place of a wheat roti appeared to be acceptable as long as it served the purposes of being a starchy accompaniment, and as a scoop for the vegetables.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods; Strategies for Maintaining Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating rice, curry, and potato chips</td>
<td>This participant had reported in her interview that she never ate a meal without papadams back home in India – something she was unable to purchase in State College. It appeared that she used potato chips as a substitute because just like papadams, the potato chips might have contributed to the crunchy texture of the meal.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods; Strategies for Maintaining Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observed Behaviors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Meanings</strong></td>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating yogurt and rice at the end of a meal</td>
<td>Even though the participants reported that they were full, they continued to portion out a small amount of rice and yogurt, and proceeded to ‘finish off’ their meal. The concept of a ‘complete’ meal appeared to be related to not only whether the meal consisted of any Indian dishes or not, but also to the specific combination of foods that completed the very act of eating that meal.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using salmon, tuna, or shrimp to make a very traditional Bengali dish called ‘Macher Jhol’ (fish curry)</td>
<td>Traditionally, Bengalis use a fish of the herring family, and specific spices such as fresh ground mustard and asafetida to make this unique dish. Since this particular variety of fish was reported to be unavailable in America, other fish were being used as substitutes. However, the use of the other traditional spices and ingredients remained unchanged. In this case, it appeared that a macher jhol continued to be one as long as it consisted of some form of seafood, and the specific spices that the recipe called for.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods; Strategies for Maintaining Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking rice in a pressure-cooker, and using a traditional pair of tongs to hold a utensil while cooking a traditional meal for dinner</td>
<td>Even though there was an electric rice cooker, and oven mittens in sight, some traditional cookware was being retained either because they were familiar and more comfortable using them, or possibly as an attempt to maintain traditional cooking techniques and practices.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods; Strategies for Maintaining Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Behaviors</td>
<td>Meanings</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving macaroni and cheese to their children for dinner along with some Indian food in the same plate</td>
<td>Cooking and serving both Indian and American foods to their children as part of the same meal appeared to be an attempt to encourage their children to maintain a traditional eating pattern at home while at the same time be comfortable with eating American foods. It was important for these participants that their children recognize their cultural heritage, and yet be able to adapt successfully into the American society.</td>
<td>Perceptions of Indian foods; Strategies for Maintaining Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the right hand exclusively while cooking and eating; observing a fast; placing idols of gods and goddesses in the kitchen area; removal of shoes before stepping into the kitchen; not using leftovers as part of a new recipe; browning crumbled veggie burgers to make pasta sauce; and eating a veggie burger for lunch</td>
<td>Every time the participants needed to stir a dish they were cooking, or were eating something, they used their right hands almost exclusively – even while cooking pasta or chicken soup. Similarly, behaviors such as observing a fast, placing pictures or idols of gods and goddesses in the kitchen area, removing one’s shoes before stepping into the kitchen area as a sign of respect to the presence of god, and not using leftovers as part of a new recipe all seemed to indicate one thing: even though their food choices were no longer strictly Indian, certain Brahmin concepts of religiosity, maintaining purity and avoiding pollution continued to be an integral part of their belief system. However, exactly which concepts were retained, and which were not, and to what extent, appeared to depend entirely on that individual. For example, for some participants, the</td>
<td>Being a Brahmin in State College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Behaviors</td>
<td>Meanings</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating a sandwich for lunch; Presence of cookies, chips, and candies in a kitchen cabinet</td>
<td>Brahmin belief system included the avoidance of beef, while for others it included the avoidance of meat altogether.</td>
<td>Being a Brahmin in State College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some participants had reported that they had eaten Indian foods for all meals during their stay in India, and had rarely snacked during the day. However, eating a sandwich for lunch, and snacking on typical American snacks indicated a definite change in their food choices after immigration.</td>
<td>Changing Food Choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 3: FOOD CHOICES, MEAL PATTERNS, FOOD MEANINGS</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Before Immigration</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Food Choices</strong></td>
<td>“Frequent” use of ethnic foods (clarified butter, a “variety” of vegetables, yogurt, dal, roti, rice dishes, and tea).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meal Patterns</strong></td>
