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A Piece of Bengal in Japan: The Intercultural Relationships Between Bengalis and Japanese in Tokyo

by

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With the decrease in birth rate and rise in the elderly population, there is a great need for foreign labor in Japan. However, Japan’s strict and temporary immigration policies have made it very difficult for refugees to be granted asylum status or for working-class immigrants to settle in Japan. This research offers a qualitative exploration of instances of effective integration of Bengali migrants—from Bangladesh and West Bengal, India—into Japanese society, coming for economic and asylum related purposes. I examine examples of migrants who have been able to fulfill economic needs while also introducing new artforms and practices to Japan, strengthening intercultural relationships in ways that native Japanese appreciate and even emulate. Using ethnographic participant observation and in-person interviews, this research reveals how Bengalis have recreated feelings of "home" and "belonging" through culture exchange venues such as food industries, artforms, and language.

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Preface

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1.0 Introduction

Every October came with a tantrum, our voices through the walls, my half-dressed torso, my mother's fist full of sari ends. At ten years old, I didn't want to wear the cotton blouse that scratched dry threads against my skin. I didn't want the tight sari petticoats pinned to my waist, rubbing against my ankles. I hated the feeling of cold metallic necklaces and bangles against my skin, smelling like old copper from inside a cardboard box my mother kept stored on the top of her closet for special occasions. But more so, I hated to be seen. I hated the gasps and big eyes, the big fuss and kisses over nothing. Because I knew that the clothes never fit right, because they were hand-me-downs, gifted by some distant relative in India or a college friend of my mother's. Because I wished the strings of the petticoat didn't squeeze against my stomach flesh, that my un-cut hair wasn't so long that I always had to tie it back tightly in a braid. But most of all I wished my cheeks didn't turn red like my forearms, that my face wasn't so pale compared to my mother's.

The other girls wore makeup despite not yet reaching their teens, they had bangles lining their arms and long earrings, hair down and loose on their shoulders. Normally quiet, they transformed with painted eyes and red-henna printed palms, twisting their expressive faces and bodies into villains and lovers as they danced in synchronization. I envied how the clothes fit well on their slender bodies, how they had wardrobes filled with choices, a new sari to wear each year. They took the stage while I remained in the audience. They had been to India countless times, while I still had not, and they knew just what to say when questioned in Bangla. At the time, I wished we could have been like all the other children who knew how to rub their palms against the incense as it came towards them, who knew how to dance with outstretched hands, with both parents speaking Bangla.

We were messy, my mother spending two hours searching through drawers for the one decent *sari* she owned, then painstakingly trying to pin it correctly against her waist so her ankles wouldn't show. My father couldn't speak Bangla, only knew the most important words—like *ki* (what?) and *achha* (okay), twirled his red beard between his fingers to make up for awkward silence. My grandmother lived with us, and her arthritis made crossing thresholds a production and getting out of the car and into her wheelchair an even bigger production.

All of this for one weekend of *Durga Puja,* the largest Bengali festival, taking place every fall to celebrate Durga, the Hindu goddess of war. In my city of Pittsburgh, Bengali events—from the West Bengal region of India—were hosted in Hindu temples or public venues. The West Bengalis in attendance wore their most expensive gold jewelry and the finest of silk saris. They came with their extended families, with children and grandmothers, and aunts and uncles. Some even drove from other cities and states. Everyone knew each other in this small bubble of familiarity. These cultural events were an escape from the American mainstream, a small recreation of India for the Bengali families that missed home. At these cultural gatherings, I was known for being not one of the few, but the *only* mixed-race Bengali in attendance.

There was a collective sense of belonging here, of feeling right at home within this small Bengali community. During these festive gatherings the Bengalis carved out spaces for themselves in Pittsburgh, an inside community within a society that deemed them "outsiders." Having moved across the globe for economic opportunity in the US, they had left behind "home," which came in the forms of the traditions, language and food of their homeland. How did they find a sense of belonging in the US, an unfamiliar place, a new country where passport and visa grant entry, and existence is defined by differences?

My own identity as half Bengali, half American has positioned me in an in-between space, not quite fully fitting into the mold of either identity, but instead representing a mixture of both. This has drawn me to issues that migrants face regarding the identity struggles that come with migration and the loss of a sense of home, feeling like an outsider in the both the host country and in their own homelands. I always said that it was because I was different that I hated the Bengali events in Pittsburgh, that I sat beside my parents rather than joining the other kids upstairs because they wouldn't have wanted me there. Largely it was because I preferred books to socializing, because I seldom smiled, because my own unbearable shyness and insecurity kept holding me back. But there also existed a cultural barrier, which made me overtly aware of my differences, which separated me from this diasporic community. This cultural barrier did not solely stem from my social isolation, but rather from my mixed ethnicity, which itself was a product of cultural exchange. As I grew older and my grandmother grew weaker, we stopped going to Bengali events and I left that piece of me in childhood memories, only explaining my cultural background when it was forced out of me.

My distanced relationship with the Bengali diaspora in Pittsburgh resulted in an uneasiness with the presumed homogeneity of this Indian diasporic identity. Furthermore, despite the US's seeming promotion of multiculturalism, there are very limited instances of cultural integration of first-generation Bengali immigrants and Pittsburgh locals. The American friends I grew up with knew nothing about Bengali culture, nor did they have any interest in it. And as it turned out, these diaspora spaces weren't for attracting Americans; they simulated the Bengali "home" experience with exclusively Bengali members.

My relationship to this Bengali identity changed in the semester I studied abroad in Tokyo, Japan. In high school, I had participated in a short homestay in Japan with a host family, and

despite the fact that I spoke no words of Japanese, my host family did everything they could to overcome our language barrier and welcome me into their home. This personal connection motivated me to seriously continue learning Japanese, and also sparked an interest in immigration in Japan and how foreigners integrated into Japanese society. I never imagined Bengalis and Japanese intersecting. They were so starkly different linguistically, culturally and geographically. However, I discovered that Tokyo was actually home to many South Asian foreigners, many of them migrants from India and Bangladesh. In my interactions with the Bengali diaspora in Tokyo, I became interested in how migrants create the feelings of "belonging" and "home" when migrating to Japan's primarily culturally and ethnically homogenous society. Through these encounters, my own relationship with my Bengali background changed, and my dual identity served as an asset in forming connections with both Japanese locals as well as Bengalis.

The ethnic label "Bengali" refers to both West Bengali Indians and Bangladeshis. This thesis explores one way in which some members of the Bengali diaspora in Japan have managed to develop a sense of belonging and creation of home *through* direct intercultural relationships with certain Japanese locals. This is illustrated through the exchange of cultural artforms, music, language, business, travel, food, intimacy and love. However, this particular creation of "home" in the context of diaspora is not unidirectional. These Japanese locals who express an interest in Bengali culture are often themselves seeking to find or create their own sense of belonging in Japan. This search for a sense of belonging is apparent in their professional and social interest in Bengali culture. Fantasies and hopes are embedded within intercultural encounters. For some Bengalis and Bangladeshis, Japan becomes a kind of ideal place, representing cleanliness, economic opportunity, and safety. At the same time, some Japanese locals are able to find desirability in "Bengaliness," which seems to represent a friendliness, the freedom to be socially

outgoing and openly speak your mind, something that is less apparent in the atomizing tendencies of Japanese urban life (Allison 2012). In these specific encounters, home is not only created for the Bengali diaspora, but spaces of home are also created for Japanese locals.

There is an assumption that only migrants experience being "out of place," while citizens feel a natural sense of "belonging" in the homeland. But this is not always the case. There are in fact many citizens who may feel socially isolated and marginalized, despite having secure jobs and opportunities. Anthropologists Heike Drotbohm and Annika Lems (2018) urge us to reconsider our associations with the term "displacement." They ask: "Can the social rupture experienced by a refugee be compared to the struggles of the poor who are being pushed out of their houses, or to the uprootedness of a homeless person endlessly wandering the city?" Can local struggles of financial insecurity and discrimination be compared to the displacement that migrants experience? By limiting ideas about displacement to immigration and movement across borders, we produce an exclusionary discourse that promotes the idea that only locals have a "natural place of belonging" (Drotbohm and Lems).

Heath Cabot (2018) discusses forms of precarity experienced by refugees in Greece as well as by Greek citizens. Cabot's analysis breaks down the limited experiences ascribed to "refugees" and "citizens" as distinct groups, and instead urges us to understand them in relation to one another. Despite the opposing legal statuses and problems faced by Greek citizens and non-citizens, they share common struggles that have led them to "become beneficiaries of humanitarian interventions meant to alleviate suffering and address basic needs" (3). My study asks us to reanalyze not just what it means to feel displaced but also what it means to feel "at home." I seek to challenge existing notions of "belonging" in contexts of migration, by showing instances of intercultural exchange

that not only help Bengali diaspora communities feel "at home," but also, under certain conditions, allow local Japanese to create social spaces of belonging.

In this context of the Bengali diaspora in Japan, home is recreated through forms of mutual cultural exchange and emulation between Japanese locals and Bengali foreigners. This ethnography offers a qualitative exploration of instances of integration of Bengali migrants into Japanese society, a diaspora community that has been able to fulfill Japan's economic needs while also introducing new artforms and practices to Japanese locals, strengthening intercultural relationships in ways that certain native Japanese themselves appreciate and even emulate.

1.1 Theoretical Issues

The term "diaspora" typically refers to a community displaced from the homeland residing in a host country. The word comes from the Greek *diaspeirein,* literally meaning the "scattering of seeds," an etymology evoking ideas of rootedness and displacement. Diasporas are often painted as exclusionary and bounded groups that are culturally homogenous, when in fact, there is great diversity within these communities. My research builds on studies of diaspora that illustrate that feelings of "home" and "belonging" are not static, but rather continuously changing with migration. In different ways, this body of work invites us to think of home as transportable, recreated and evolving with migration. The flexibility of ideas of "home" allows diaspora communities to bring aspects of the homeland to the host country, in an effort to retain connection to the security and familiarity left behind.

Some studies argue that migrants experience a changing relationship with the homeland after migrating and settling down in the host country. James Clifford (1994) argues that diaspora should not be limited to the constraining, if archetypal, example of the Jewish diaspora, but rather, expanded to a wide range of peoples, broadening the application of this label. Diaspora is often condensed into the idea of longing for home, but Clifford suggests that diaspora is more than this disconnection from the homeland (302). Rather, the original relationship with the home country changes through the recreation of homeland in an unfamiliar place (304). One's sense of home is thus ever-changing, continuously reshaped by experiences and memories. Home holds multiple meanings for diaspora communities, existing and being recreated in multiple locations.

While Clifford argues for the expansion of the term diaspora, Rogers Brubaker (2005) argues that 'diaspora' should not be too widely extended to include many different groups of people. This is what he deems "the 'Diaspora' of Diaspora:" "If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so," Brubaker writes. "The universalization of diaspora paradoxically means the disappearance of diaspora" (4). Like Clifford, Brubaker tries to move away from the idea of "homeland," arguing that the analysis of diaspora should instead be directed toward shared practices and claims, rather than groups of people. For example, the common linking of diaspora and homeland excludes some members of the African diaspora, which is so widely dispersed throughout the globe due to slavery and forced labor, that the ties to homeland can become lost (6). While the label "diaspora" generally signifies a sense of displacement and migration, Clifford emphasizes that diaspora communities do not necessarily come from "elsewhere" (306). Native and indigenous populations also claim the diasporic identity as they are never truly seen as "locals" despite having stayed put in their homelands (309). This literature reflects the diversity and flexibility within and across diaspora communities, illustrating that mobile or displaced

communities partake in effort to recreate feelings of home. The particular Bengali communities in Japan that I worked with have formed relationships with local Japanese as a means of sharing and preserving their Bengali cultural identity. However, in doing so, they must reshape their cultural identities to fit within the constraints of Japanese society, resulting in a changing relationship with the homeland as Tokyo begins to feel more like home.

Many migrants' conceptions of "home" change after migrating to a new country and settling. Nicole Constable (1999) examines Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong and their engagement with ideas of home. With a population of 130,000, Filipinos comprised the largest non-Chinese minority in Hong Kong (203). Unlike other diaspora studies, Constable's ethnography looks at the growing feelings of displacement from the homeland while these workers begin to feel more at home in the host country. The Filipina workers maintain a romanticized image of home, while in reality they feel "more at home away from home" (208). Constable argues that places are always connected to social, political, and cultural factors (207). Filipina workers need to leave the homeland in pursuit of economic gain. While they maintain a deep emotional connection to and love for the Philippines, they feel a sense of security and satisfaction in Hong Kong where they are able to earn higher wages and gain more freedom as women (208). After a certain period of time away from the homeland, this migrant community no longer feels "at home" in the Philippines. Constable also analyses the reshaping of gender, economic, and family roles that come with migration (228). Filipino domestic workers are often unwilling to admit their discomfort with returning home. However, Constable argues that this unwillingness is not solely linked to economic motivation in the host country. Rather, it has to do with the identity changes that result from migration and the development of a home away from home (216).

Scholarship shows that in some cases building close-knit communities in host countries fulfills the diaspora longing for belonging and home in new places where migrants often feel oppressed. Clifford argues that the one thing that all diasporic communities share is a tension with host communities. He writes, "New arrivals are kept in subordinate positions by established structures of racial exclusion" (311). The shared suffering and forms of resistance are what bind the diaspora community. Stuart Hall (1990) introduces the idea that diasporic identity is a process that takes place over time (222). He argues that colonialism has destroyed the past history and culture of many diaspora communities (224), and as a result, diaspora identities are continuously changing, influenced by both past diasporas as well as emerging ones (225). The negative experiences and suffering caused by systems of slavery and imperialism unify people in the diaspora despite their differences, while cutting them from their past (227). This suffering and "Othering" results in the creation of spaces of familiarity and home in otherwise unfamiliar host countries. Clifford likewise discusses how there is a need for community that motivates diaspora groups to develop a support system and navigate oppression in the host country (314). Brubaker agrees that diaspora is a special community of solidarity, formed over time through generations (7).

Clifford cites Indian writer Amitav Ghosh in saying that South Asian communities, specifically, have "the ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations" (Clifford 206). The South Asian diaspora is one of the most widely dispersed. While initially displaced from the homeland as slaves and laborers as a result of colonialism (Mongia 2018), South Asians now disperse primarily for economic, professional, and education purposes (Jacobson and Kumar 2018, 1-2). They were most widely dispersed after World War II, increasing their presence in Western and Asian countries, and bringing with them cultural values from the homeland (Rai and Reeves 2008,

3). The emergence of South Asian restaurants and popular film industries have become global sensations. This idea is illustrated in the Bengali festivals and cultural events in the US that I grew up attending, representative of Bengali Indian culture.

Diasporas are heterogenous, vastly different in their spaces of belonging, influenced and shaped through integration into, and exclusion from, different host societies (Brubaker 2005, 10). In *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), Avtar Brah complicates the South Asian diaspora in her discussion of her own dual identity, born in Punjab and raised in Uganda. Despite her multicultural upbringing, she was often forced to claim a single identity. This link between race, homeland, and belonging is projected in anti-immigrant and refugee sentiments across the globe (3). Brah writes, "In Britain, racialized discourses of the nation continue to construct people of African descent and Asian descent, as well as certain other groups, as being outside the nation" (3). This categorization separates diaspora communities as the "Other" and as a result, they are forced to find solidarity and unity among fellow community members, who share the same cultural values. It is important to study diaspora communities within the societal frameworks of the host population. Brah's central claim is that diaspora is an interpretive frame for examining the societal conditions—the political, cultural, and economic contexts—that position diasporic populations as inferior to host populations (16). She does not imply that the relationship to the homeland is always perfect, but instead, it is continuously changing. Diasporas differ in how they are situated within the political climates of new places, and the power relationships that mark diasporas as different (182).

Clifford discusses the making of multicultural spaces to celebrate diaspora cultures as well as the use of cultural performance elements as expressive forms of political agenda or resistance (313). He describes South Asians using clothing and traditions to stay connected to the homeland while in the host country. He also writes that women in particular remain connected to, and become

empowered by, these traditions (314). However, he explains that multiculturalism is not inherently progressive, as it does not bring better wages or living conditions to diaspora communities (314). For Clifford, despite moves toward multiculturalism and diversity, there still exists a cultural gap that highlights differences rather than appreciating and learning from diaspora communities. Clifford thus argues that nationalism and nostalgia for the homeland "cannot be 'cured' by merging into a new national community" (Clifford 307). Rather, diaspora communities must recreate pieces of home for themselves as cultural minorities.

Studies of diaspora, while highlighting the flexibility of home, thus have a tendency to reduce local host country communities to oppressive forces that highlight differences. These discussions refer to diaspora communities as separate from the local population, not addressing instances of intentional, non-economic interaction and exchange between locals and foreigners. Diasporic multicultural performances are described as being meant to be viewed and enjoyed by locals, or to help diaspora communities recreate and preserve a sense of home. My study builds on and diverges from this work by showing specific instances of diasporic communities directly interacting with local communities, who themselves end up emulating and engaging in diasporic cultural forms.

I never expected that in Tokyo of all places, I would discover a Bengali community so starkly different from the Bengali families I grew up with. That, for once, rather than being a bystander, I would become one of the insiders in these Bengali spaces. In Japan, nationality is defined by blood, not by birthplace, with a clear legal and ideological separation between locals and foreigners. I often wondered how immigrants, migrants, foreign workers, and refugees came to feel at home in a country like Japan, which is known for being primarily homogenous. But while being in Japan's busiest city, I discovered that Tokyo, was in fact, quite a heterogenous city—

contrary to popular understanding. During my daily train commutes in Tokyo, at least once every day I encountered other foreigners, and not just Caucasian tourists and exchange students, but mothers in traditional garb with children, men in business suits with briefcases, in jeans and loose T-shirts.

For the Bengali population in Tokyo, I initially assumed it was the *preservation* of cultural and national identity that enabled them to feel "at home". In their discussion of the South Asian diaspora, Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves (2008) argue that "the people of the diaspora do not merely settle in new countries: they recreate in their socioeconomic, political, and cultural institutions, a version of that homeland that they remember" (1). These Bengali communities often came to Japan with no prior connection to Japanese language or culture, but simply with the hope to find a better life with safety and job opportunities. I expected that exclusively South Asian settings with close-knit families and home cooked foods would serve as an escape, so to speak, from the Japanese mainstream, experiences of hostility and exclusion, and the frequent reminders that they were foreigners.