<td>“Regular” - 3 or 4 meals a day – Indian</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eating out - “rare” due to higher cost.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snacking = “tiffin”, not “junk” foods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food Meanings</strong></td>
<td>“complete” meal - 1 staple, 2 or 3 sides.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Street foods = “fun”, “unhygienic”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snacks in India = “not fattening”, healthy”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rice and yogurt = essential to complete meal, “comfort food”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall quality of diet – “good”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After Immigration</strong></td>
<td>“Frequent” use of American foods (fruit juice, canned or frozen vegetables, bread (white), ready-to-eat cereal, cheese, soft drinks)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meal Patterns</strong></td>
<td>“Sporadic meals” – no breakfast/American breakfast, lunch - American fast foods, Dinner - traditional.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eating out = “necessity”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snacking ↑ – on “junk” foods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food Meanings</strong></td>
<td>Dinner meal - not “complete” (1 staple, 1 side dish), at least “Indian”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Street foods did not “exist here”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snacks = “unhealthy”, “fattening”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rice and yogurt = still “essential” to “complete” meal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall quality of diet – “bad”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>Brahmins</td>
<td>Non-Brahmins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Inherent Qualities</td>
<td>wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness</td>
<td>passion, pride, valor, dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Foods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Human Quality</td>
<td>Cooked, minimum amount of spices or seasonings, fresh-fresh fruits, vegetables, milk, honey</td>
<td>Fried and spicy foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Purity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Heat-Producing</td>
<td>Balance of ‘hot’ (spicy), and ‘cold’ (fresh produce, yogurt, milk)</td>
<td>Too many or too little ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Meats (Ahimsa)</td>
<td>Avoid beef, all non-vegetarian foods, eggs</td>
<td>Avoid beef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coastal Brahmins eat fish</td>
<td>Eat all non-vegetarian foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Body-Composition (Ayurveda)</td>
<td>Menstruating women – body heat – no contact with perishable foods</td>
<td>No rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hygiene</td>
<td>Bathe before meal</td>
<td>No rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wash cooking area thoroughly before and after every meal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>Brahmins</td>
<td>Non-Brahmins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cook</td>
<td>May not accept food from lower castes</td>
<td>No rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Storage Practices</td>
<td>May not eat leftovers</td>
<td>May eat leftovers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cook every meal fresh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Meal-Time Etiquette</td>
<td>Avoid physical contact with another’s plate,</td>
<td>No rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dishes containing food</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dip fingers in bowl of water before</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>touching another dish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Place highly perishable foods (milk) away</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from fermented foods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Eating with Hands</td>
<td>Right hand only</td>
<td>May eat with both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Religious Ceremonies</td>
<td>Avoid the presence of all lower castes and</td>
<td>No rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘impure’ foods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Fasts</td>
<td>Observe religious fasts</td>
<td>No rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Menu Planning</td>
<td>Sattvik menu – vegetarian foods</td>
<td>Tamasik and Rajasik menus – meats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 5: CHANGES IN BRAHMINS-RELATED RULES, VALUES, AND BELIEFS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Before Immigration</th>
<th>After Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being a Brahmin</td>
<td>“one who follows all the rules”.</td>
<td>“Still believe, but cannot follow all - not practical”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating Brahmin Foods</td>
<td>Beef was not eaten; cow was “worshipped” back home.</td>
<td>“Still cannot eat beef. They are sacred and are pets”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We never ate any meat. You just don’t kill an animal for food”</td>
<td>“I don’t like an animal being killed. But its a necessity here”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We ate a very sattvik menu back home – vegetarian”.</td>
<td>“Even vegetarian foods here have meat extracts…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I can’t always eat the sattvik way – at least not for lunch. Dinner, I certainly do”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing Religious Ceremonies</td>