Japan's efforts to preserve its relatively homogenous society has made it nearly impossible for refugees to be granted asylum status (despite being a signatory to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees), or for working-class immigrants to settle in Japan. But the rising elderly population and decrease in birth rate in Japan has simultaneously caused a great need for foreign workers to fill unpopular blue-collar jobs. Migrants are allowed entry with only short-term visas to do low-skilled labor for up to three years before having to leave. While some communities of migrants have been studied, such as Japanese-Brazilian immigrants who form the third-largest minority in Japan, such studies tend to focus solely on immigrant groups with existing ties to Japan. Studies of diasporic communities in Japan (e.g. Tsuda, Linger, Mahmud) often discuss foreigners

in Japan as isolated communities, carving out a separate space in Japanese society without any positive engagement with local populations.

Anthropologists Daniel Touro Linger and Takeyuku Tsuda have written on the displacement of Brazilians of Japanese descent migrating to Japan and recreating their identities in this new space. The Japanese government emphasizes temporary migration, working to limit the permanent settlement of working-class immigrants. However, Tsuda (1999) argues that Brazilian *nikkeijin* of Japanese descent are actually long-term migrants and become structurally embedded into Japanese society. Brazilian nikkeijin are often viewed as the "best" kind of migrants and the most privileged in their job prospects because of their close physical resemblance to ethnic Japanese (697). He cites an employer's description of his Brazilian *nikkei* employees: "Those with Japanese blood are more diligent. They think more like the Japanese and are easier to relate to. As you get further away in terms of generation, they become more Brazilian and don't work as seriously" (967-968). Brazilian nikkeijin are believed to possess *ninjo* or "Japanese human feelings" (698).

Linger (2001) describes nikkeijin struggling with the distance and separation from their homeland. His study highlights that despite experiencing certain forms of acceptance, even more privileged migrants can often feel displaced or excluded. "Can one feel truly at home in such a divided, arrhythmic state?" he asks (5). He describes his interviewees *feeling* Brazilian, despite their Japanese physical features. Linger examines the personal experiences and life history narratives several nikkeijin, for whom the sense of home and belonging is very much linked to understanding one's sense of self (14). These nikkeijin feel *both* Brazilian and Japanese but struggle to immerse themselves into Japanese society, being bullied and ignored by Japanese coworkers and bosses. "As a foreigner, I feel like a negative point," one interviewee said. "I mean,

you can't give your opinion. This distance. I can't accept it. The barrier is very great. It's very hard to communicate" (101). Another interviewee complained of a lack of Japanese interest in Brazilian culture. "There's a lot of ignorance, like once when they asked me if there are bananas in Brazil. Just from that question I figured out that they knew nothing whatsoever about Brazil" (101). Tsuda's and Linger's analyses addressed instances of Japanese-Brazilian adults and families integrating into Japanese society. However, any direct social interaction with local Japanese was portrayed in a negative light, with locals expressing little interest in their Brazilian coworkers or classmates and, at worst, direct forms of discrimination.

These diaspora communities are discussed as existing separately from the host populations, any kind of interaction only serving to further confirm their feelings of isolation and displacement. These interactions paint a uniform image of the "migrant experience in Japan," with social isolation and hostility from local Japanese communities. My study complicates understandings of these diaspora experiences in Japan, examining instances of a mutual recreation of home through intercultural exchanges and relationships between Bengali migrants *and* Japanese locals.

My study also contributes to studies of migration in Japan by focusing on a significantly understudied, but growing, diaspora community. There is limited literature on the contemporary Bengali Indian diaspora in Japan other than accounts of historical encounters between prominent Bengali and Japanese historical figures. The literature that exists on the Bangladeshi diaspora focuses on these migrants as isolated in Japanese society, having little to no interaction with Japanese locals, and suffering from social isolation and harsh working conditions.

Tokyo is home to some of the largest immigrant populations in Japan, with a variety of intercultural organizations, programs, and events, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. As of 2019, 16,030 Bangladeshis were recorded as registered foreigners in Japan (Ministry of Justice

2019). Anthropologist Hasan Mahmud (2014) has conducted extensive fieldwork with Bangladeshi migrants in Tokyo, discussing in particular the social and economic pressures in the homeland causing these communities to migrate, also emphasized in other studies of Bangladeshi migration (Gardner 2009). Mahmud describes the experiences of Bangladeshi men migrating to Tokyo to quickly earn wages to send back as remittances to family in Bangladesh. A small percentage of Bangladeshis living in Tokyo have been granted the Monbusho Scholarship with funds undergraduate and graduate education, often resulting in professional job opportunities and permanent resettlement in Japan (96). However, these Bangladeshis are in the minority. Many migrated to Japan during Japan's visa-waiver period from 1987-1989, during which they worked as undocumented migrants. However, with Japan's current tightening of immigration policies, most Bangladeshis come as language school students for economic purposes and end up overstaying their visas (98). The student visa grants them entry and then they work part-time jobs, with relentless hours so they can earn and send as much as possible back to their families.

Deemed by the Japanese government as the "worst kind of migrants," with the worst pay and working conditions, many Bangladeshis view Japan as a "temporary destination" (99). Mahmud describes Bangladeshi populations concentrated in specific neighborhoods, opening up Halal shops and restaurants to cope with feelings of isolation (98). He argues that they stay deep within the Bangladeshi community, fully immersing themselves in Bengali social events. "You have to look Japanese" to properly fit in, Mahmud describes one Bangladeshi interviewee saying (101). This implies that Bangladeshis are never able to physically "fit into" society because of their inability to appear Japanese. They described this feeling as *ghar-jamai*, the Bangla word for the "groom living with the parents-in-law" because by being treated as a guest, the son-in-law will always be an outsider in his wife's family (101). Mahmud's interviewees complained about the

cold "mentality" of Japanese people, which made it difficult for Bangladeshis to make friends. However, Mahmud clarifies that this is largely due to their structural situations. The long working hours and limited job opportunities have forced them into social isolation from Japanese (112), and to cope with the loss of home and loneliness, "remitting is actually a bridge" between migrant and family, in the words of one interviewee (104). Mahmud discusses how many Bangladeshi migrant men marry Japanese women and become involved with their children's Japanese schooling in order to integrate into Japanese society and form relationships with local communities (Mahmud 100)—thus developing ties of kinship and "blood."

Across these accounts of the meaning of home in diaspora, there is the recurring suggestion that survival and belonging in contexts of migration is dependent on a recreation of the homeland in the host country. This takes place through the production of close-knit diaspora communities, who bind together to overcome feelings of displacement; or, in some cases, through the production of kinship ties, which themselves reassert the Japanese conception of citizenship through blood. My research in Tokyo began from a limited understanding of the Japanese-Bengali relationship as two communities coexisting separately, Japanese at the top of the social ladder, immigrants at the bottom. I imagined small bubbles of Bengali and Bangladeshi communities in exclusively South Asian settings. However, through my interactions and interviews, I came to realize that some Japanese foreigners and Bengali locals had in fact, formed deep intercultural relationships. In Tokyo, Bengalis and Japanese did not *all* exist in exclusionary boundaries, as distinct social groups. Instead, the niche of Bengalis I met had gone to great lengths to share and blend their distinct cultures, cuisines, and music in intercultural spaces, drawing in the migrants who otherwise disappeared behind counters. They highlighted the culture, cuisine, and language left behind in the homeland, asserting Bengali identity and recreating it in Tokyo.

1.2 Methodology

I spent my spring 2019 semester as an undergraduate exchange student at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. Living in Tokyo from April to August, I spent four months conducting ethnographic fieldwork with members of the Bengali diaspora and Japanese locals involved in Bengali culture. Prior to leaving the US, I obtained IRB approval from the University of Pittsburgh, a long process that took several months and multiple revisions before my study was approved. Although my research was labeled "low-risk," there were concerns associated with the possibility that my research subjects would have "illegal" status. To address this concern, I designed open-ended interview questions, translated into both Bangla and Japanese, so that the vagueness would allow research participants to naturally open up without necessarily disclosing their legal statuses. With my journalistic background, I fully expected my methodology to consist primarily of formal interviews with research participants, sticking strictly to the questions I had composed beforehand.

Although I had a few close Japanese friends in Tokyo, I had no connection to the South Asian community there. The feelings of fear and isolation that I experienced in the Pittsburgh-Bengali community were amplified in Tokyo, a huge city where I knew nothing about the South Asian diaspora. I initially planned to recruit research participants through the restaurant industry, noting the large number of Bengali and Bangladeshi owned "Indian" restaurants in Tokyo that seemed to pop up in every neighborhood. At Sophia University, I was put in contact with an Indian graduate student whose dissertation explored Indian religious migration to Tokyo (Wadhwa 2016).

"Don't even bother trying to talk to restaurant workers," she had warned me. "They won't have the time to talk to you."

I almost took her advice, having joined countless Bengali and Indian Facebook groups and email lists, and having little success finding contacts. On the "Indians in Japan" Facebook group,

I asked for recommendations for Bengali restaurants in the area, and one respondent told me about "Puja," a Bengali restaurant located in Machiya, a neighborhood that was over an hour away from my dormitory. I sent a long message in English to the Puja restaurant's Instagram and Facebook page, explaining my research and requesting to interview the owner. My message went unanswered.

It wasn't until the end of April, during a weeklong vacation from school, that I finally visited Puja. I brought along three friends for moral support, one of them a native Japanese language speaker. Conducting journalistic interviews in the city of Pittsburgh had been easy, sending emails and setting up convenient times, and sticking to a strict schedule. I had never done ethnographic research before. Nearly every ethnography that I had read described anthropologists spending years in their field sites before finally gaining the trust of the host population, and actually forming relationships. My expectations were low.

The Puja restaurant was tiny, like entering a family's house, and we were the only customers. In Japan it isn't customary to start up conversations with strangers or even smile while passing by. Naturally shy and reserved, I wasn't used to being assertive in public situations. I was used to having people come up to me; I never initiated conversation. But in this case, when the owner of the restaurant smiled and greeted us in Japanese, I plucked up the courage to ask her where she was from. And when she told me she was Bengali, I replied in Bangla, the first time I had spoken the language to someone besides my grandmother. And this time, my response was greeted with a wide smile. The woman, Sanchita, co-owned the restaurant with her Japanese husband and, having read my email, had been too embarrassed to do an interview. I continued to try to convince Sanchita to be willing to be interviewed, but through our interactions as she stopped by our table, I realized that this casual conversation in itself became a form of interview. I realized

that this research was about forming relationships and building trust, which couldn't be achieved through the hierarchical relationship of interviewer and interviewee.

Puja became my primary field site and I continued to visit weekly, bringing different groups of friends along because I was too shy to go alone. Through these visits and with the help of my Japanese friend's translation, I built connections with the Japanese clientele who frequented the restaurant. It was, in fact, through these *Japanese* locals that I gained connections to a wider Bengali community in Tokyo. I would join them for lunch and dinner, spending sometimes four to five hours, speaking nothing but broken Japanese. They introduced me to fellow Japanese with Bengali connections, as well as Bangladeshi migrants residing in the area. I found myself having to quickly switch from Bangla to Japanese, to Bangla, to English, the languages jumbled in my mind. My biracial identity helped me to fit into a liminal space that helped both Japanese and Bengalis open up to me. But it also made me feel deeply ashamed of my poor Bangla ability, a language that had become more filled with mistakes as I grew older and spent less time at home speaking with my grandmother. I was often the listener in these situations, noting down everything that I heard, and getting few words in.

I found other research participants through attending events organized by the Bengali Association of Tokyo and the India Bengal Cultural Association in Japan. I met Bangla language professors through my Japanese friends who studied Bangla language. There were so many situations where I had to walk up to complete strangers and introduce myself fully in Japanese, something I had hardly any experience doing in English in the US. As a woman doing this research, I approached every situation with an air of caution. In my initial efforts on Facebook, I had messaged several Bangladeshi restaurant pages and one owner responded enthusiastically. His frequent messages and interest in my background, mixed with an eagerness to be interviewed,

made me very wary to meet him. However, when I actually visited his restaurant with a group of friends, I found that he was genuinely kind, and my paranoia had manifested into an unnecessary fear. This wasn't to say that all of my encounters were positive, some men speaking over me and criticizing my "poor attempts at research," while others asked to meet with me for coffee. But those experiences were overshadowed by the friendships and relationships that I managed to build completely through the hospitality and kindness of others. In developing these new relationships, I found myself developing my own feelings of belonging and acceptance for my Bengali heritage.

There were so many relationships that I explored during my four months of field research in Tokyo. But four months was not nearly enough time to become exposed to all of the Bengali and Japanese relationships that were born and had developed in Tokyo. There were many cultural events I was invited to and unable to attend—Bengali sweet-tasting socials, Indian dance performances, and community gatherings hosted by Bangladeshis. There were many people with whom I wasn't able to fully develop relationships because I was getting ready to return to the US and was swamped with final exams. This fieldwork had nonetheless given me a new hope in my Bangla ability and a chance to connect to one part of my identity that I had felt ambivalent about for years.

Methodologically my ethnography used participant observation and in-person semi-structured interviews to highlight the effects that intercultural relationships with groups of Japanese locals have on some Bengalis, and vice versa. I examined how these Bengalis have navigated the constraints of Japan's strict immigration policies through venues of exchange such as food industries, cultural artforms, and language. I interviewed Bengalis, Bangladeshis, and Japanese. I visited Bengali restaurants and cultural events, spoke with businessmen, restaurant owners, writers, and artists. I talked to Bengalis in Japanese, and Japanese in Bangla. I watched

Japanese women wearing *saris* and *salwar kameez* dance to *Rabindrasangee*t and play *sitar* and *tabla*. I watched Japanese professors write Bangla letters on a chalkboard in a Japanese university. I met Japanese who had started their own Bengali restaurants, who had married Bengalis, who had learned from their Bengali and Bangladeshi friends how to prepare authentic dishes. And these Bengalis in Japan had learned to master the Japanese language, worked for Japanese companies, spoke to their children in Japanese. I learned that for some of these immigrants, surviving in Japan was not simply about the preservation of cultural identity. Rather, in some cases, the mixing and sharing of cultures, and relationships formed between Bengalis and Japanese, could make Tokyo feel like home. I revised my approach to focus on these interpersonal connections and learned that mutual cultural exchange is one way that integration has taken place, benefitting both Japanese and Bengali residents.

The majority of my research respondents were located through snowball sampling with Japanese clientele in the initial field site of Puja, a relatively expensive restaurant, which impacted the kinds of Bengalis and Japanese I had access to. These encounters were largely shaped by macro factors of social class and educational backgrounds that influenced the Japanese interest in and access to Bengali culture. The Japanese locals I met had the economic ability to be able to pursue educational and professional interests in Bengali culture, which strengthened their ties to Bengali locals. The Bengalis who I was introduced to were, for the most part, financially stable owners of their own businesses or businessmen in Japanese companies. My access was thus to a very specific group of Bengalis and Japanese whose economic backgrounds granted them easier access to intercultural exchanges. As a result, my research is not reflective of the experience of *all* Bengalis in Japan and does not mean to underplay the discrimination and working conditions that Bengali

migrant workers do continue to face in Tokyo, which is an important part of the picture for a great many migrants in Japan.

I had also anticipated the need to respect and address the different cultural experiences and historical tensions between Hindu West Bengalis from India, and Muslim Bengalis from Bangladesh. In 1905, under British colonial rule, Bengal was divided into West Bengal and East Bengal with a Hindu majority in the west and a Muslim majority in the east. Though the two Bengals were reunited in 1911 after a lot of agitation by the Bengali people against this British Partition, the Hindu-Muslim division of Bengal by the British had been accomplished. In 1947, with India's Independence came the Partition of the country into India and Pakistan. Bengal was divided into Hindu-majority West Bengal in India and Muslim-majority East Bengal, which was now East Pakistan. In 1971, after the brutal West Pakistan war on East Pakistan, the country was divided into two countries and East Pakistan became the current independent nation of Bangladesh. As a result, people from the neighboring country of Bangladesh also speak the Bangla language.

As of the end of June 2019, the Japanese Ministry of Justice has recorded 16,030 Bangladeshi nationals among the total population of registered foreigners in Japan. 37,933 Indians are recorded, but it is not possible to estimate the exact number of Bengali-speaking Indians. Brah (1996) writes, "Diaspora is an interweaving of multiple traveling; a text of many distinctive and, perhaps, even diasporic narratives" (184). She argues that the South Asian diaspora, in particular, is different in each geographic migration (183). Diasporic communities are both local as well as global, depending on their place of inhabitance.

Jacobsen and Kumar (2018) emphasize the diversity of the South Asian diaspora, with a multitude of different languages, religions, and cultural practices. They write: "Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, and Sri Lankans keep their different national identities in the diasporas" (5). They

describe the North Indian Hindus and the Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka practicing Hinduism separately. They argue that communities from different states of India remain separate even in the diaspora, despite their shared religious beliefs (6). This is particularly the case, they argue, for Hindu-Muslim relations: "The nature of Hindu-Muslim relations in the South Asian context is often not very different from its manifestation in the diaspora" (9). However, through my research I discovered that Bengalis from both India and Bangladesh took part in religious and social gatherings together, despite differing nationalities, and preaching that everyone was welcome— "we do not discriminate."

During my field research, I visited a Korean barbecue restaurant owned by Bangladeshis, which was located right next to the Puja restaurant. The Korean barbecue had grills on every table with menus written in Japanese, serving the Korean dishes I had developed a strong taste for while in Japan. However, the owner was a Bangladeshi man who had migrated to Tokyo on a student visa. His first job was working in a similar barbecue restaurant, where he gained skills preparing meat and Korean dishes. Working his way up over the years, he chose to open his own restaurant, differentiating himself from the many South Asian restaurants in Japan. He thought that opening up his own Korean barbecue place would be more unique and would attract more Japanese clientele.

"The relationship between Bengalis and Bangladeshis in Japan is good," he had told me in Bangla. "The passport is different, but the language is the same."

His statement showed me one example of how these communities coexist in Tokyo, their hostility diminishing with the shared Bengali language serving as a unifying force.

Although my research exposed many positive elements of intercultural encounters, I recognize that this limited research is not reflective of the many instances of racialization and

exclusion that migrants in Japan continue to face. Even with intercultural exchange, not all barriers of separation and exoticism are broken down, and in some cases, they are even amplified. But in closely studying these experiences and coming to understand the conditions that the Bengali diaspora faces in Japan, I hope to shed a light on some of the mutually transformative outcomes that have come as a result. In some instances, intercultural emulation and exchange between Japanese and Bengalis *has* served to help isolated diaspora communities *and* local communities find a sense of belonging and home.

This ethnography blends personal narrative vignettes with analytical research to illustrate my own position as anthropologist within the frameworks of these encounters. Dorine Kondo (2012) states that "an anthropologist's experience in the field is conditioned by his/her culturally and biographically mediated way of seeing" (74). The anthropologist's background and multiple identities will always shape the fieldwork experience. Every person's identities are different, influencing our ability to create relationships with others and analyze experiences. Historically, anthropological ethnography has been embedded in power dynamics of colonialism and imperialism. Participant observation was used to paint a picture of the "native's" world and experiences, the anthropologist attempting to speak from within the native perspective but still located outside that world (Narayan 1993, 676). It is our responsibility as anthropologists to explicitly acknowledge that our understandings "are situated within culture, history and biography" (Kondo 2012, 84).

Kirin Narayan (1993), who is also half Indian and half American, argues that it is important for anthropologists to examine their own "multiplex subjectivity" of multiple intersecting identities. "Multiple planes of identification may be most painfully highlighted among anthropologists who have identities spanning racial or cultural groups," she writes (676). She

introduces the term "halfies" to describe the experience of people of mixed race who are not "native" or not-native" but a mixture of both (673). For Narayan, anthropologists should not merely address ethnicity, but also additional aspects of race, gender, class, and religion that compose their identities. She argues that "we all belong to several communities simultaneously," which all play a role in impacting our understanding of the world (676). I thus chose to include elements of auto-ethnography in order to be transparent about my own background, which provides context for my interactions with Bengali migrant communities and Japanese locals, as well as my position in these intercultural spaces. I describe anecdotes from my childhood that have shaped my ongoing complicated relationships with the Bangla language and in turn, my Bengali identity. As Kondo points out, "the narrative authority of [ethnographic] text gives us the power to 'know' and to 'represent' as we see fit" (83). My mixed identity has impacted and influenced my interactions with my research respondents, as well as my understanding of these encounters. Anthropology has been seen as a dialogue with the "Other;" however during my fieldwork, I was simultaneously the insider and the outsider, and for my various Bengali and Japanese interlocutors I was a mixture of "Bengali" and the "Other." My role as an American foreigner in Japan added another layer of Otherness that impacted this experience. Narayan writes: "The study of anthropology can also lead to the discovery of many strange and unfamiliar aspects of one's own society" (679). Through my autoethnographic accounts, I reveal aspects of my own growth during this research and the ways in which I, myself, found a sense of belonging and home that I had previously struggled to find within a Bengali community.

The following chapters details various forms of intercultural encounters and exchange between Bengalis and Japanese that I discovered in Tokyo. The Background section provides historical and contemporary context for Japan's immigration and refugee policies, and ideas about

race and religion that shape the migrant experience in Japan. Chapter One focuses on examples of cultural emulation, describing how reproducing the Other can both exoticize and help to bridge the gaps between diaspora and local communities. In Chapter Two, I examine how intercultural exchange through food avenues has helped migrants and locals recreate feelings of home and belonging, specifically within the restaurant industry in Tokyo.

Through this analysis of intra-Asia migration, I bring attention to some specific instances of intercultural exchanges between Bengalis and Japanese locals in Tokyo. My exploration highlights several Bengali migrants who have created feelings of home and belonging through the direct sharing of Bengali culture with local populations, which Japanese locals themselves appreciate and emulate. The instances of intercultural relationships are mutually beneficial in helping Bengalis to find home in Japan and giving Japanese locals a space to escape from the atomizing tendencies of Japanese society. This work with the Bengali population in Japan contributes to studies of the numerous instances where minority cultures face tensions with host populations. This exploration of intra-Asia migration (even if it illustrates the exception rather than the rule) can help us better understand Japan's current immigration policy and promote intercultural relationships that can help Japan retain its identity while welcoming immigrants.

2.0 Japan's Response to Foreigner Workers

Japan has the oldest population in the world, with the highest life expectancy and more than 21% of its population over 65 years old (Jozuka and Ogura 2018). The nation's rising elderly population and sharp decrease in birthrate creates its labor shortage and the need for foreign labor to fill this labor gap. The United Nations (2019) reported that Japan reached the "lowest potential support ratio in the world (the number of workers per retiree)" (79). However, the Japanese government lacks an official foreign worker policy, giving short-term visas to incoming migrants to fill low-skill jobs for up to three years before they are forced to return to their home countries. These migrants do the undesirable "dirty," "difficult," and "dangerous" work with often poor working conditions and low pay.

The Japanese government's societal push towards cultural and ethnic homogeneity stems from a long tradition of attempting to prevent colonial or religious influence from the outside world. Historically, Japan's *Sakoku* (isolation) period lasted from the 17th to 19th century, consisting of a set of imperial policies preventing Japanese locals from leaving the country. It was not until 1853 when Commodore Matthew Perry led American ships to the Tokyo Bay, that Japan was forced to reopen to Western trade (Green 2017). Japan's imperial expansion from 1905-1945 resulted in an influx of colonized Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese residents (Yamanaka 1993, 74). Koreans came to Japan in the 1920s and 30s but were viewed negatively as "tough, rough, wild, unwashed, and ignorant of Japanese language and culture" (Shipper 2005, 304). This racist attitude persisted after the Great Kanto Earthquake in September 1923 when the Japanese government blamed Koreans for causing this natural disaster, organizing local authorities and vigilantes to kill Koreans (304).

During World War II, Japan promoted a negative image of foreigners to help strengthen hostility towards its enemies (305). After the war, many Korean, Taiwanese and Chinese former colonial populations living in Japan returned to their home countries. However, the 700,000 that remained in Japan were stripped of their citizenship in 1947, their rights taken away. This post-war population of former colonial subjects who lost their citizenship status were known as "Zainichi," treated as second class citizens in Japan (Kimiko and Wattles 2019). Post-war Japan experienced an economic boom with industrialization, transitioning from rural to urban landscapes. Keiko Yamanaka (1993) writes: "Maintenance of cultural and 'racial' homogeneity was a major concern of policy makers and the ruling Liberal Democratic party" (79). This push for 'one ethnic group, one language' was a key contributing factor to Japan's post-war economic miracle (79). There was a labor shortage in these new industrial settings, especially for low-paying blue-color-jobs which were dirty, demanding, and dangerous. This need for low-skilled workers attracted many migrants and foreign workers from the Global South to migrate to Japan. In 1952, the Immigration Control and Refugee Act prevented long-term settlement for foreign workers and as a result, many illegal immigrants overstayed their visas (Green 2017). The influx of foreign workers was publicly disputed in Japan over fears of disruption to society and increase in crime rates. Only foreign professionals from high economic backgrounds, who were deemed "desirable immigrants," were granted long-term stay and permanent residency (Green 2017).

In the 1980s, Japan tried to become more westernized, "launching a campaign to separate Japan from Asia" (Shipper 2005, 303). The Meiji government pushed for Japan to have stronger national unity and superiority over other Asian nations. Contempt for Chinese and Korean immigrants was reflected in woodblock prints that portrayed these ethnic minorities in a negative light. Meanwhile Japanese were depicted to appear physically European, "standing tall with

military mustaches and careful haircuts—in order to separate their race from the rest" (Shipper 2005, 303). In 1990, there was an influx of immigrants from the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, China, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Bangladesh (Lie 1994, 4). These foreigners, many of whom were undocumented immigrants from the Global South, were labeled *Japayukisan*, a term derived from *Karayukisan*—Japanese prostitutes working abroad in the late 19th century. These so-called *Japayukisan* were primarily female sex workers. However, in the mid 1990s the migrant population shifted to primarily male migrants coming to Japan to work manual and manufacturing jobs (4). The income inequality between Japan and the developing world allowed these migrants to earn significantly more money in a much shorter time than they could in their home countries. The Japanese economy relied on this labor, but the workers were given no official acknowledgement or support from the government (85).

Yamanaka (1993) divides foreigners in Japan into five subcategories: *nikkeijin* (foreigners of Japanese descent), company trainees, students, female entertainers, and illegal workers (77). Yamanka shows that these foreigner categories reflect the different hierarchical statuses assigned to groups of foreigners, that allow or inhibit economic opportunity in Japan. For example, financially secure study abroad students from Western English-speaking countries have the privilege of earning high wages by teaching English abroad, an opportunity that is not granted to all immigrants (81). Female entertainers and illegal workers, however, were strongly stigmatized and given limited access to job opportunities in Japan. Tsuda (1999) recounts employers describing Bangladeshis and Iranians as the cheapest migrants with the worst working conditions: "At the bottom are Bangladeshi and Iranians with the lowest wages. It really shouldn't be this way, but it just is" (698). The Japanese government feared that letting in these immigrants permanently could result in "racial clashes and the further widening of economic inequality" (Yamanaka 1993, 78).

In 1993, Japan developed a Technical Intern Training program, which gave people from the Global South entry to Japan to learn manual and technical skills. However, despite the positive potential of the program, many of these workers ended up in jobs that violated their human rights with very poor working conditions and illegal overtime labor at a below minimum wage. The program was another disguised means of importing cheap labor (Chan 2018).

Lie (1994) argues that Japan's fear of foreign workers "is based not so much on the economic—but rather on the perceived symbolic—threats to Japanese society" (9). There is a concern that an increase in foreign labor could result in interethnic conflicts over resources, and changes to Japan's racial and cultural homogeneity (8). Japanese policy makers fear that developing an official foreign worker policy "would create a permanent immigrant community that could be a source of political, economic, and social tensions in the host country" (Yamanaka 1993, 72). McRae (2018) writes: "Throughout Japanese history there has been a sense of exceptionalism: that Japanese people, and their society, are different from the rest of the world. Not only different, but better" (2018). The presumed uniformity, cleanliness, and safety of Japan further enhances the fear that foreign workers will disrupt the order in Japan society (McRae 2018).

The Japanese government and media have used official crime statistics to label foreigners as offenders, dividing criminal offenses as "Japanese" and "non-Japanese" offenses. There are more crimes listed for "non-Japanese;" however, these crimes are predominantly minor offenses related to disobeying immigration laws (Shipper 2005, 306). This misrepresented data has helped encourage the Japanese population to believe that immigrants will pose security threats, overshadow and dominate over Japanese locals. While Western English-speaking foreigners frequently benefit from English-teaching related job opportunities and education programs in Japan, other foreign workers struggle every day to make ends meet. The Japanese government has

historically reflected its unwillingness to permanently integrate working class immigrants into Japanese society. This sentiment stems from a long history of ethno-nationalism and foreign policy which has made life in contemporary Japan very challenging for migrant workers. However, much of Japan's economy relies on migrant labor from developing nations.

2.1 The Coming of Islam to Japan

Many of Japan's foreign laborers are from developing nations in the Global South. With Japan's influx of South Asian foreigners came an increase in Muslims residing in Japan. As a result, the Muslim diaspora's cultural practices and religious traditions have influenced Japanese architecture and cuisine, as well as attitudes about religion. Unfortunately, in some instances the Japanese government has used Islam to promote anti-immigrant sentiments that spread Islamophobic fears of foreigners causing disruption and unrest to Japanese society. However, the history of Islam's presence in Japan has positively impacted the living conditions of many Muslim foreigners, as well as influencing Japanese locals to expand their ideas about religion sometimes even themselves convert.

Islam was first introduced to Japan in 1877 when a Japanese naval vessel from Ottoman Turkey went to Japan. The first Japanese people who converted to Islam were Mitsutaro Takaoka and Bumpachiro Ariga who traveled to Mecca and India in 1909. Upon being influenced by locals, they converted to Islam and changed their Japanese names to Omar and Ahmad (Rahman 2011, 234). In the 1920s, Tatar Muslims escaping from the Russian revolution fled to Japan, residing in major cities in Japan, including Tokyo and Nagoya (Yamagata 2019, 4). In 1935 the first Japanese mosque was built in the city of Kobe, Japan, followed by the construction of the Tokyo Mosque

in 1938 (Rahman 2011, 254). I visited the Tokyo Mosque with my Japanese friend who was interested in seeing the beautiful architecture and paintings with Islamic motifs. These mosques were built through the Japanese government's policy to develop relationships with Muslim locals, designed to help with the advancement of foreign policy to expand Japanese territory to "North China and South East Asia, both of which had large Muslim populations at the time" (Yamagata 2019, 5). During World War II, there was increased interest in Islam when the Japanese military government developed research centers to study Islam, due to the large population of Muslim communities in Japan's territories (255).

The second significant instance of a Japanese interest in Islam occurred in 1973 after the Oil Shock, when the government wanted to explore how oil in Arab countries would benefit Japan's economy. Rahman (2011) argues that Japan's interest in Islam ended after this period, with Japanese locals having little interest in the religion and Muslim populations. However, there was an increase in Muslim foreign workers in the 1980s when Japan opened its borders to import foreign sources of cheap labor (Ono 2017, 314).

According to Clark Chilson (2012), Japan is a country that places very little social importance on religion (50). Buddhism is the most commonly practiced religion in Japan, but even that practicing population is low compared to other nations. In 2010, 190,000 Muslims were recorded in Japan, making up 0.15% of the total Japanese population. Most of these Muslims were immigrants from Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran, and Bangladesh. The few Japanese who converted to Islam were Japanese women married to foreign men and converted after the marriage (Rahman 2011, 256). Yamagata (2019) argues that there is very limited research on the Japanese perception of Islam in Japan. While Japanese locals do not appear to be hostile against Muslim communities, news and media outlets do portray the Islamic world in a negative light as a "radical religion,"

which when compared to Western religions like Christianity, is seen as “backward, intolerant, strange, unfree, and aggressive” (8).

The Japanese disinterest in religion can make smooth migration to Japan more challenging for Muslim migrants who are faced with very limited halal food options. *Halal* means “legally allowed,” pertaining to meat preparation, as well as certain behaviors such as sex and marriage, that are only deemed religiously acceptable if they are properly practiced according to Muslim law. Ono (2017) writes: “Muslim Japanese, as an extreme minority encounter the halal issue on a daily basis and are made conscious of their self-identification as Muslims” (333). Much of Islam is about the relationship between the self and the rest of the world. Eating is viewed as a “glorification of God” (329). To adjust to the influx of Muslim foreign populations, Japan has begun opening halal food markets within spaces like University cafeterias to serve international students. My study abroad university, Sophia University had a halal dining hall, serving Indian food options on campus.

However, these halal businesses are nearly all foreign owned as Japanese firms are reluctant to open the market, saying that “halal is a sensitive issue as it is associated with religion” (Ono 2017, 287). It is very much up to Muslim immigrants to design systems for their own diasporic communities in Japan, handing out guidebooks on halal dining options to help Muslim migrants and tourists new to Japan (324). Many of the Bangladeshis I met through my fieldwork owned halal shops and had flyers attached to their menus with detailed maps of other halal dining options in Tokyo. The Japanese government’s reluctance to support Muslim foreigners in Japan, has made immigrant communities responsible for carving out spaces and safety networks for themselves within Japan. The halal market has both provided Muslim immigrants with businesses

opportunities, while also creating social networks where diaspora communities can find the familiarity and support, which is not supplied to them by the government.

2.2 Japan's Response to Refugees

The Japanese working visa, which is incredibly difficult to obtain, serves as the greatest obstacle to many foreign workers wishing to settle permanently and work in Japan. Japan's immigration policy does not grant low-skill foreign workers permanent entry and manual laborers are not given work visas. The Japanese government is unwilling to give work visas because this would give migrants the freedom to choose their jobs, which would result in a loss of workers who are willing to do the "dirty" work (Chan 2018). Thus, many economic migrants apply for asylum in an effort to prolong their legal stay in Japan (Jozuka and Ogura 2018). By choosing this path, migrant workers have a better chance of getting a work visa, but even refugees and asylum seekers who are escaping religious persecution are only granted short-term entry and their asylum applications are frequently denied. When the temporary visas expire, they are either deported or sent to detention centers where they must pay fines in order to be provisionally released.

In Japan the term *nanmin* (refugee) is rarely uttered, not owing to lack of refugees in Japan, but because Japan's refugee crisis remains a largely hidden problem, kept behind the walls of detention centers and under-the-table manual labor. In 2017, Japan only accepted 20 of its 19,629 applications for asylum status (Kimiko and Wattles 2019). The Japanese government provides little to no assistance to its refugees. The lack of an anti-discriminatory policy enables legal discrimination and exclusion from equal access to employment and housing. Factors ranging from language, to religious differences, to housing discrimination make life in Japan a continuous

challenge for migrant workers and refugees. Chan (2018) argues that there are fears that having a more lenient refugee policy, would force Japan to take in many North Korean refugees. News outlets have perpetuated misconceptions that "armed North Koreans might disguise themselves as refugees and target military bases or nuclear power plants; and that North Koreans have a penchant for bribery, stimulants, drugs, and a lack of civil interactions that could 'create turmoil' in society" (Chan 2018). The Japanese media's promotion of fear has led many Japanese citizens to incorrectly believe that there are no refugees in Japan, and that refugees are violent threats to the peace of society.

Despite the Japanese government's unwillingness to permanently accept migrant workers, many Japanese nonprofits such as the Japanese Association for Refugees (JAR) provide assistance to these marginalized communities. Local Japanese have worked to promote welcoming sentiments to immigrants, which I explored through engagement with student advocates in Tokyo. I first met a Bangladeshi refugee after joining the Sophia Student Refugee Support Group (SRSG), a student organization for Sophia University students living in Tokyo. The walls of the otherwise dark university classroom wore bright printed flowers and welcoming signs. Small packets of Japanese snacks of chocolate biscuits shaped like mushrooms and koala bears lay arranged on the tables in their bright plastic wrappers. These monthly Refugee Cafes hosted by SRSG are social gatherings to give refugees and local Japanese students an opportunity to bridge the gap and remove the societal separation between refugee and local communities in Japan.