<td>“We observed fasts, and celebrated religious festivals, its what all Brahmins do”.</td>
<td>“We still celebrate all of them, but its also because we want to continue our traditions”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 6: PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ETHNIC AND AMERICAN FOODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Ethnic Foods</th>
<th>American Foods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older Generation</td>
<td>“Conformity to Indian culture”, “Bonding with Indian culture”, “original”, “salty”, “spicy”, “may be unhealthy”, “variety”</td>
<td>“Bland”, “Cheesy”, “Not original”, “a mixture of several ethnic cuisines”, “healthy”, “very hygienic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>“Problematic”, “Heavy”</td>
<td>“Fast”, “Convenient”, “Easy to prepare”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>“Easy to prepare”</td>
<td>“No preparation required”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE 7: MAINTAINING OR LOSING TRADITIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Traditional Behavior</th>
<th>Strategy to Maintain Traditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Level of Income</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>Buy Indian foods from India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Add Indian spices to other foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer Length of Stay in State College</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>Prepare Indian meals often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Share with extended family and Indian community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Time</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>Prepare in bulk and freeze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eat Leftovers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Buy ready-to-eat Indian foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eat at Indian restaurants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older, younger members, and spouse in family</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>Older members and spouse prepare traditional meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare Indian meals often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Exposure to American Foods in India</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>Become accustomed to American foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepare more Indian meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learn about the negative health aspects of fast foods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 8: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Effect on Traditional Behavior</th>
<th>Meaning/Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Older – ↑</td>
<td>Older – maintain cultural heritage; pass on traditions to children at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young – ↓</td>
<td>Young – sense of independence, non-conformation to traditions, novelty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males – ↓</td>
<td>Males – lack of know-how in traditional cooking, perception of Indian cooking as ‘problematic’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females - ↑</td>
<td>Females – maintain traditional role, more comfortable and familiar with Indian cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Single – ↓</td>
<td>Single - greater preoccupation with education and career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married - ↑</td>
<td>Married – spouse available to help with chores, more time available to devote to cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living situation</td>
<td>Living w/ children or elderly - ↑</td>
<td>Pass on traditions to children, presence of elderly to cook traditional foods for time-strapped couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay in State College</td>
<td>Recently arrived – ↓</td>
<td>Recent arrivals – adjust to new surroundings, sense of independence, non-conformation to traditions, novelty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Longer stay - ↑</td>
<td>Longer stay – wearing off of novelty, sense of belonging to culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin-related values and beliefs</td>
<td>Stricter Brahmins - ↑</td>
<td>Transition to American foods – harder due to stronger Brahmin belief system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
<td>Traditional Behavior</td>
<td>Meaning/Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual continued</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Exposure to American foods in India  | Little or none – ↑ at first, then ↓  
                      Higher – ↑ at first, then ↓  | Little or none (rural areas) – perception of American foods as ‘exciting’, ‘novelty’ or ‘different’.  
                      Higher - sense of independence, non-conformation to traditions, novelty. |
| Extent of contact Americans          | Higher contact - ↑    | Perception of negative feedback, need to blend in                                      |
| **Group**                            |                      |                                                                                      |
| Extent of solidarity with Indians    | Extensive - ↑         | Social contacts that focused on food helped to maintain a sense of belonging to culture, and retaining and strengthening traditions |
| State College area and community     | Negative perceptions - ↓ | Perception that the area was limited in resources such as variety of spices and foods, higher cost of foods, the community in general was ‘narrow-minded’, and did not appreciate Indian ethnicity |
FIGURE 1: STUDY TIMELINE