The Sophia students involved have personal connections to the cause. Many, half-Japanese themselves or foreigners from other countries, have experienced xenophobia while growing up in Japan. They had formed personal relationships with the refugees, meeting them not just through social gatherings, but also when visiting them in detention centers. These students had heard stories

of the failure upon failure to obtain asylum status and live legally in the country that was so often thought of as "safe" and "free."

This kind of welcoming environment is rare, according to the Bangladeshi refugee who always greeted me in Bangla at these events. He always seemed to find me in the crowd, the only Bangla speaker, and he'd ask me questions about the US and my studies in Japan, and which country I thought was better.

"It's not usually like this in Japan," he told me. "This kind of feeling like you belong. It's only here in this university with these students. Outside is another world."

During my time in Japan, I visited a detention center in Tokyo where we spoke to a man behind a glass wall. He had applied for asylum status only to have his application denied for the sixth time. Having already spent a year in the center, without any exposure to sunlight or fresh air, he told us how he could feel his mind disappearing. People who entered with able bodies and sharp minds developed health problems and mental illnesses in the detention centers where only rice is served three times a day. The man behind the glass, known for having big muscles, who took pride in his daily exercise and weightlifting, sat and wept before our eyes. I could only sit and listen as he cried. I realized that this was not a unique case—rather, it had become the norm for many immigrants who wanted to live in Japan. Detention centers visibly show Japan's efforts to maintain a divide between Japanese and foreigners. The creation of these spaces stems from Japan's very limited ideas about citizenship and belonging. The unwillingness and fear associated with permanently accepting immigrants has caused countless asylum seekers in Japan to remain an invisible part of the population with no access to human rights and equal opportunities.

2.3 Race in Japan

In Japan, citizenship and identity are defined by blood, rather than birthplace. This emphasis on blood is connected to the Japanese societal push for ethnic homogeneity. As a result, mixed-race or foreign workers in Japan can never truly be seen as citizens, because of their racial differences which set them apart from the Japanese mainstream. In Japan, the Japanese term gaijin, a contraction of the more formal term *gaikokujin*, has been used to refer to non-Japanese or foreigners (both white and of color) in Japan, literally meaning *outsider*. Westerners have argued that the term is derogatory with racist undertones because it functions to "Other" and label people who differ from the predominant Japanese population (*Japan Today* 2011). However, this perspective tends to overlook how this term can also have positive connotations: such as the privileges that come with being a white Westerner in Japan and fitting into the idealized global beauty standards.

Historically, white Westerners have symbolized cultural capital, beauty and power in Japan. As a result, Japan holds aspirations to be "white," idealizing the Western world, while simultaneously resenting it (Rivers and Ross 2013, 324). The rise in plastic surgery, as well as beauty and cosmetic products, has helped to reinforce beauty norms associated with whiteness (325). There are limitless teaching job opportunities reserved and easily available to "native speakers" of English, who have practically no difficulty getting hired. John Russell (1991) writes: "Japanese as Asians have traditionally occupied a liminal state—a gray area— 'betwixt and between' the 'Civilized White' and the 'Barbarous Black' Other" (6). Japan's prejudice and exoticism of specifically blacks stems from Western promotion of racism and stereotypes. Rivers and Ross (2013) write: "While an alliance between the black and the Japanese based on their awareness of being 'people of color' or to 'fight racism' sounds good, it is hardly likely." The

authors reference Yoshio Sugimoto's (2010) "ladders of civilizations" with Euro-Americans at the top of the hierarchy, Japanese in the middle, and other Asian countries at the bottom. There is no mention of African, South Asian, or Latin American countries, which are invisible within this frame (326). This example illustrates the hierarchical divisions of Japanese people in relation to foreigners. However, within this Japanese framework, white Euro-Americans are deemed globally superior, while other Asian countries are posited inferior, placed at the bottom of the hierarchy to imply Japan's self-assigned as second-best to the white race. The exclusion of developing countries renders them invisible, showing Japan's hostility towards foreigners of color.

Foreigners of color in Japan often face discrimination in the workplace, being rejected from jobs and not being allowed to live in certain housing complexes (*Japan Today* 2011).The term gaijin contains a series of meanings that fall on a spectrum of differing levels of perceived harmfulness that are dependent on the contexts in which they are used. The ambiguity of the term often masks or conflates the contexts in which gaijin *does* serve as a sort of racist epithet that causes people of color and mixed-race people in Japanese society to face discrimination in their everyday lives.

In Farrahan Hasnain (2018) discusses the celebration of "Gaijin Day" in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture. The supposedly multicultural event intended to host foreign performers and venders, resulted in significant criticism from the mixed-race public. Hasnain's research is on the Japanese diaspora, particularly Japanese of Peruvian and Brazilian descent who were born and raised in Japan, who often face discrimination and prejudice in the workplace and in access to higher education. When hearing about "Gaijin Day," Hasnain assumed that the performers would be foreigners visiting Japan to participate in the event. However, she quickly discovered that the majority of the artists were mixed-race third and fourth generation Japanese. Using the term gaijin

to refer to members of the Japanese diaspora who were born and raised in Japan, speaking Japanese as their first language, was for Hasnain, "at the very least inaccurate and, at most, deeply offensive." These *sansei* (third generation) and *yonsei* (fourth generation) mixed-race Japanese have often never been to the home countries of their parents or grandparents. "Their cultural identity is significantly Japanese, yet they are routinely labeled as 'gaijin' simply because they have multicultural or multiethnic backgrounds," Hasnain writes. An event that was supposed to promote multiculturalism thus only served to further reinforce stereotypes.

In 1973, many Japanese went to Brazil for economic opportunities (Lie 1997, 7). Hasnain (2018) provides some historical context, explaining that the Brazilian community has "more than halved since 2007, when the Japanese government offered payments to *nikkei* (foreigners of Japanese descent) of around ¥300,000 per worker and ¥200,00 per dependent to leave Japan permanently." This information illustrates the Japanese government's desire to maintain a culturally homogenous society by, according to Hasnain, essentially bribing its ethnically Brazilian citizens to move out of the country, despite their physical "Japanese" appearance.

Hasnain interviewed several mixed-race Japanese about their thoughts on the celebration of Gaijin Day. "To me, the words 'gaijin' or 'gaikokujin' don't hurt me, but the actions that come with them do," wrote Peruvian nikkei Juan Saul, a naturalized Japanese citizen. He discussed applying for a job at a Book-Off (Japan's chain of used bookstores). Despite doing well on the phone interview and almost being hired, he was rejected from the job when they saw him in person. "I was politely declined when I came in person because they said my 'gaijin face' would make 'communication difficult' and the customers might not want to talk to me," Saul said. "Some of the factories here refuse to pay work injuries or provide interpretation for nikkei, sansei and yonsei workers. They are treated as 'gaijin'—as outsiders—when they are the people who build the

important parts of Japanese technology." In this context, the gaijin label prevented Saul from being hired in the workplace, labeling him as "foreign" for his physically darker skin despite his Japanese citizenship. His description of the mistreatment of foreign workers who serve in the labor force for manufacturing and technological companies, illustrates the unequal treatment of foreigners who fail to appear physically "Japanese."

Dominic Maricon Feir Delacruz, a Filipino-Japanese man described being called a gaijin after people heard his non-Japanese sounding name. While Delacruz physically appears Japanese and fluently speaks the language, he described being bullied in middle and high school. "Usually in school, those who are one of a kind usually meet bullies. It's called '*Deru kui wa utareru*' and in English it means 'The nail that sticks out will be hammered down,' meaning a person who does something different gets unaccepted by others" (Hasnain 2018). His mixed-race identity served as a culturally separating factor that made him sometimes feel like an outsider in his own country. These multiethnic Japanese citizens have identified with their Japanese citizenship their entire lives but are still defined for their physically and culturally foreign traits. Labeling citizens who are members of the Japanese community gaijin simply because of their appearance or their racial and ethnic identity highlights the ongoing ways in which language and cultural stereotypes work to perpetuate the notion of Japan's national homogeneity.

Foreign workers in Japan (who are not Japanese citizens or of Japanese descent) face even greater identity struggles and discrimination. Akiko Onishi and Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu (2003) use detailed interview data from several South Asian Muslim residents in Japan to illustrate the daily struggle of foreign workers of color without perfect English language ability, let alone knowledge of Japanese, to fit into Japanese society. In the 1980s, Japan's economic growth increased the need for labor, which was fulfilled by foreign workers. Foreigners coming mainly

from Asian countries are referred to as "foreign workers," often entering Japan without any legal permission to stay or having lost their ability to stay after overstaying their visas (Onishi et al 2003, 225). The authors write, "Individuals may attempt to develop strategies to avoid suffering from stereotyping, prejudice, rejection, and derogatory judgments and resulting negative self-images, self-effacing behavior, and submission" (228). Migrating to Japan often causes identity and cultural conflicts as foreign workers struggle to fulfill the Japanese cultural norms and expectations needed to fit into Japanese society.

The interviewed participants were Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Iranian male foreign workers. They expressed two different narratives. In the first, "I am almost like Japanese," interviewees discussed their inability to fit into Japanese society despite following Japanese cultural expectations and mastering the language (230). The second narrative, "They do not see who I am," discusses the struggle of leaving their home countries where they had successful careers, to come to Japan where they are essentially invisible and struggle to find jobs (232). "It is stupid to make effort in Japan," one Pakistani respondent said. "No matter how hard you work, you are still treated as a 'foreigner.' After 10 years of hard work, you are still in the same place . . . people call you a foreigner. For a foreigner, there is no future" (232). These interviews highlight the inability for foreign workers in Japan to be seen for more than their differences. These non-white working-class foreign workers face discrimination in the workplace and come to Japan with extremely limited job opportunities, forced into manual labor and factory work. Their experiences reflect the inability for poor migrants to access equal treatment and opportunities in the workplace. They are unable to rid themselves of their foreign identities and low economic statuses, which serve as barriers to upward social mobility and opportunity in Japan.

Fumi Sakata (2012) brings a new perspective to the culture of racism in Japan in reference to white foreigners. Her article discusses a toy-like mask called "Hello, Mr. *Gaijin*" that depicts the face of a white man with blue eyes and a high-bridged nose, which is sold as a gag toy in Japan. The mask is presented as a "source of fascination as well as ridicule and mockery" (ii). While the mask does serve to idealize Western beauty standards and the Japanese desire to possess the white body, it also ridicules white Westerners, as it is labeled a "joke toy." Sakata argues than rather than simply reinforcing the superiority affixed to white bodies, the Gaijin mask serves to "mock and commodify this power of whiteness (ii). In this context, the mask functions to stereotype and ridicule Western physical features, drawing conclusions also about Western personality traits. Sakata addresses the complex nuances of the usage of gaijin, writing, "Being called 'gaijin' is not quite the same as being called 'white,' for it goes beyond the simple racial categorization and it singles out the person for being the outsider. If 'gaijin' can be simply explained as a manifestation of global whiteness, those who are labeled as such should be desired and admired instead of being excluded as the outsiders who can never cross the binary border to become one of the insiders, the Japanese" (34). Rather than simply referring to race, then, the term *gaijin* can also be used to imply a person's Westernized nature and *cultural* difference (34).

Sakata clarifies that she does not intend to suggest that the white experience in Japan can be described as a "disadvantaged minority group" (34). She recognizes that sociological studies have highlighted the use of Caucasian models for Japanese advertisements, illustrating the "superiority that is affixed to the white body in Japan" (35). However, she argues that the gaijin mask serves to complicate this concept, transforming "whites in Japan into a humorous, pleasurable, and innocent toy-mask to be consumed" (68). Sakata says that "the mask embodies the significantly contradictory nature of whiteness in Japan where whites are racialized to be

objectified while their white body continues to be desired" (68). The "Hello, Mr. Gaijin" mask illustrates the problems with the Japanese fixation with the white body, while also showcasing the objectification of white foreign culture in Japan.

The ambiguity of *gaijin* gives it multiple meanings depending on the contexts in which it is used. The term highlights the nationalistic emphasis on racial distinction in Japan, to divide "foreign" from "Japanese." The use of gaijin to refer to white Westerners shows the Japanese desirability and fascination with whiteness. However, it also serves to label and marginalize people of color in Japan, both mixed-race Japanese residents and foreign workers, also labeling them "foreign." Moreover, third or fourth generation Japanese are also referred to as gaijin simply because of their physical appearances or cultural differences and continue to struggle to find jobs. Low income foreign workers who make up the needed labor in Japan are often without proper rights or wages, unable to move up the social economic ladder because of their foreign identities. While gaijin can be used with harmless intentions it can also serve to illustrate Japan's views on race and class, which serves as a driving factor in discriminating against immigrants and preventing them from access to equal opportunities.

Immigration and asylum policies, frameworks of race and discrimination, and a complex relationship with Islam, have all contributed to Japan historically becoming less hospitable towards migrants. This context has shaped migration to Japan and highlights the historical insularity of Japanese society. Despite relying on foreign labor, the Japanese government's push towards ethnic homogeneity has prevented foreigners from access to many rights and opportunities. Given this difficult historical context, it is all the more surprising and significant that some spaces of intercultural exchanges *have* emerged, which serves to complicate the presumed division between Japanese and foreigners of color.

3.0 Cultural Emulation

Durga Puja, the largest Bengali festival, takes place every September or October to celebrate Durga, the Hindu goddess of war. In Pittsburgh, Hindu Bengali events were hosted in Hindu temples or public venues. In "The Social Drama of Durga Puja," Arnab Banerji (2019) analyzes the Durga Puja cultural event as a space which "performs reflective nostalgia and operates as a blueprint for Bengali identity that is intended to bind first-generation Indian Americans to their Bengali roots" (Banerji 2019, 1). Banerji asserts that Durga Puja is a social drama (Turner) in which the Bengali diaspora perform *Bengaliyana* or "Bengaliness," these performances serving as liminal spaces within the host country after leaving the homeland (8).

Durga Puja celebrates the goddess Durga's return home for four days. In India, new statues of Durga are sculpted from clay each year in October for the ten-day duration of the festival period. Then in an immersion ceremony at the end of the festival, the statues are fully submerged in the river, the biodegradable contents not causing harm to the environment. However, diaspora communities are not able to perfectly reproduce the homeland celebrations. They must make adjustments and work within the constraints of their locations. The Hindu Jain Temple in Pittsburgh used the same clay statue of Durga every year and while they performed the immersion ceremony, they did not submerge the statue in a river. Durga was clad in silks and jewelry, surrounded by her four children Saraswati, Lokhhi, Ganesh, and Kartik, with their designated animal companions. At the Pittsburgh temple, after leaving our shoes to a sea of footwear at the entrance, we went barefoot to the base of a stage area where baskets of fruit and flower offerings lay at Durga's feet. In the morning, we took flowers and offered them to her, while in the evening, we cupped our hands to the incense passed around. Despite the overwhelming crowds of people, I

always felt a strange sense of comfort in Durga's thin oval eyes lined in black and her calm smile as she slayed the demon at her feet, stabbing a spear into his chest.

Banerji acknowledges that the experience of these cultural events differs for diaspora families and their American-born children. While first-generation families are able to reexperience the home cultures they are nostalgic for, second-generation children do not identity with their Indian roots as much. Instead, they must juggle two cultures, preserving separate spaces for their Indian and American cultures (6). During Durga Puja I often sat in the back with my parents, hoping to disappear into the audience, while the Bengali friends I had grown up with since preschool, now near their teens, danced with made up faces and hair tied back in white flowers, bells jingling on their feet. Banerji describes the cultural community programs, with children and adults from the diaspora community performing. This served as an opportunity for parents to "flaunt" their children's successful ability to maintain Bengali artistic and musical ability and in turn, embody "Bengaliness" (Banerji 7).

In Japan, I saw a different kind of Bengaliness than the one-way, even exclusionary performance of culture with which I grew up. It was one that could be shared, imitated, and even emulated. Graham Huggan (2008) discusses the cultural ability to engage with and represent the "Other" through "mimesis," the act of replication and "representation that involves the mediation between different worlds and people—in essence, between different symbolic systems" (94). Mimesis helps those who are subject to oppression and unequal power dynamics, to cope with and try to understand their controlling authorities (93). The process of emulation can be compared to mimesis, in the imitation involved. However, emulation seeks to imitate through a means of admiration or respect, aspiring to mimic traditions or practices taken as a means of inspiration.

During my field research in Tokyo, I discovered not only a Bengali and Bangladeshi effort to successfully integrate and settle into Japanese society by emulating Japanese social behaviors, but also, somewhat more surprisingly, Japanese local interests in emulating Bengali culture. While the Bengali desire to learn Japanese and fit into society was the product of an unequal power dynamic, there was a mutual desire to learn about the Other in both of these cultures with distinctly different social practices. Much of this emulation involves an interest in art, and the exchanging of language, music, and visual forms. For instance, while Bengalis learned Japanese language in seeking to integrate in Japan, in my fieldwork I met numerous Japanese who chose to study Bangla language and music. Emulation and mimesis reveal a negotiation of the idea of homeland, and the production of new notions of "home," not only by diaspora communities but also by local communities, who in turn are able to find their own sense of belonging.

This chapter focuses on instances of mutual emulation that center on various aspects of cultural production and were particularly rich opportunities for relationships to form between Bengalis and Japanese. These instances of emulation appear in musical performances and dance, language, architecture, visual art, and ideas about beauty. Through the process of emulation, Bengali cultural forms are not only replicated, but they are transformed, coming to symbolize the desires of both Japanese and Bengalis. Through emulation, some diaspora Bengali community members and Japanese locals are able to create contexts in which they feel a new sense of belonging and freedom in Japanese society. Becoming immersed in Bengali customs and practices sometimes led Japanese locals to become kinds of cultural "ambassadors" and experts on Bengali culture. These forms of emulation also entailed tropes of exoticism, fascination, and the desire to experience the Other through embodying it.

3.1 Rabindra Jayanti

On Saturday, March 18th the Bengali Association of Tokyo (BATJ) hosted the 158th birthday of Rabindranath Tagore in Ikegami Kaikan Hall in Ota-ku, Tokyo. Having written both the Indian and Bangladeshi national anthems, Rabindranath Tagore—acclaimed Bengali poet and the first Nobel laureate in India—is loved by Bengalis for the songs he has written and composed. Almost a godlike figure for Bengalis, Tagore's portrait hangs from the walls of many Bengali households, wreaths of flowers hanging around his neck. I had seen countless portraits of him dressed in a white gown with white beard and mustache.

In 1916, Tagore went to Japan. Having visited Japan five times between 1916 and 1929, he wrote a travel diary titled, *Japan Jatri* (traveler), detailing his views of Japan. Tagore was strongly against forms of nationalism which promoted xenophobia, critiquing imperial missions and warfare. For this reason, he even spoke up against Japan's colonization of Korea. But he admired Japan's Eastern mentality and spiritual strength over its desire for foreign acquisition for progress. He respected Japan's strength and ability to preserve its culture without falling into Western influence. He loved Japanese art, was influenced by Japanese poetry and nature, and drew on it in some of his own poetry. Tagore's presence in Japan and Bengal helped to create initial cultural connections as well as a historical prototype that could be referenced in encounters between Bengalis and Japanese (Bandyopadhyay 2019).

In Bengal, *Rabindra Jayanti,* Tagore's birthday, is widely celebrated with musical and dance performances featuring Tagore's poetry and songs, as well as his influence on Bengali culture. For the celebration in Tokyo, I had borrowed my only South Asian friend's *salwar kameez,* a long gold and pink tunic, and wore it on the hour-long train ride, despite the 80-degree heat. No one had looked at me twice on the train or at the concert venue, as if already used to seeing

foreigners wearing traditional garb. The event was designed to bring Bengalis together, but also to give Japanese people interested in Bengali culture the opportunity to perform and showcase their appreciation for Bengali culture. The dark auditorium was filled with people of all ages. Young children dressed in matching Indian dance clothing sat in rows in the front. Japanese couples and elderly community members whispered to the South Asians seated beside them. More than half of the attendees were non-Bengali, filling the audience with Japanese and foreign faces—with mixed-race faces like mine.

Many of the South Asians that I saw sat with their Japanese partners and multi-racial children. Sanjay Kumar Verma, the Ambassador of India attended the occasion to give the opening speech. Members of the Bengali community sang and danced to Tagore's songs in ways that I had seen throughout my childhood. However, unlike the cultural events I grew up attending in Pittsburgh, the songs and dances in Tokyo were performed in Japanese and Bangla with both Japanese and Bengali performers. Tomoko Kambe, in her 80s, wore a green sari and sang a rendition of a Tagore song translated into Japanese. Seated on weak knees, she clapped her hands to the vibrato in her voice. She had studied classical European music on the piano before going to Santiniketan, India, to study *Rabindrasangeet* (Bengali songs written and composed by Tagore). She translated and published many Bengali books into Japanese to promote cultural exchange.

Well into their 60s and 70s, a troupe of Japanese dancers raised their knees higher than I ever could to Bangla songs echoing from loudspeakers. They had their *saris* wrapped around their waists as they twirled their wrists and swayed across the stage. Benneta Jules-Rosette (2000) discusses the roles of cultural and artistic performances in the identity shaping of diaspora communities. She examines how the African diaspora in Paris uses cultural art and performance to "create a space for difference within a dominant culture, without turning away from, or

completely rejecting Europe" (43). To cope with oppression and isolation, this diaspora community uses art and performance as a platform for political activism while also creating communities within the host country (40). Jules-Rosette argues that diaspora communities tend to have three options for integration into the host society. They can choose to insert themselves into the host country while maintaining their own cultural practices and identities. They can choose to assimilate and adopt the host culture the host culture. Or, lastly, they can choose to integrate by "adopting French nationality while attempting to retain a balance between one's culture of origin and French culture and society" (40). However, despite adopting French nationality, African diaspora communities in Paris experience racism.

The Bengali diaspora community in Japan engages with the host society through all three of the modes of integration that Jules-Rosette mentions. They maintain their Bengali identities and cultural practices while following the rules of Japanese society. However, the Bengalis are never able simply to "adopt" Japanese nationality. Rather, they are continuously labeled as foreigners within the societal frameworks of Japanese society amid dominant assumptions of cultural homogeneity. They must integrate through engaging with the Japanese mainstream, and they often bring Japanese locals into their inner circle, to share and educate others about their Bengali culture. Many of the Bengali women from West Bengal, India performing at Rabindra Jayanti taught classical dance and singing lessons to Japanese communities. As a result, the Japanese locals who appreciated and themselves wished to emulate Bengali artforms, shared the stage during this memorable event to celebrate Rabindranath Tagore whose influence in Japan from decades ago had left remaining impacts on Japanese locals.

3.2 Tagore Songs

Despite growing up in Japan, Yuka Okuda received her undergraduate degree from Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, India. She has her own Bangla singing school in Tokyo, and she also teaches Bangla language at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. At *Rabindra Jayanti* Okuda-sensei played the *tanpura* stringed instrument while Masanori Hisamoto played *tabla* (Indian drum). Her song "*Phuley Phuley Dholey Dholey,*" was written by Tagore, about flowers, with a chorus that's only four lines long, and I remembered when my grandmother used to sing it with me in the evening before bed.

For as long as I can remember, my grandmother could never quite sing in tune, but I could, and she often begged me to sing for her, but I always refused, out of shyness and embarrassment. It wasn't until I entered adulthood that I finally agreed. The patio in my grandmother's nursing home was quiet, except for the wind, when she held my hand as I sang to her quietly in Bangla. I was always surprised to still remember the words after so many years. Seeing Okuda-sensei on the stage, long hair half pinned up, pleated sari, hands embracing the stringed tanpura, you wouldn't know she was Japanese, upon first glance. Never had I seen a foreigner so at home, so fitting in a Bengali setting. The gentle deepness of her voice reminded me of my childhood, of the many years when I used to sing in Bangla and learned *Rabindrasangeet* (Tagore songs).

Meeting Okuda-sensei in Tokyo reminded me strongly of Banani Mashi, my old singing teacher, with her deep voice and welcoming eyes. In my childhood, I tended to stare at Banani Mashi's wrists when she sang *Rabindrasangeet* (Tagore songs), at the bulky gold and silver bangles she wore around her thinning wrists. She always painted her lips dark red, a color that left prints on our cheeks when we ran to her after class to hug her. The saris were of expensive silks; she'd never wear the same one twice. I was six years old and Banani Mashi was well beyond 70

years old, but the only sign of aging was the glimpse of white roots in her otherwise black hair. The bulky rings on her thumbs pressed against the keys of the harmonium, a hybrid of the pianos I was used to seeing in music classrooms, with the more unusual accordion. We sat in a semi-circle on the blankets laid out on the living room carpet, our mothers seated behind us, as we sang in unison.

While the other students excelled in *Bharatanatyam* (Indian classical dance) or had musically talented parents, my mother went through careful pronunciations of each Bangla vowel and aspiration when we practiced, making sure that I properly aspirated consonants like kha and gha to form puffs of air from deep within my throat. We listened to recordings of the songs on our old cassette player as she tried to play them on a little keyboard. The songs were written by Rabindranath Tagore and we, like most Bengali families, kept a *Gitobitan*, a book the size of a dictionary, with all of Tagore's songs written in Bangla, on our living room bookshelf.

Every weekend Banani Mashi flew to a different US city to teach Rabindrasangeet (Tagore songs), so she came to Pittsburgh once every month for a Saturday and Sunday. The lessons lasted three hours each day, sometimes longer because Banani Mashi always seemed to forget what had just happened 15 minutes before, that we'd only just finished singing a verse before she had us repeat again. When she called on us to sing, we passed around the clumsy microphone plugged into a speaker and she adjusted the harmonium to match our vocal ranges. There were five of us on that carpet, and the adults in the room compared our voices to famous Bengali singers, clapping when we finished. I especially liked becoming one collective voice. We were all the same in Banani Mashi's eyes when we sang together. She occasionally said afterwards how well I sang, how good my Bangla was, for having an American father. But more so, she made me feel like

some small part of me could really truly connect to my Bangla heritage, and sometimes I really believed it.

Years later when I listened to her voice on the crackling cassette tapes we kept in stacks above the radio, my eyes sometimes watered. Banani Mashi was the only person besides my grandmother who made me believe in my voice, despite its mistakes and mispronunciations. She moved back to Kolkata, India shortly after my freshman year of high school. I was told that her Alzheimer's was too severe to continue living and teaching in the States. When she disappeared, so did the lessons, and so did my voice and the vocal cords I had spent 14 years exercising.

Meeting Okuda-sensei in Tokyo made me further miss my old singing teacher as the classroom filled with Japanese women of all ages smiling while Okuda-sensei introduced me. These women had studied and learned *Rabindrasangeet* (Tagore songs) and so loved the music that they were motivated to study the meaning behind the words they sang. The language class met once a week at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Okuda-sensei writing Bangla letters across the chalkboard and explaining the meaning behind Bengali poems. She saw me also as an expert on Bengal, engaging with me during class, calling me to read passages without realizing that I read Bangla very slowly, having forgotten much of the alphabet that I had learned as a child. However, despite my flaws, she continued to respect my presence and welcome me warmly, even inviting me to join their singing class.

Okuda-sensei told me how she'd developed her passion for *Rabindrasangeet.* She was first introduced to Tagore's works in high school when she read a translation of *Gitanajali,* a collection of his poems. She didn't know Bangla at the time, but she wanted to learn. And so, in 1985 she went Santiniketan, in West Bengal India to Visva-Bharati University in order to study Bangla.

“When I first arrived in Santiniketan, it felt as if I had just returned somewhere familiar,” she said. “I don’t know why it felt like that. It was my first time going.”

Despite having extremely limited Bangla language background, she completed her entire undergraduate education in Bangla, the only foreigner in the class. Even the tests were in Bangla, not a word of English spoken in the classroom.

“Then after three years, I had a dream in Bangla,” she told me. “And after that it became easier. I no longer felt like a foreigner although everyone else was Bengali.”

For Okuda-sensei, this dream in Bangla represented an important shift between her experiences as “foreigner” to developing feelings of belonging. Through her full immersion into Indian society, thoroughly learning the language and studying the music, she had come to think of India as another home.

Her love of Bangla came from her love of Tagore songs. Majoring in music, she learned to sing *Rabindrasangeet* (Tagore songs) under the professor Konika Bandyopadhyay, a legendary female *Rabindrasangeet* singer. The language became important in understanding the pronunciation and the meanings of the lyrics. She translated Bangla into Japanese, writing on Tagore’s presence in Japan and sharing *Rabindrasangeet* with the Japanese community.

“Is there anything between Bangla and Japanese that’s the same?” I asked her.

“There is,” she said. “Inside of the songs, the themes about hardships, memories, things you can’t see with your eyes. Those themes can be found in both Bengali and Japanese poetry.”

Despite the linguistic differences between Bangla and Japanese, Okuda-sensei found music forming a bridge between these distinctly different cultures. Traveling to Bengal and herself becoming the foreigner, made Okuda-sensei sympathetic to foreigners in Tokyo and motivated her to expose Japanese locals to this rich culture upon returning to Japan. Through the sharing of visual

and literary artforms, diaspora communities become more visible and appreciated by the host country. Okuda-sensei became a Bengali cultural ambassador, providing translations of Tagore's songs and poetry, making it accessible to Japanese communities and strengthening the ties between these two communities. This local interest and spreading of Bengali culture have, in turn, helped many Bengalis and Japanese form relationships that help to create a sense of home.

3.3 A Piece of Japan in Santiniketan

Japanese have taken interest in Rabindranath Tagore's music and have chosen to emulate it, opening their own schools as reflected by Okuda-sensei. However, the reverse also exists, with Bengalis emulating Japanese painting techniques in the early part of the 20th century. In the first half of the 20th century, Japanese painters Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso came into contact with Bengali painters Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. These prominent historical figures emulated both Japanese and Indian painting techniques. Japanese artist Okakura Kakozo was made to resign from his position as director of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, due to an administration related conflict. He chose to leave Japan for India where he was influenced by Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu reformer like Ramakrishna who promoted the secular idea of all religions coming together (Inaga 2009, 150). Yakuza's disciple Yokoyama Taikan was inspired by this relationship and painted the 1902 painting "Meiji," depicting a young boy surrounded by religious icons of Buddha, Confucius, Laos and Christ (150).

Taikan was invited to Kolkata by the Tagore family in 1903. At the time, Tagore's nephew Abanindranath Tagore was greatly influenced by this interaction and adapted Taikan's water dripping technique, changing it into a "wash" painting method (151). With his interest in Indian

artforms, another painter Kanpo had previously traveled to Kolkata in 1916 for one and a half years to study Indian art forms. He formed a strong friendship with painter Nandalal Bose, a student of Abanindranath's, and as a result many of their paintings share common features, "suggesting mutual emulation" (159). Traveling to India had a strong impact on Kanpo's art. For example, his depictions of Buddha changed to mirror Ajanta mural paintings in Maharashtra, India. He also began using "vivid primary colors" of blue, green, and orange in his paintings of Buddhist iconography (159).

Kanpo also developed a strong devotion to Rabindranath Tagore. In 1928, Nandalal Bose accompanied Rabindranath Tagore on his second trip to Japan where they met Kanpo (162). Kanpo painted Tagore as "an Oriental sage," portraying him with features very similar to those in Zen Buddhist paintings (165). This historical context provides a framework for Japanese and Bengali artistic connections that have influenced contemporary forms of emulation. The historical intercultural mixing of Bengali and Japanese painting styles has helped to establish cross-cultural ties and relationships between communities that otherwise would have little overlap. In doing so, both Bengali and Japanese culture is recreated in artforms, the Other being transformed into something culturally familiar.

Stemming from the interest in studying Japanese painting, came an appreciation for Bengali visual and literary art forms. The Indian Embassy in Tokyo recently hosted Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay, a Bengali poet and calligrapher who had the first truly authentic Japanese house built in his town of Santiniketan in West Bengal, India. Bandyopadhyay is a calligrapher and poet, who, inspired by Japanese calligraphy, took this artistic approach and applied it to writing Bangla alphabet letters in a similar style. He took it upon himself to fulfill Rabindranath Tagore's wish to have a Japanese house built in India. In 1916, after being awarded the Nobel Prize, Tagore went

to Japan. He especially admired Japanese architecture for its simplicity and wished there could be Japanese architecture in his homeland of India.

The Indian embassy's event showcased Bandyopadhyay's poetry and calligraphy from his most recently published book, *The Scarecrow's Prayer.* The lecture hall had a presentation displayed on a screen while Bandyopadhyay discussed the historical connections between Tagore and Japan, and the process of bringing the Japanese house to Santiniketan. The house, with the Japanese name *Kokoro* (heart), took several years to build, symbolizing a cross-cultural wonder and a visual representation of Tagore's perception of Japan.

In his presentation, Bandyopadhyay told us that when Tagore first went to Japan, he had an exotic view of Japan as the Other, thinking that Japanese had very difficult minds, that were very deep and hard to fully understand and see. He wanted to see Japan from a positive perspective. The modern Japan had a professional rather than personal face. Japan was both new and old at the same time. The culture was directed towards discovery of the inner soul.

Tagore especially liked Japanese art. He loved their ikebana and tea ceremonies. He thought that religious ritual was one of Japan's highest national achievements. He was especially drawn to Japanese architecture and gardens. In Japanese houses he saw that there was nothing in the rooms besides the essentials. They were not cluttered but instead had boundless interiors. He found the Japanese language peaceful, saying that only the term *baka* (idiot) was a word of abuse. While he liked Japanese dance as it was a dance of the whole body, he thought that Japanese music was "not well developed."

Tagore's perspectives illustrate a series of comparisons between Japan and India, specifically through a West Bengali lens. However, through his reflection emerges a clear sense of not just exoticism, but also awe and admiration. Tagore was so influenced by some of Japan's

(to his mind) anti-Western core values and artforms, that he wished to have a Japanese house built in Bengal. He desired to emulate Japanese architecture and Japan's simple values by bringing a piece of Japan to Santiniketan, India. He quite literally wished to have Bengali and Japanese architects work together to reproduce this Japanese sense of home, which he felt a deep nostalgia for, in his own homeland, bringing Japan and Bengal closer than ever before.

Nilanjan Bandyopadhyay took it upon himself to fulfill Tagore's wish and build a Japanese house in Santiniketan. As it was not possible in Tagore's lifetime to bring a house from Japan to India, Bandyopadhyay set to work hoping to honor Tagore by bringing his dream to life many decades after Tagore's death. He worked with a team of six Japanese architects and designers: Kazuhiro Aoshima (carpenter), Miku Watanabe (fashion designer), Nobuhiko Kawahara (dollmaker), Shigeru Sebe (painter) and Sayuri Hashimoto (mending designer). He worked for the Visva-Bharati University, founded by Tagore in Santiniketan. He independently funded the building of the house by himself. Bandyopadhyay, interestingly, was himself first introduced to Japanese culture by Azuma Kazua, a Japanese Tagore scholar.

The painter Jogen Chowdhury gave land to build the Japanese house with space for a garden. The first plan of the house was done by Bengali Milon Dutta, which was then modified by Sato Kongo, a Japanese artist. They wanted the house to mirror the empty spaces found in typical Japanese houses, but not be a copy of any existing pieces of architecture in Japan. The house took six months to build out of concrete and brick. It has a *genkan* (Japanese entryway) with a void and stairwell leading to the first floor. The kitchen has basic ingredients to make a simple Japanese meal. The living room is Japanese style with a low table and legless chair with a red box. There is an iron table with a fire pit and a *tokonoma*—insect cage with a paper moth. There is a small bedroom, which is the only room with a wooden bed. The guest room was made as empty as

possible with an *oshirre* (traditional storage closet for bedding) and natural grid floorings. There is a *chashitsu* (tearoom) for tea ceremonies and a garden with dry landscape. The garden serves as a memorial for Azuma Kazuo with mortal remains. Kazuo, a Japanese devout follower of Tagore, spent much of his life teaching in Santiniketan and sharing Tagore's writing in Japan. The house even has a little library with books about Japan and natural lighting on three sides.