Pilot Study
↓
Initial Contact
↓
Consent Via Sign-Off Forms
↓
Identify Participants (Snowballing)
↓
Interviews
↓
Data Analysis
↓
Identify subsequent participants
↓
Interviews
↓
Data Analysis
↓
Conduct Participant Observations
↓
Data Analysis
↓
Member Checking (Reliability)
↓
Write Up

Time: 6 months

Time: 2 to 3 months

Time: 2 to 3 months

Time: 6 months
FIGURE 2: SAMPLING AND THEORETICAL SATURATION

SAMPLING
⇓
ANALYSIS
⇓
CATEGORY: CHANGING FOOD CHOICES
“I ate a variety of Indian foods back home; more so than here”.
“We didn’t eat out all that much, even when we had the money to”.
“I don’t eat very regularly. I eat very sporadically here. It’s bad”.
“The quality of my diet has only gone down ever since I came here”.
SATURATION
⇓
SAMPLING
⇓
ANALYSIS
⇓
CATEGORY: BEING A BRAHMIN
“A Brahmin is one who follows Brahmin specific rules regarding eating”.
“I really don’t eat like a Brahmin here, although I feel like one”.
“I do not eat like a Brahmin here even though I did back home”.
“Its not possible to follow all the Brahmin-related rules that I was raised to follow”.
SATURATION
⇓
SAMPLING
⇓
ANALYSIS
⇓
CATEGORY: PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS FOODS
“I consider a meal or a food to be Indian when..”.
“Indian cuisine is problematic and heavy”.
“American cuisine in general is not filling, but its healthier”.
“I feel I am Indian when I can eat at one Indian meal a day”.
SATURATION
⇓
SAMPLING
⇓
ANALYSIS
⇓
CATEGORY: MAINTAINING/LOSING TRADITIONS
“I don’t want to be looked down upon or anything like that”.
“I ate American food even when I was back home”.
“I have been here for a long time. So my diet has changed considerably over time”.
“My husband and I have a lot of Indian friends, and we cook Indian food together”.
SATURATION
FIGURE 3: THEORY ON FOOD-RELATED ACCULTURATION

Recent arrival
Longer length of stay in U.S.
Novelty of eating non-traditional foods
Being young
Being single
Being widowed
Being male
Being students
Less strict Brahmin definitions at home
Traveling
Less solidarity and contact with fellow Indians
Negative feedback from the host community
Higher cost and low availability of traditional foods

Retaining Traditions

Longer length of stay in State College
Wearing off of novelty of eating non-traditional Foods
Being older
Being married
Having a spouse
Being female
Being professionals
Having children
Having elderly living at home
Strict Brahmin traditions
Extensive solidarity and contact with fellow Indians
Positive feedback from the host community
Lower cost and higher availability of traditional foods

Losing traditions
APPENDIX A

PILOT STUDY – RESULTS

Table 1: Food Choices and Meal patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before Immigration</th>
<th>After Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Choices</td>
<td>↑ Rice, vegetables, lentils,</td>
<td>↑ Bread, soda, pizza, cookies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fruits, yogurt</td>
<td>ready-to-eat cereals, pasta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meal Patterns</td>
<td>3-4 meals a day (breakfast,</td>
<td>1-2 meals a day (lunch or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lunch, ‘tiffin’, and dinner)</td>
<td>snack, and dinner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating Out</td>
<td>Rare (limited to occasional</td>
<td>Frequent, at least once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>street foods)</td>
<td>every day for lunch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Food-Related Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indian Foods</th>
<th>American Foods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Filling’, ‘Complete meal’</td>
<td>‘Light’ or ‘Not filling enough’, ‘Snack’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Less fatty’</td>
<td>‘Fatty’ or ‘Unhealthy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Organic’ or ‘’wholesome’</td>
<td>‘Processed’ or ‘Not fresh’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Problematic’ or ‘Time consuming’</td>
<td>‘Fast’, ‘Easy to prepare’, ‘Convenient’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘More variety’</td>
<td>‘Just a mix of different foods’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO SERVE AS A SUBJECT IN RESEARCH

I consent to participate in the research study titled ‘Exploring Changes in Food Meanings and Food Choices Among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College, PA: A Grounded Theory Approach’. I understand that if I need additional information or have further questions, the investigator of this research study, Meenakshi Mahadevan, Ph.D. Candidate, Nutrition, Department of Nutritional Sciences, Penn State University, can be reached at the following telephone number:

(814) 861-6674

I understand that this dissertation will examine the changes in food choices and food meanings among the Hindu Brahmin residents of State College, and that my participation will consist of two one to two-hour long interviews that will be tape-recorded and one participant observation. I will not be compensated for my participation. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can terminate my participation at any time. I understand that my participation in this research will expose me to no additional risk greater than those encountered in my daily life.

I understand that my identity will be kept confidential. Data will be coded such that my identity will not be compromised at any time nor will any key with subject names be available to anyone other than the investigator of this research and her academic advisor.

I understand that the results of this study may be published or reported to educational databases to further community and organizational understanding of the issues being studied, but in no way will my identity be revealed in such a report.