Every object in Kokoro has a strong connection to Japan and a story to tell. They range from pottery to calligraphy to paintings. For Bandyopadhyay, Kokoro represents a nostalgia for Japan. The painting "Nostalgia" by Misako Shire is hung up in the house. Bandyopadhyay also occasionally cooks in the house and hosts guests.

The house represents the fusion of two worlds, and two cultures. Bandyopadhyay recreated a piece of Japan in Santiniketan, bringing the Japanese sense of "home" to his home country. Nostalgia is very often linked to notions of not just the past and memory but of "home" (Seremetakis 1994). However, this account of emulation through architecture, of recreating a Japanese house in India, represents a literal recreation of home, showing how the "heart" yearns also for a "home" produced through a relationship with foreign country that sparked great emotional connection and cultural influence. It reflects the Bengali desire to emulate aspects of a Japanese sense of "home" which cannot be found in India. And yet it is this very notion of home and belonging that many Bengali diaspora communities living in Japan struggle to find when migrating to Japan.

3.4 Learning Bangla

In 1955, Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray made the Indian art film *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road), which won the Best Human Document Award at the Cannes International Festival in 1956 (Matsuoka 2008, 147). The film gained an audience in Japan for its depiction of rural life and poverty in India. In 1983, the Indian Film Festival in Japan showed blockbuster Bollywood films such as, *Sholay* and *Bombay*, which addressed hot political topics such as Hindu-Muslim tensions (250). These films differed from what Japanese audiences were primarily exposed to, challenging their more stereotyped notions of Indian culture. With increased South Asian immigration to Japan in the mid 1990s, the Indian film industry gained popularity among Japanese locals. In 1998, the Tamil film *Muthu* was screened in Japan, taking the Japanese name *Odoru Maharaja*, meaning "Dancing Maharaja" (243). The film gained tremendous popularity, exposing Japanese people to a new way of movie going with audience interaction during screening at movie theatres rising. There were "open expressions—laughing, clapping, shouting time, singing songs in accordance with the events on screen—were encouraged" (246). The film portrayed a mixture of acting with elaborate song-dance sequences. But more importantly, it depicted a stereotypical image of rural India that aligned with the Japanese limited image of India as "a 'backward' country, where people wear traditional Indian clothes, living in 'eternal villages' under the 'caste' system" (246).

Today, Bollywood films are more widely available to Japanese locals, some films showing in theatres in major cities like Tokyo. The interest in the film industry has helped to expose many young Japanese to different Indian languages and cultures, including Bangla. While Bengalis and Bangladeshi migrants come to Japan for economic purposes, and struggle to master the language through immersion, public classes, or formal education, a select few Japanese have chosen to

pursue Bangla language study. Many of these students study at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) where Bangla language is taught. The teachers of these Bangla courses are not only Bengalis but also Japanese who have traveled to India or Bangladesh and extensively studied the language there. I had the opportunity to sit in on a Bangla language class at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

Minori is currently a third-year student at TUFS, majoring in Bangla. She had done a homestay in Bangladesh and currently worked as an intern for the NHK radio's Bangla program. She also worked as a language translator for a first grade Bangladeshi student in elementary school. This little girl couldn't speak any Japanese, so Minori came to all of her classes with her and translated the lessons into Bangla for her. The parents had a different translator hired each day to accompany their daughter to school. In addition, Minori was in a Kathak Indian dance troupe at her university and did dance performances, wearing Indian dance clothing. She was recently featured on her Japanese friend's YouTube channel where she teaches an "Indian makeup" tutorial, performing her "Indian expertise." She draws on eyeliner with long extended wings, giving the eyes a dark and exotic look. With false eye lashes, eye shadow, and red lipstick, she sticks a *bindi* onto her forehead to fully emulate the makeup styles that are characteristic of Indian dance troupes. This video showed me that Minori's dance group not only tried to visually emulate Indian dance styles, but also incorporated those fashion styles into their everyday lives.

Studying Bangla and traveling to Bangladesh, had entirely influenced Minori's wardrobe. She wore South Asian garments and geometrical printed tops and tunics. She was soft-spoken and modest, and I was very impressed by Minori's strong interest in Bengali culture. However, unlike other Japanese interested in Bengali things whom I met (and who I discuss in the next chapter), I

noticed that Minori did not try to think of her personality *as* Bengali. Instead she expressed interest in the culture and embraced it through an interest in language learning and performance.

Minori's interest in Bangla developed when she was in high school and went to her current university's open campus. There she met a *senpai* (upper classman) who had studied Bangla.

"If you use Bangla from now forward, you'll have more business opportunities," her senpai said.

She decided that she wanted to study a language that few Japanese studied. She wondered if there was a demand or need for Bangla speakers in Japan.

While Minori was in the level three class, I shadowed a first-year Bangla class. The teacher was a man from Kolkata, India. He appeared strict with his students, criticizing their mispronunciations, despite being otherwise very lenient about punctuality. Minori told me that it was okay to be late to class, this lateness being characteristic of Bengali culture. The professor was sometimes late himself. At the university there were a total of four professors of Bangla language: Yuka Okuda; a professor from Bangladesh; a Japanese professor who worked for NHK radio; and this professor from Kolkata, India. The Indian professor came to the Japanese university through a three-year exchange program, the teacher-in-residency changing every three years.

During the class the students repeatedly practiced reading Bangla passages aloud. The passages represented natural Bangla conversations, addressing daily events and explaining different festivals for Hindus and Muslims. The primary focus was pronunciation, which he said was the biggest challenge for Japanese. This was a huge problem as Japanese often could not properly say "Bangla" or "Bengali," failing to pronounce the "l" sound. He used Japanese words to help provide examples of correct pronunciation, saying that the difference between *tha* and *ta*, and the aspirated *ttha* and *tha* was a challenging distinction for non-native Bangla speakers. He

used the name of the nearby train station Tama as an example for the sound of one of the “t’s.” Despite Bangla and Japanese being drastically different in nearly all aspects, there were a few words that were interestingly similar. The professor introduced the Bangla word *achha* meaning “okay,” comparing it to Japan’s *sou desu ne* or *hai*. He thus drew on Japanese words in his teaching even though he couldn’t speak Japanese fluently and taught entirely in English. The professor also drew connections between Japanese *chotto*, and Bangla *chhot*o meaning small. This was one word that shared a similar pronunciation and meaning with Japanese. By drawing connections between the languages, the Bengali teacher sought to help his Japanese students emulate Bangla, despite their different linguistic capabilities.

One of the greatest initial challenges that comes with migration is transitioning into learning to speak the host language. The loss of language contributes to the feelings of social isolation and longing that diaspora communities experience in Japan. Time and time again, I heard from Bengalis in Tokyo that the most difficult part of transitioning to life in Japan was the language barrier. Japanese locals learning Bangla language highlights a source to bridge the cultural gap between Bengalis and Japanese, while showcasing a Japanese appreciation for Bengali culture. It is often through language learning and study abroad immersion, that many Japanese students have made global connections and had opportunities to study abroad, expanding their world views. This global perspective has contributed to Japanese students often being the most welcoming communities towards foreigners, working towards removing language barriers and deconstructing the misleading “homogenous” image of Japan.

3.5 Negotiating Mixed-Race

Beauty is so deeply connected to race and national identity that there is a tendency to enhance the features that are deemed "beautiful" and acceptable by society. Race becomes another area through which emulation occurs. Despite the different physical features and fashion in Japan and South Asia, both cultures try desperately to emulate and recreate "whiteness," which appears in the forms of lightening creams in India and white powdery foundations in Japan; on billboards and in train station advertisements; in TV commercials and music videos. Diaspora communities in Japan, particularly those of color, are visibly marked as different, labeled as foreign and exotic. However, foreigners migrating to Japan and marrying Japanese locals has resulted in a great increase in mixed-race Japanese citizens, challenging notions of race in Japan.

Growing up I benefitted from the privileges that came with having lighter skin than my mother but struggled with having an entirely different experience than her within the Indian community where I was visibly not physically "Indian." It was only through Indian cinema that I was able to imagine myself in the Indian world, living vicariously through the dramatic storylines and complex love stories. Ranjan Bandyopadhyay (2008) addresses this disconnect between first generation and second-generation members of the Indian community in discourse with Indian Cinema. Bandyopadhyay argues that Bollywood films represent the older generation's nostalgia for their homeland, the "longing for a home that no longer exists or existed" (79). These older generations are able to connect with film plots and see themselves on the screen. However, second or third-generation Indians are motivated to travel to India through the more modern portrayals of India, now depicted in heavily Westernized contemporary Bollywood films (Bandyopadhyay 84). While I didn't travel to India until I was 18, I felt a connection and desire to travel to India through the scenes I saw in the movies.

However, unlike the second-generation children that Bandyopadhyay describes, I grew up on old black-and-white Hindi film songs, Bhagwan and Geeta Bali dancing together through the doors of a ticking clock the size of a house, in the 1951 Bollywood film *Albela.* We watched Raj Kapoor with his black top hat, stealing a watch from a man's pocket in the 1951 song *Awara Hoon*. I had learned to hum these songs at the same time that I had memorized nursery rhymes, at the same time that my father had played Jethro Tull's Christmas albums and old Devo CDs. By sixth grade I was in love with Indian actor Shahrukh Khan who made me swoon with his furrowed brows and slick dance moves on the top of a moving train in *Dil Se*, a film my mother said was still too violent for me to see. In high school, I was old enough to date but my plots to replace Shahrukh Khan's wife were no longer of interest because he was by then over 50 years old, but still playing shirtless romantic roles with young female actresses.

While older female Indian actresses like Kareena Kapoor and Kajol Devgan retreated to older roles as mothers, younger, newer, sexier actresses emerged. In their mid to late twenties they danced their slender bodies against Shahrukh's somehow unwrinkled skin, showing faces paler and paler through the decades. Katrina Kaif was the newest hit star. I first saw her in *Jab Thak Hai Jaan,* white enough to pass for European but dark enough to get by as an Indian. She can barely speak Hindi in interviews, only knows how to play passive, sexy roles, yet she is admired by millions of fans for her pale skin and beauty. She, half-Indian, is now the new face of the Bollywood industry with its preference for light skinned actresses, with whitening creams and powdered faces, lightened black hair made to look brown. Even my half-German, half-Indian cousin, an actress, auditioned for a female lead role in a Bollywood film, having Hindi lessons beforehand. But the industry denied her the role because her oval face was what they considered "too round," because Bollywood screens displayed beauty only in the form of slim waists, a limited

representation of Indian women. Katrina Kaif, who mixes Hindi with English and was raised in the UK, defines the new Indian, the new desire to be the best of both.

People of "mixed-race" come in all varieties but have identities that are almost always associated with ideas about racial difference (Edwards et al 2002, 4). Mixed-race people are given non-recognition or over-categorization and are often depicted as experiencing an "identity crisis," a "culture clash," or feeling of "cultural confusion" (2). In 2014, 2% of Japanese citizens were recorded as biracial (2). Just like in the Indian film industry, Japanese society promotes Western beauty standards, and whiteness is valued. However, even before contact with the Western world, Japanese society believed in the idea of *shiroi* (white) equating with beauty, while *kuroi* (black) was deemed unattractive (Törngren and Sato 2019, 3). Japanese society generally categorizes people of mixed-race into either, or: *Either* Japanese *or gaikokujin* (foreigner). There was initially no space for an in-between (2). However, with changing beauty standards came the creation of spaces that included mixedness in ideas of beauty in Japan.

Western beauty was primarily promoted during the early 20th century when Japan came into greater contact with the Western world. Western movies promoted the idea of white female beauty (3). The Pacific War produced many mixed-race citizens, but after World War II ideas about mixedness changed, whiteness becoming associated with the United States, which had bad connotations at the time. In the 1960s, however, "Generation EA"— Ethnically Ambiguous half-celebrities—were prominent in beauty commercials. In the 1960s, *haafu-gao* (multiracial face) became the new face of beauty (4). Through the modeling industry, the Other becomes further enhanced and exoticized to develop a unique sense of beauty, and mixed-race models in Japan help to challenge notions about race and beauty, while also exoticizing themselves to cater towards

local desires. However, the experiences of mixed-race models do not always undo or undermine racial ideas about purity in Japan but may sometimes also reassert them.

Maya Kazi is *hafu*, the Japanese term for "half" or multiracial Japanese individuals. She started her modeling career at age 18, appearing in magazines and catalogues. In the modeling industry it was actually easier if you were *hafu*—half Japanese with something else. In fact, nearly all of Japan's most popular models in their twenties identify as "half." In the 1970s, the Japanese government became more lenient regarding immigration laws, resulting in an increase in foreign residents, therefore increasing interracial relationships and multiracial children in Japan. Russian models also started coming to Japan, easily finding work with good pay with their white skin. But Maya admitted that it was unusual to see South Asian models, *purely* South Asian models, with dark skin. Being half was perfect; it preserved the exotic look while maintaining familiar "Japaneseness."

I met Maya in a crowded Starbucks for an interview, and she sipped on her café latte, eyes wide and focused, lips puckered slightly into a smile. I fumbled clumsily for my notepad, apologizing for arriving late.

"Don't worry," she said softly in Japanese, her native language.

Rain sloshed against the windows of the crowded café, breaking my umbrella and frizzing my hair. But her ombre hair, untainted from the rain, fell perfectly against her tan shoulders, elbow on tabletop, hand on chin—a poise I had seen in countless photos on the internet where she posed in dresses and swimsuits. After learning about her fame within the Tokyo modeling world, I sent her an email requesting an interview, expecting not to receive a reply. But, to my surprise, she made time in her busy schedule to meet. I remember when I first saw Maya, her face projected onto a tiny television screen inside a Bangladeshi restaurant in Tokyo. I couldn't believe we had

the same name, the same long dark brown hair that curled at the ends, and we were both half-Bengali.

In the episode, “Books, Curry and the Taste of Home,” aired in December on NHK World Japan—Japan’s international public broadcast network—the camera following half Japanese, half Bangladeshi model Maya Kazi as she introduced viewers to the hidden Bengali restaurants in Kanda Jinbocho. This area in central Tokyo was known as “Curry City” with over 400 curry-serving restaurants.

“I have been here [Tokyo] for photoshoots and to meet with publishers,” she says in the episode, standing in in front of a busy Tokyo street. “But today I will take a closer look.”

Maya has heard Bangla since her childhood, learning to recognize the aspirated consonants and rounded vowels when her Bangladeshi father spoke. But when it comes to speaking Bangla, she struggles to formulate sentences and remember the words. The episode aimed to preserve Maya’s Bangladeshi heritage by having her narrate in Bangla, memorizing a script prepared for her with English subtitles. On screen, she became a cultural ambassador for Bengali culture, her Japanese accent lining each Bangla word.

In 2015 Ariana Miyamoto was crowned Miss Universe Japan. Miyamoto, like Maya, is *hafu*, and half African American and Japanese. Her award received backlash and criticism (Chung and Ogura 2018). Miyamoto had faced frequent bullying in elementary school, which Maya admitted was quite common for multiracial Japanese, especially in early education. Despite being born and raised in Japan, Miyamoto’s face still remained labeled as “non-Japanese” or “Other.” It wasn’t enough to speak native Japanese and live in the country if your face didn’t show it. As a result, many mixed-race Japanese do what they can to hide their non-Japanese identities, “passing” as Japanese and “covering” their more stigmatized sides (Törngren and Sato 2019, 5).

In 2016, Priyanka Yoshikawa Ghosh, a half Indian-Bengali model, became the first multiracial woman to win Miss World Japan. Unlike Maya, Ghosh grew up speaking fluent Bangla, having lived and gone to school in Kolkata, India for one year when she was nine years old. Although Ghosh didn't face as much racial backlash as Miyamoto, many Japanese questioned why the award had not been given to a "pure" Japanese (Sen 2017). Miyamoto and Ghosh's achievements questioned Japan's limited self-image, challenging efforts to maintain a homogenous Japanese society. Their recognition opened the doors to many other *hafu* models in Japan.

Being *hafu* helped Maya to begin her modeling career and explore her multicultural heritage. Originally from Tokyo, Maya graduated from the Meiji Gakuin University where she studied Japanese history. I was surprised to hear that in addition to modeling, she has published newspaper and blog articles about Japanese history and its South Asian influences.

"With my face, it's more interesting to do that kind of research," she said. "I become a kind of character."

Through this research, Maya has managed to explore her own multicultural heritage and the preexisting historical relationships between Japan and South Asia. Her interest in books and history is deeply rooted in these two countries.

She told me her parents met in a Japanese train station years ago where her father had approached her mother.

"He was hitting on her," Maya admitted, laughing.

Maya's father, Ghiyasuddin Kazi came to Japan as an exchange student from Bangladesh, receiving scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education to study art at the Tokyo University of the Arts. He has lived in Japan since 1975 and now works fulltime as a painter, famous both in

Japan and Bangladesh, his artwork having received recognition from the Japanese emperor who gave him the Order of the Rising Sun award in 2018.

Like his daughter, Kazi too, used his bicultural Bangladeshi and Japanese influences, and applied them to his career. Maya told me that her father's paintings are seen as exotic in Japan, while in Bangladesh they are known for having Japanese qualities. Using images of nature, he manages to blend these two cultures while showcasing their individual themes.

Maya admitted that her father's paintings remind her more of Bangladesh and the landscapes she frequently saw as a child when they went back to visit. His painted puffs of grays blend into a cloudy haze, interrupting the dominating splotches and squiggles of white. White is a dominant theme in his paintings, appearing like snow but reminding Maya of the thick fog that appeared in wet mornings.

"If there is a filter between the beauty of this world and myself, then that is still my father's brushstrokes," she wrote for *The Daily Star* in "Thoughts about My Father's Paintings."