Signature of Participant _________________________________________________

Signature of Investigator _________________________________________________

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APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Background Information

2. How would you describe your typical daily diet back home?

3. Do you feel your diet has changed since coming to State College? Explain.

4. How would you describe a Brahmin?

5. Can you explain some rules or concepts that are specific for Brahmins?


7. What do you think about your own cuisine? Describe it.

8. Would you make any changes now that you have been here for ___ years?

9. What would you do differently if you feel like you needed to make some changes in your diet?

10. How does your background affect the way you eat?

11. What do you think about the people here? How do you think they react to you as an Asian Indian?

12. How do you feel about living in State College? How does that affect what you eat?

13. How do you see yourself in the future?

14. How do you feel about having other Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins around?

15. What can the Nutrition Department do to make things easier for you?
APPENDIX D

CODING CATEGORIES

Category I: Changes in Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings

Theme 1: Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings in India
Subtheme A: “I ate a variety of Indian foods back home; more so than here”.
Sub theme B: “Back home, we ate more regular meals”.
Sub theme C: “We didn’t eat out all that much, even when we had the money to. Eating street foods was fun though”.

Theme 2: Food Choices, Meal Patterns, and Food Meanings in State College
Subtheme A: “The foods I eat now are quite different from what I used to back home, but I still try to eat as Indian as I can”.
Subtheme B: “I don’t eat very regularly. I eat very sporadically here. It’s bad”.
Subtheme C: “I eat out a lot here, and snack a whole lot too. I never used to much, back home. Like I said, the quality of my diet has only gone down ever since I came here”.
Subtheme D: “I eat out a lot more than I used to back home; out of compulsion mostly”.

Category II: Brahmin-Related Rules, Values, and Beliefs

Theme 3: Being a Brahmin in India
Subtheme A: “A Brahmin is one who follows Brahmin specific rules regarding eating…..”.
Subtheme B: “A Brahmin is not only someone who eats or avoids certain foods but also someone who follows other Brahmin-specific rules”.
Subtheme C: “As a Brahmin, religious ceremonies are a way of life”.

Theme 4: Being a Brahmin in America
Subtheme A: “I really don’t eat like a Brahmin here…although I feel like one”.
Subtheme B: “I do not eat like a Brahmin here even though I did back home….but I never felt like I was, or am a Hindu Brahmin in the first place”.
Subtheme C: “Its not possible to follow all the Brahmin-related rules that I was raised to follow”
Category III: Perceptions Towards Indian and American Foods

Theme 5: Perceptions Towards Indian Foods
Subtheme: “I consider a meal or a food to be Indian when…..”

Theme 6: Perceptions Towards American, and Other Ethnic Foods
Subtheme: “I think American foods are very different from…..”

Category IV: Maintaining Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions in State College

Theme 7: Reasons for Losing or Retaining Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions
Subtheme A: “I really can’t afford to be a traditional Hindu Brahmin here…”
Subtheme B: “My kids and my mother make me who I am here – a traditional Brahmin at times, and then very Americanized at other times…..”
Subtheme C: “I don’t want to be looked down upon or anything like that…..”
Subtheme D: “I ate American food even when I was back home. So it was not a huge transition for me…..”
Subtheme E: “I have been here for a long time. So my diet has changed considerably over time…..”

Theme 8: Strategies for Retaining Indian or Hindu Brahmin Traditions
Subtheme A: “My husband and I have a lot of Indian friends. So we always have a potluck then”.
Subtheme B: “After all, we are a minority here. So we should all be together. And celebrating festivals are a great way to do that”.

Theme 9: The Future of an Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin in America
Subtheme A: “I see my future as the way it is now. I eat pretty much everything except beef. And I continue to enjoy and eat Indian food as well”.
Subtheme B: “I think I might even become more Indian in my eating over time. Once I have a family, and kids, I would want my kids to be Indian, and a Brahmin”.

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APPENDIX E

CONSENT TO SERVE AS A CONFIDANTE FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES

I understand that my role in this dissertation will be to serve as a personal confidante to the investigator of this study.

I understand that my participation in this dissertation, titled ‘Exploring Changes in Food Meanings and Food Choices Among Asian Indian Hindu Brahmins in State College, PA: A Grounded Theory Approach’, will consist of discussion sessions with the investigator at frequent intervals (as per my time, availability, and convenience). The purpose of these discussion sessions is to help the researcher face her biases and assumptions about the issues in this study that may otherwise interfere with the credibility of the findings. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation in these discussion sessions. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can terminate my participation at any time. I understand that my participation in this research will expose me to no additional risk greater than those encountered in my daily life.