Masako Kudo's (2017) analysis of transnational relationships, regarding marriages between Japanese women and Pakistani male labor migrants, discusses the reversed gender roles produced through the relationship between the global South and developed north (18). By marrying Japanese women, Pakistani labor migrants, like many Bangladeshis, are able to secure their statuses in Japan and work legally, often starting their own businesses, which the wives partake in (20). Kudo also discusses the limited research on marriages in which the Japanese wives choose to return to Pakistan with the children while the Pakistani husbands stay behind in Japan to finish work. This choice stems from the desire to give their children an Islamic upbringing and an English education, which would not be available in Japan (26). As a result of these marriages, many Japanese women convert to Islam, and face social stigmatization from their Japanese

families for marrying non-Western foreigners. The associations with white Western husbands are quite different from those with darker skinned migrant workers (23). However, through these marriages, Japanese women find that they are able to share duties with their husbands who value family and partake in family obligations, unlike Japanese men who work long hours and spend little time at home (23).

Maya's family, however, is fully immersed into Japanese culture. Despite coming from the Islamic country of Bangladesh, from a working-class background, Maya's father was never strict about religion or preserving that Bangladeshi identity. For many Muslims moving to Japan, adjusting to the lack of halal foods available and the limited access to mosques for regular prayer, made life challenging. But Kazi only followed a few of these religious practices and dietary restrictions, giving his daughter a life that was much more lenient and Japan-oriented than that of other mixed-race Japanese.

But as a child Maya felt distanced from Bangladesh, which compared to Japan was unclean, chaotic and often flooded—a foreign place without many friends.

"It's not good of me to say," she admitted, "but honestly I thought of it [Bangladesh] as a country below Japan."

However, Maya was respected in Bangladesh for being *hafu,* for being Japanese—Japan viewed by Bangladeshis as a superior country. And likewise, many Japanese admired her Bangladeshi heritage and beauty, promoting her as a Bengali cultural ambassador. Some of Maya's Japanese friends even pursued Bangla language study, having themselves traveled to Bangladesh.

"But why this Japanese interest in Bengali culture?" I asked her.

"I think it's because Japanese love curry," she told me. The widely popular Japanese curry draws on South Asian influence, while preserving the mildly sweet flavor that is dominant in Japanese cuisine.

But really, Maya believed that it was because traveling to Bangladesh changed things for its visitors. The culture shock was so deep that it was difficult to forget even after returning to Japan. As a result, some Japanese to choose to study the language and cultural art forms, all in order to maintain that connection.

Wearing traditional South Asian clothing in Bangladesh and serving as a Bengali cultural ambassador in Tokyo, Maya came to appreciate her Bangladeshi background and the trips back to her father's country. When she became an adult and entered the modeling industry, she benefitted from this dual identity, while also further understanding the difficulties that came with being *hafu* in Japan. But moreover, Maya came to recognize the nuances, the feeling of happiness that Bangladeshis seemed able to have, even if they were poor, even if they had low-wage jobs or few belongings. It was a sentiment that she rarely saw in Japan.

"In Japan if you ask are you happy, people don't know how to answer."

Maya's experience represents the duality of Bengali and Japanese mixedness in Japan. Despite being raised in Japan and primarily exposed to Japanese culture, her work in the modeling industry and current position as a kind of ambassador for Bangladesh has changed her relationship with her Bangladeshi heritage. In the same way that I have struggled with my half-Bengali identity but found a way of coming to terms with it in Japan, Maya has changed her attitude towards Bangladesh, now proudly exhibiting this side of her identity in her journalistic writing. Kazi's father's paintings provide a visual example of emulation, by incorporating Japanese art styles with

and Indian painting techniques, which both gained him Japanese acclaim and recognition, but also helped him to find a sense of home in Japan.

Mixed-race Japanese are able to emulate and embody the Other, in an acceptable way, still preserving familiar Japanese physical traits while simultaneously exhibiting elements of exoticism. Emulation of cultural beauty standards can indicate aspects of desirability. By openly representing her Bangladeshi side, Maya has managed to become a cultural ambassador who changes the Japanese attitude about Bangladesh. Ideas about race and beauty become entangled with ideas about heritage and culture, expanding the limited understanding of mixedness into a dialogue about bicultural upbringing. Mixed-race models have challenged the idealization of whiteness in Japanese society, creating a new face of Japan, while sometimes having to enhance their foreign identities in this effort.

4.0 The Intercultural Exchange of Food

Tokyo has a surprisingly large number of South Asian restaurants, many owned by Bengalis (from India and Bangladesh), Pakistanis, and Nepalis. These immigrant-owned restaurants and shops initially opened to serve South Asian immigrants, selling halal foods and South Asian goods that are unavailable in Japan. However, with the increase in "ethnic" restaurants in Japan and the demand for "Indian" food, many of these South Asian restaurants cater to Japanese locals and choose to label themselves as "Indian," serving commonly known Indian dishes such as *naan* and popular curries. Rahman (2011) writes, "The restaurants are decorated in Indian style, screen Bollywood movies and play Hindi music, and showcase cultural products and pictures of South Asian (Indian) political and cultural personalities to present a truly Indian ambience" (265). The vastly diverse cultures within South Asia and even within India are not transferred into the diaspora (Mankekar 2002, 197). Instead, stereotypical and simplified notions of this culture are produced. The intentional homogenization of Indian and South Asian food caters to primarily Japanese clientele while simultaneously attracting migrants and immigrants from different parts of South Asia.

While in Tokyo, I discovered a select few Bengali and Bangladeshi restaurants that stood apart from this popular Indian cuisine. These restaurants took pride in serving *Bengali* food and taking Bengali names, aiming to educate the Japanese public about this culture and distinguish it from the more widely known Indian culture. There is little scholarly literature on the Bengali diaspora communities in Japan that examine interactions between migrants and Japanese locals. But these Bengali restaurants can serve as spaces of *interaction* between some Japanese locals and South Asian foreigners. They are where cross-cultural relationships, both professional and

personal, can be formed. Not only do they recreate home and community for Bengali diaspora members, but they also help bridge the gap between migrants and Japanese locals. They provide opportunities for facilitated cultural exchange, where Bengali communities interact with the Japanese mainstream by exposing them to their culture through food, décor, language, and even performance.

Anthropologist Leo Coleman (2013) argues that food is a key to social relationships, relationships both with environmental spaces as well as with other people (4). These food encounters include not only the exchanging of food, but also the exchanging of culture, customs, habits, and communication. Food serves as "an avenue to understand the complexities of national and personal identities and of large-scale political and economic relations" (11). The phrase "you are what you eat" symbolizes the strong connection between identity and food, which is linked to distinct cultural backgrounds. For diasporas, identity is continuously undergoing change upon arrival to new host countries. To cope with the loss of homeland, migrants recreate the feelings of home and familial kinship left behind—also through food. Bengali migrants moving to Tokyo face significant changes to their diets, and the Bengali foods of their homelands come to carry feelings of nostalgia and memory. "Even as food habits change," Coleman writes, "cooking and eating for and with each other remains a site of intercultural exchange and understanding" (15).

Food and the senses are linked to memory and cultural feelings of belonging: "the senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence" (Seremetakis 1994, 2). With migration comes a loss of home, and oftentimes the familiarity of homeland foods is the only way of sensorially connecting to the homeland. However, it is often difficult to perfectly replicate these tastes, as they change through encounters with local communities and limited access to goods from the homeland. With the changes in diet and available food options that come with migration,

the restaurant industry thus becomes a space for encounters, the recreation of home, and in turn, the creation of community and intercultural relationships.

With food encounters and cultural exchange comes pleasure and comfort but also stereotyping and even racialization of Bengali identities. In this chapter, I argue that the introduction of Bengali cuisine to restaurants in Tokyo does not merely serve to recreate home for Bengali migrant communities. Rather, these intercultural spaces also provide Japanese locals with a sense of kinship and belonging. This Japanese interest in Bengali food, and the intercultural relationships formed through this interest, has helped Bengalis retain pride in their national identity and feel more at home in Tokyo.

Coleman (2013) talks about the ethnographer as a character within these social relationships, "grappling with some element of the local world that they had previously ignored in their research" (5). It was through the introduction to Bengali cuisine in Tokyo that I found myself introduced to the networks of Bengali, Bangladeshi, and Japanese cross-cultural communities within Japan. I found myself transported to memories of my childhood through these food encounters. Studying abroad in Tokyo, thousands of miles away from my own homeland, I too found comfort and belonging in these spaces, and became embedded in relationships within them. I incorporate my own experiences into this ethnographic data in order to show my own position within these intercultural spaces of encounter, where I too sometimes became gendered and even ethnicized.

4.1 Puja

I first discovered the Puja Bengali restaurant through a Facebook group called "Indians in Japan." The chosen name for the restaurant *Puja* literally means "prayer" in Bangla, a term used for a variety of Hindu festivals. Deemed the most "authentic" West Bengali restaurant in Tokyo, the door to Puja was hidden on the bottom floor of a tiny outdoor shopping area in Machiya, Tokyo. Quiet and dimly lit with no people in sight, the area felt empty at first glance, but once you descended the stairs, the door to the restaurant couldn't be missed. Framed between a series of tall potted plants and a large model rickshaw, stood a brightly painted wooden door. The entrance had a large chalkboard painted in Bangla and Japanese lettering, handwritten in red. This was my first-time seeing Bangla in a Japanese context, the curls of the hiragana beside the twists and turns of the Bangla alphabet.

It really felt like entering someone's house. The single room in Puja had varieties of Bengali motifs, framed photos and textiles on the two walls. I instantly recognized the religious image of the Hindu goddess Durga slaying a demon printed onto a hanging tapestry, remembering attending annual Bengali festivals during my childhood. The straw tablemats at Puja were golden with Indian patterning. To the left were seats with tables and on the right, to my surprise, was an upper seating level with low tables and traditional Japanese tatami mats (made of wooden straw) to sit on the floor.

"Is it common to sit on mats in India?" One of my friends asked.

Yes, in Bengal eating on the floor was common in middle class homes even a generation ago, and is still common in villages, sitting on straw mats or low wooden stools. The inclusion of tatami mats at Puja thus displayed a blend of both Japanese and Indian eating practices. While

working well with Bengali habits, the Japanese tatami mats also served as a reminder that we were still in fact in Tokyo.

The Puja restaurant serves dishes from West Bengal, specifically the city of Kolkata. I was pleased to see many familiar Bengali dishes on the menu including *begun bhaja* (fried eggplant) *luchi* (deep friend flat bread), and *Ilish maachh* (a fish famous in Bengal). The menu was in written in Romanized Bangla and Japanese, including a long informative paragraph in Japanese designed to properly educate and inform the Japanese public about the diversity in India, beyond the homogenizing assumptions and stereotypes. This section explained that there are in fact 22 official language in India, and many more if you count the dialects. So many languages that a more accurate estimation is about 200 to 300! The menu stated that despite common assumptions, India is much like a country of many smaller countries. Each state in India is drastically different with its own distinct language and culture. While *naan* bread is the most well-known Indian food in Japan, the menu explained that naan is actually a Persian food, and at home in India, rice is the true staple food. People rarely prepare naan in the home. Fish and rice are the most popular dishes in Bengal. Mustard is an important spice, used in the form of grains, pastes, and oil. The menu recommended the *mishti doi* dish, a sweet baked yogurt dish that my mother frequently prepared during my childhood.

Dining at Puja allowed its clientele to consume "Bengaliness," educating the public about authenticity and identity. Brulotte and Giovine (2014) assert that food serves to "reinforce ethnic group identity" (3). They argue that notions of authenticity signify "one's membership in a group" and accepted sense of belonging (5). For migrant communities, food is strongly linked to ethnicity, cultural heritage, and the construction of belonging (4). The power of food to "contain and embody the memories of people and places, across space and time" allows Japanese locals to experience

Bengali culture without having to travel to Bengal (2). Puja recreates Bengali food that mirrors the dishes served in West Bengal, India to distinguish from the non-Bengali majority of restaurants in Tokyo. The food is used as a platform for constructing dialogue about Bengali identity and educating Japanese about the culture. Through this education and preservation of Bengaliness, Bengali immigrants are able to spread awareness of the diversity of India and translate it over to the diaspora.

Parama Roy (2002) writes, “Migrants preserve their ties to a homeland through their preservation of and participation in traditional customs and rituals of consumption” (472). As Roy asserts, migrants want a kind of tangible connection to the homeland, which can be found through consumption and production of India in the diaspora (206). At Puja, this tangibility exists in the marketing of “Bengaliness,” through the recreation of Bengali food, décor, and music. Puja stands apart from mainstream Indian restaurants in its production of a specific region of India. Sanchita, one of the owners (first discussed in the introduction to this thesis), told me that despite the increasing number of Indian restaurants in Tokyo, Puja was actually the only West Bengali restaurant in the city.

The global food industry stereotypes and homogenizes cuisines as depicted in the production of “Indian” food in Japan (Brulotte and Giovine 2014, 2). The Indian restaurants in Japan all served typical long naan bread and sweet curries designed to satisfy the Japanese tastes. “Local” cuisines are always changing and being reinvented when placed in foreign contexts (Watson 1998, 161). For instance, Watson (1998) describes the “Japanese” version of McDonalds serving fried egg burgers and iced oolong tea (162-163): “Goods are embedded in their culture of origin; their introduction into a different culture is more than a simple importation of commodities” (180). McDonalds in Japan represents the importing of “American food,” but more importantly, the

importing of “Americana as imagined by Japanese people whose understanding of United States culture is limited” (72).

As McDonalds is used to reproduce Japan’s limited stereotypes about American culture, the Indian restaurant industry reproduces the Japanese image of “India.” In her discussion of the Indian diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, Purnima Mankekar (2002) discusses the “forging of community and identity” that comes with the production of homogenous Indian grocery stores (201). These stores sell Indian products ranging from groceries to DVDs and jewelry. She describes these grocery stores as “Little Indias,” spaces for Indian diaspora to gather and form communities and create a sense of belonging in the US (203). The distinctions that exist between different regions in India do not transfer over to diaspora communities. Instead, Indians become grouped together as a collective nation, with little attention to the diversity within the country. However, Mankekar argues that the homogenization of Indian food is intentional. Shop owners purposely label themselves as Indian to target a wider audience of clientele (204). These markets sell “ethnic” products from different regions within India.

The first Bengali restaurant I visited in Tokyo was Bangladeshi owned and called Sonargaon, the name of a historic city in Bangladesh. However, the loudspeakers played Bangla and Hindi songs, and the menu was filled with the Japanese Indian food I was used to seeing. The waiter told me that most Japanese don’t know much about Bangladeshi cuisine, so it was easier and more popular to serve “Indian” food.

“Sweet things are only eaten for dessert in Bangladesh,” he told me. “Naan is not eaten with meals. Rice is eaten with meals.”

But in Japan, the curries lacked spice and were sweetened to match Japanese curry. Long fluffy naan slathered in butter replaced rice. The restaurant did have a special menu that served

Bangladeshi foods, but you had to call in advance to request it. The waiter told me that most of the restaurant's workers were Indian, but the owner and a few workers were Bangladeshi. These Bangladeshis believed that "Indian" food would cater more to the Japanese clientele than Bangladeshi food.

Unlike the majority of Indian restaurants in Tokyo that served Japanese Indian food, the Puja restaurant took great lengths to uniquely serve food specific to the West Bengal region in India. The rest of the menu focused on Rabindranath Tagore, whose historical ties to Japan I discussed in detail in Chapter Two. The *Rabindrasangeet* songs (Bengali songs written by Tagore) that I had grown up listening to and singing were playing from the speakers every time I went to the Puja restaurant. Dedicating so much physical space and educational emphasis on Tagore, this prominent Bengali historical figure, helped Puja's efforts to recreate the authentic Bengali experience, bringing Bengal to Tokyo.

"*Irasshaimase*."

The Japanese word used for welcoming clientele into a shops or restaurants, came from the lips of Sanchita, the owner of the restaurant Puja. I fidgeted in my chair, wanting to ask her if she spoke Bangla, but became too nervous when she passed our table. Finally, after she took our order, I asked in Japanese where in India she was from. She said Bengal, and when I told her that my mother was Bengali from Kolkata, she switched to Bangla without thinking. She told me she was from Santiniketan. I responded in Bangla, causing her eyes to widen in surprise, cheeks spreading into a warming smile. My Bangla was terrible, but she didn't care. "I'm just so happy to be able to speak with you." This moment highlighted our shared feeling of home, despite our different backgrounds, emerging simply through this sharing of language.

Growing up, I was often too shy to speak Bangla with other adults for fear of making embarrassing grammatical mistakes. Here too, my speech was slow, and initially I accidentally referred to Sanchita with the informal *tumi* (you) and apologized. *Apni* is the more formal and appropriate term to use when first meeting someone or speaking to non-family members who are your elders. Sanchita told me not to say sorry. She didn't mind if I called her *tumi*, suggesting that she already felt a closeness with me. She pointed to herself and said *Didi,* older sister. In Bengali culture, it is customary and respectful to refer to anyone older than you with familial terms, regardless of whether they are actually a blood relation. These kinship terms are ingrained into Bengali culture and can also be symbolic of hierarchical relationships. For example, in India, service workers are expected to use terms like "Sir" and "Madam" when referring to customers. However, it is also customary to refer to people of a higher caste as *Didi* or *Dada,* literally meaning "older sister" or "older brother," despite age differences. In this case, the language highlights this difference in social class. When I traveled to India, I was shocked when elderly waiters referred to me, a teenager, as *Didi*, simply because of our hierarchical differences.

In Puja, Sanchita began by calling me *Didi,* despite being much older than me. She chose not to use *apni*, the very formal second person "you," and instead chose to use kinship terms to refer to me. Her usage of *Didi* maintained the hierarchical differences in class that she still held onto despite immigrating to Japan. Calling me *Didi* highlighted that I was hierarchically above her in the role of a client whom she was serving. However, as time went by, she changed my name to *Maya Bon,* meaning "Maya little sister," establishing our closer relationship. Using *Bon* and *Didi* thus shifted to show our age differences instead of highlighting class differences. I am now expected to refer to her as *Didi* not *Mashi* (aunt), despite the fact that she is of the age to be my aunt, or *Mashi*.

This Bengali usage of language can be compared to the Japanese language system, which has entire conjugations and words that exist solely for the purpose of establishing formality within hierarchical relationships. Although Japanese service workers generally use extremely polite speech when talking to clientele, Sanchita used plain formal Japanese with her Japanese clientele. Her Japanese was conversationally fluent, but she did not perfectly follow the rules of Japanese formality. Instead she held onto the social hierarchical viewpoints that she had formed in India, referring to even the Japanese clientele in Bangla as *ei Didi* or "this sister." In the space of Puja, language and kinship terms adhered to Bengali rules, despite the fact that this was Japan.