I understand that the identity of the participants of this study will be kept confidential. Data will be coded such that their identities will not be compromised at any time nor will any key with subject names be available to me.

I understand that the results of this study may be published or reported to educational databases to further community and organizational understanding of the issues being studied, and that my identity may be revealed in such a report for verification purposes.

My Signature_________________________________________________

Signature of the Investigator_________________________________________
APPENDIX F

TRANSCRIPTION VALIDATION FORM

Dear _________________________________________:

Thank you for your participation in my research study. The information that you shared during your interview helps to provide a better understanding of the experience of changing food meanings and food choices among the Asian Indian Hindu Brahmin residents of State College, PA.

A transcription of our interview is attached. Please take a few moments to carefully read through the transcript to validate the accuracy. If you would like to clarify any points, please feel free to call me at (814) 861-6674 and I will arrange for a meeting between us so that the necessary clarifications can be made. After you have read the transcript and if you find the transcript to be accurate, please sign at the bottom of this page and mail it to me at:

Meenakshi Mahadevan
5 F Henderson Building
Penn State University
University Park, PA 16802

Please be reminded that this is a strictly confidential interview. Fictitious names and locations have been assigned to the participants and locations in this study.

Thank you for your cooperation and your timely attention to this matter. If you have any questions or concerns, don’t hesitate to contact me at (814) 861-6674, or my advisory committee chair, Dr. Dorothy Blair, at (814) 863-2912.

Meenakshi Mahadevan

My signature on the above line verifies that I have read a copy of the transcription of my interview with Meenakshi Mahadevan.
### APPENDIX G

#### GLOSSARY OF INDIAN TERMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahimsa</td>
<td>Principle of nonviolence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amrta</td>
<td>Nectar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayurveda</td>
<td>Traditional Hindu medical system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barfi</td>
<td>Fudge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>One of the four castes – priestly class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaat</td>
<td>Spicy mix of crackers and vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandanam</td>
<td>Sandalwood paste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chutney</td>
<td>Relish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curry</td>
<td>Stir-fry with vegetable or meat with spices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curry Powder</td>
<td>Spice blend to be used in stir-fries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dal</td>
<td>Thick soup or stew made of beans and lentils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dosai</td>
<td>Rice and lentil flour pancake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garam Masala</td>
<td>Hot spice blend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghee</td>
<td>Clarified butter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idli</td>
<td>Rice and lentil flour cake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadhi</td>
<td>Yogurt-based sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khappa</td>
<td>Cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kheer</td>
<td>Milk and rice pudding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korma</td>
<td>Rich, gravy vegetable or meat-based sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
<td>Warrior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kulfi</td>
<td>Icecream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumkumam</td>
<td>Red sacred powder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lassi</td>
<td>Buttermilk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masala</td>
<td>Spice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandi</td>
<td>Name of god’s vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panchagyya</td>
<td>Five elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paneer</td>
<td>Indian cottage cheese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panipuris</td>
<td>Fried, stuffed dumplings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pappadam</td>
<td>Crisp, dry cracker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickle</td>
<td>Spicy relish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitta</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prasad</td>
<td>Gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puri</td>
<td>Fried wheat flour pancakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasik</td>
<td>Passionate in nature (foods fit for a warrior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajma</td>
<td>Bean curry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasam</td>
<td>Thin lentil soup with tamarind and spices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roti</td>
<td>Broiled/baked Wheat flour pancakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabji</td>
<td>Vegetable stir-fry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sambar</td>
<td>Thick lentil soup with tamarind and spices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samosa</td>
<td>Stuffed fritters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sastika</td>
<td>Cold in potency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sattvik</td>
<td>Calming in nature (foods fit for a Brahmin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherbet</td>
<td>Fruit juice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shudra</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamasik</td>
<td>Dull in nature (foods fit for the lower castes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thayir</td>
<td>Yogurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffin</td>
<td>Mid-meal snack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untouchables</td>
<td>People considered as dirty, or polluted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upma</td>
<td>Vermicelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishya</td>
<td>Trader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vata</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vedas</td>
<td>Holy scriptures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vrthi</td>
<td>Hot in potency</td>
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</tbody>
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VITA

MEENA MAHADEVAN

Personal

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Models and Theories in Dietary Behavior
Use of Qualitative Methods in Applied Nutrition Research