In Tokyo, my Bangla language ability didn't matter so much. There was a sense of comfort simply in being able to speak to someone else in the native language. In our first encounter, Sanchita told me that it felt as if we hadn't just met and that whenever she meets a Bengali in Tokyo, she feels close to them.

Sanchita told my friends how happy she was to be talking to me.

"I'm feeling so happy," she said in Bangla. *"Daisuki Daisuki!* (I love her!)*"* she told them in Japanese, pointing to me.

In our first meeting the initial barrier I was used to experiencing disappeared. Sanchita chatted away as if she had known me all her life. In a city like Tokyo, foreign residents were such visible minorities and yet their cultural forms were so invisible and unknown to the mainstream public. In Tokyo, Bengalis were in the minority, and because of this Sanchita felt somehow "nearer" to the Bengalis she met, even if meeting for the very first time. Every day she spoke Japanese in the restaurant, so she told me that speaking Bengali became a breath of fresh air, a brief escape to her home in Santiniketan, India. I realized that in Tokyo it was easier to quickly develop a closer relationship with other Bengalis, simply through the shared language.

This differed greatly from the culture I had grown used to in the US where I was often ridiculed for making Bangla grammatical mistakes. This fear of making mistakes became so great during my childhood that I often became ashamed to speak Bangla and hid behind the English that was spoken in school and came more easily. Everyone assumed that I couldn't speak or understand Bangla. But in Tokyo, Bangla held more weight, representing homeland in a space where Japanese were the majority. Not only were there very few migrants and immigrants in Japan, but there were fewer people who could distinguish between the different parts of India. For Sanchita, I symbolized not only the shared South Asian background, but specifically Bengal, a region of India that was largely unknown to most people in Tokyo. It didn't matter that my Bangla contained grammatical errors. Speaking Bangla connected me to a wider cultural background and identity; it was another mode of transporting and creating the Bengali homeland in Japan.

4.2 A Piece of Bengal in Japan

When I asked if she cooked the food, Sanchita blushed and pointed to the kitchen where a Japanese man with small spectacles was sitting. "My husband cooks it all, and I just serve and eat the food."

The mastermind behind this little restaurant that harvested this intercultural space for Bengalis and Japanese was in fact the Japanese man Hiroaki. He was a quiet type with a beard and mustache, seldom smiling, and when he did it seemed to slip out despite his trying to conceal it. His jokes were subtle, and he showed little emotion in his responses. But he was the man who spent hours each day in the kitchen that could be seen through an alcove in the back of the

restaurant. Despite his quiet and reserved persona, he had created a space for Bengalis to feel more at home in Tokyo, in a small piece of India that he had created.

Sanchita told me that Hiroaki first became exposed to Bengali culture after seeing a Bengali music performance in Tokyo, sparking his desire to travel to the town of Santiniketan in the West Bengal region of India. It was there that Hiroaki tasted Bengali food for the first time and fell in love with the culture. In Santiniketan he met his future wife whom he married and brought back with him to Japan where they now have two daughters.

After returning from Japan, Hiroaki initially took his wife to the famous Nakamuraya Bakery in Shinjuku, Tokyo where *Indo Karé,* an Indian style of curry, was first introduced to Japan by Rash Behari Bose. Bose was a Bengali revolutionary in the Indian Independence movement, long before Bangladesh was a separate country. He helped in the attempt to assassinate British Lord Hardinge and became the most wanted man in India during World War I. In 1915 he escaped to Japan under a fake identity and hid in the home of a Japanese family named Soma. In 1918 he married Toshiko Soma, the family's daughter to secure his safety in Japan as a Japanese citizen. During the time, interracial marriages were highly taboo. Despite the social stigma, it is said that Toshiko chose to marry Bose for love (Pal). One account reads: "To Marry Miss Toshiko, the eldest daughter of Nakamuraya, one of the biggest and most honorable bakers in Tokyo to an Indian in exile and under the shadow of death was unimaginable and considered to be impossible" ("Rashbehari Bose and the Woman Who Saved Him"). With the help of Toshiko's father, Bose founded a restaurant on the top of the Soma family's Nakamuraya bakery in Tokyo's Shinjuku. Bose introduced an Indian-style curry to Japan called *Indo Karé*, being the first to expose the Japanese to Indian food without needing Westerners to mediate this exchange.

For Bose, this introduction of Bengali food helped him to recreate a homeland, to which he knew he could never safely return to. He wrote about Indian affairs in Japanese newspapers in an effort to persuade Japanese authorities to support the Indian Independence movement, creating an initial tie between Bengalis and Japanese (DailyO 2016). Bose passed away in Tokyo in 1945, two years before India achieved independence. Sanchari Pal (2017) writes: "Questioned by his doctor about his appetite, a glum Bose answered, 'How can I have an appetite when the nurses don't allow me the food I most desire?' 'And what is that?' asked the doctor. The answer, of course was the Indian curry from Nakamuraya!" This history provides a historical context for when Indian food first enabled intercultural ties between Japanese and Bengalis.

In many ways the Puja restaurant reminded me of Rash Behari Bose and his use of food to promote Bengali cultural connections in Japan. Like Bose and his wife Toshiko, Sanchita and Hiroaki's relationship enacted not only cross-cultural love, but also cultural exchange through food. However, when Hiroaki took his wife Sanchita to Nakamuraya bakery, Sanchita was disappointed that Bose's restaurant had only one Indian dish on the menu, and it wasn't even authentic. It could not equate to the dishes found in Bengal. Even in this historically significant site that represents the introduction of Indian food, the Japanese consumer was the focal point. The Indian food was designed to appeal to the palate of Japanese locals.

After visiting Bengal, Hiroaki traveled to Bangladesh and Nepal. With his wife's help, he slowly learned how to cook authentic Bengali dishes, and then after trying many times, he was able to master it himself. Sanchita told me that Bengali food is similar to Japanese food in terms of certain flavors and the way of learning to prepare the dishes. To help his wife feel more at home in Japan, Hiroaki decided to open the Puja Bengali restaurant. Initially the restaurant served the typical "Indian food" which appealed to Japanese tastes with a side menu serving authentic Bengali

dishes. Then gradually the restaurant transitioned into a Bengali-only restaurant that also sought to educate Japanese visitors about the region of West Bengal and Bengali culture, with a map of India on the wall and an informative page on the back of the menu. Sanchita told me that she had lived in Japan for 18 years; the restaurant having opened in either 2004 or 2005. She couldn't remember when exactly. Sanchita and Hiroaki took pride in introducing Bengali culture to Japanese clientele.

To my surprise, Sanchita spoke to her husband in Bangla.

"He can speak Bangla?!" I had never heard a non-Bengali speak Bangla, and I had assumed that Sanchita had been forced to adjust to the culture of Tokyo by learning Japanese. However, her husband, too, had taken the trouble to learn Bangla to make his wife more comfortable.

"If you speak slowly, he'll understand," she told me.

Hiroaki's investment in Bengali culture and cuisine thus extended beyond simply cooking, and into a deep appreciation for the language and culture.

Hiroaki was only in Santiniketan, India for a short time before he had to return to Japan, but he had already fallen in love with Sanchita. To avoid having to leave her, Hiroaki married her in Santiniketan in a *gram* (village) wedding, then brought her back to Japan with him. Their wedding photos were framed on one wall, making the restaurant feel like a home. In one photo, several girls with their hands painted in *mehndi* (henna), held flowers in their outstretched palms. My favorite was of Sanchita smiling bashfully, wearing a flower-adorned veil. As the bride, she sat on a chair with a sari and partial head covering, flowers around her neck.

Sanchita told me that her daughters who are half Bengali and half Japanese identify as Japanese and never learned Bangla because they lived in Japan for their whole lives.

"It's really thanks to your grandmother that you can speak Bangla," she told me.

I hadn't spoken Bangla since coming to Japan and before that it was only with my grandmother, with whom I had spoken in Bangla since I was a child. My grandmother was turning 92 in five months, on October 15th.

"Does your grandma even know you're in Japan?" My friend once asked.

I wasn't sure if she remembered. Her voice through the long-distance phone calls cracked between words, but not from old age. Words twisted and turned in her throat, sticking to the roof of her mouth and underneath her tongue. The words came in snippets, in pieces and parts of what they used to be. At age 90, a stroke had stolen her words, stolen her right hand, her ability to chew solid foods and swallow un-thickened water. But it was because of my grandmother that I had learned to speak not one, but two languages at the same time that I learned to balance on two feet and draw chalk on the sidewalk streets.

In my childhood, we used to sit at the top of the stairs where the first drops of sunlight left crisscross streaks on the wooden landing below. The window outside showed more than the sky when my grandmother told stories of her childhood. Stories of the Indian Independence movement against the British when she engaged in the protests; the way her mother bathed in the Ganges river in the morning. While I gave up speaking Bangla from embarrassment in my teens, at home I always felt comfortable speaking Bangla with my grandmother. But lately my sentences were shaky without her responses. I'd forgotten how to properly conjugate, how to aspirate consonants, and say certain vowels.

My developing relationship with Sanchita made me think more of my own mother and grandmother, now so far from me during my study abroad. Being in the Puja restaurant and speaking with Sanchita made me feel as though my own home wasn't so far away. Puja not only reproduced family and belonging, but also a sense of love and connection—for me also. The

intercultural relationships between Sanchita and her husband through sharing food, language, and culture helped Sanchita to adjust to her new life in Japan. Her husband's love for her was reflected through his efforts to recreate her homeland in the city of Tokyo, learning Bengali cooking and the Bangla language. This relationship mirrored the historically significant marriage between Rash Behari Bose and his wife Toshiko, whose marriage defied societal standards but ensured Bose's protection from British forces. Food served not only as a mode of recreating Bengal in Tokyo, but also recreating feelings of family and love, which were also facilitated by some Japanese locals.

4.3 Language Ties

In the spirit of *Rabindra Jayanti*, Rabindranath Tagore's birthday, the Puja restaurant had decided to prepare a special menu of a typical meal that would have been eaten in Tagore's household.

"*Aajger khabar shob Thakur barir khabar,"* Sanchita told me. "Today everything is food from Tagore's house." The dishes came in small metal bowls and platters, each dish served one at a time.

"*Aaj ki onek Bangalira eshechhilen?"* I asked Sanchita. *"*Did many Bengalis come today?"

She told me that most of them came earlier in the day. She pointed to a table across from us nearest to the kitchen where a group of three Japanese were sitting, two women and one businessman. One Japanese woman wore a top that reminded me of the kinds of colorful tunics that my mother often wears with Indian geometrical patterns and paisley.

"This girl loves everything Bengali," Sanchita said, gesturing towards a woman who was seated at that table.

This woman with glasses who had been staring at me earlier smiled and said "*Apni ki Bangali?* Are you Bengali" with a strong Japanese accent, a combination I had never heard before.

I was amazed. In my city of Pittsburgh, there were few opportunities to learn Bangla, and those that did exist were not very serious.

As we left the restaurant, I wished we had spoken more. On my way up the stairs to the exit, I decided to turn back and do what is typically unheard of in Japan—start a conversation with a stranger. Dragging my Japanese friend along, we returned to the restaurant and walked up to the table, my Japanese friend shyly introducing me and explaining my desire to talk with her.

Smiling warmly, she replied in Bangla, "I'm also happy to talk to you."

She introduced herself as Nanami. I quickly learned that Nanami often visited Puja to practice her Bangla with Sanchita and enjoy Bengali food. She had studied Bangla for four years as an undergraduate at the Tokyo University of Foreign Language Studies. She had traveled to Kolkata and Bangladesh, and she told me in Bangla that she was making a documentary about Tagore. Unlike me, her speech, even with an accent, seemed flawless. She had also traveled to both India and Bangladesh and had already translated more than 50 of Tagore's Bangla songs into Japanese.

"She is really amazing," Sanchita said. I couldn't help but feel jealous.

The Tagore song *Anondolokey* started playing, reminding me of my childhood. Nanami started softly singing along to the song, closing her eyes and Sanchita smiled in approval. I came to learn, however, that Nanami wasn't the only Japanese person with strong connections to Bengali culture.

Most customers came to Puja alone, sitting by themselves in the small room. There was no shame in it. Sanchita went from table to table, engaging with the customers as if they had just

entered her home. Puja served not only as a recreation of the Bengali homeland for Sanchita and other Bengalis, but also a space where many Japanese clientele also came to feel “at home.”

“It’s good for me,” she told me. “If you come alone, we can talk.”

Recently an online article about the restaurant had sparked outside attention, bringing in many customers in Tokyo who knew nothing about West Bengal. I expected this to be good news for the restaurant with the increase in customers meaning increased business and profit. But Sanchita disagreed.

“If too many people come, my husband will die,” she said laughing.

She didn’t like it when Japanese came to the restaurant thinking it served Bangladeshi or Indian cuisine, unable to distinguish, seeing it all as all the same.

“There’s a big difference between Bengal and Bangladesh,” she said. “I want people to know about that.”

Some Japanese people would come into the restaurant and say Bangladeshi-dialect words like *pani* for water, instead of *jol*, highlighting the difference between West Bengal Bangla and Bangladeshi Bangla.

Sanchita loved talking to the people who came regularly, who had built relationships with her—people who loved and appreciated Bengali culture. I realized that business wasn’t the primary objective of Puja. Instead, cultural exchange and global education held primary importance. Much to my surprise, the majority of the clientele in Puja were not in fact Bengali. They were mostly Japanese with prior connections and interest in Bangla language and culture. Through Puja, I was introduced to an array of characters, showing me a side of Japan I never knew existed, a Japanese community that had a deep appreciation and passion for Bengali culture.

4.4 With One Person, An Entire Performance is Created

In my childhood, my mother brought home plastic boxes filled with orange and white Indian sweets, some oozing juices, others sticking to the lid. My grandmother offered them to the deities in her shrine before we ate them. I never liked the sticky substance, too sickeningly sweet. But Tokyo's Indian sweets catered to the Japanese preference for mildly sweet and flavorful desserts. This production of "Japanese-Indian" food reflects the continuous transformation, the undergoing of changes of cuisines and culture when exchanged with foreign cultures.

Nanami invited me to dinner at Puja with Tomomi-san and Yamada-san—two other Japanese clients. For Tomomi-san's birthday Yamada-san brought a box of Indian sweets, hand crafted from a local halal shop in Tokyo. Usually choosing to pass on Indian desserts, this time I cleared my plate and took some more.

"I thought it would be more exciting than cake," Yamada-san said.

Fully Japanese and knowing not a word of Bangla, Yamada-san had been coming to Puja for the past 14 years, since it first opened. His love of Bangladeshi and West Bengali food stemmed from a business trip to Bangladesh during his university years. Now a businessman, Yamada-san traveled to Bangladesh every few weeks on business trips. He often sent me photos of the stray cats he had come to love in Dhaka. I realized that Asian migration was not only one-way. Japanese locals also migrated to Bangladesh and India, for tourism as well as business. Yamada-san first traveled to Bangladesh in January 2013 through a university program to visit rural areas in Bangladesh and propose business solutions to solve their social issues. The program partnered with Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank, a Bangladeshi banking service giving economic opportunities to the rural poor. However, Yamada-san found the program disappointing in failing to properly train the poor how to work and make money.

So, he opened his own company in Japan, the Bengal Agri Business Ltd. which manufactures fish chips using Bengali fish and sells it in Bangladesh.

"Few people are hungry in Bangladesh today," Yamada-san said. "However, Bangladeshi people eat a lot of rice and bread, and their nutritional balance is very poor. I believe Bangladeshi people should eat more meat and fish, but they are expensive and difficult to eat. I want to a run a social business that uses Bengali fish, sells easy-to-eat foods, and solves these nutritional problems."

When asked if Japan was a welcoming country to Bangladeshis, Yamada-san answered in relation to religion. He argued that Japan is a very difficult country for Jews, Hindus and Muslims because Japanese people are not very interested in religion. However, he believed that Buddhist and Christian migrant workers have an easier time because more Japanese people practice these religions and are willing to support people of the same religion.

For Yamada-san, Puja really felt like a piece of Bengal in Tokyo. He knew the menu by heart and greeted the other customers, whom he had grown to know just as well as Sanchita and her husband. When I mentioned having studied Rabindranath Tagore's songs as a child, Yamada-san quickly went to the table with the cash register and pulled out a *Gitobitan* (complete collection of Tagore songs) and handed it to me. As I spoke with the owner, he rushed to the kitchen to help take the food to the table. Still a bachelor and living alone, Yamada-san saw the restaurant Puja as a sort of family. He came to Puja nearly every week. Without a family, Yamada-san had formed social networks within the Bengal community in Tokyo. Through this connection to Bangladesh, he had managed to develop friendships and a social network that contradicted the atomism of corporate life in Tokyo. I realized that the restaurant served as not only as a home for Sanchita and some Bengalis in Tokyo, but also for some of the Japanese clientele.

The 1991 bursting of Japan's bubble economy and the aftermath of the 2012 tsunami has caused an increase of temporary employment and job insecurity in Japan. Anne Allison (2002) discusses the contemporary job precarity in Japan. She argues that 'being alone—literally, psychically, socially—is the new human condition for Japan/ese in the 21st century" (246). Her analysis extends beyond the economic impacts on Japanese society to social aspects of "evisceration of social ties, connectedness with others, and a sense of security" (345). The strict and strenuous corporate lifestyle in Japan and the uncertainty about job security, led to increasing rates of depression and suicide (346). Allison introduces the concept of social precarity: "feeling insecure in life extending to one's (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community" (349). Diaspora communities are not alone in feelings of isolation and loneliness. Japanese locals also experience similar feelings of isolation and displacement, even in their home country. Japan has been described as a "country of loneliness" in the Japanese *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper (2011). This social isolation connects to Japan's falling birth rate and increased unemployment rates.

Puja gave socially isolated Japanese locals a space that felt like home, where strong connections and family-like relationships formed. The restaurant brought people like Nanami and Yamada-san who had academic and professional ties to Bengali culture, together. These ties helped Bengalis like Sanchita feel connected to her cultural identity in Japan, and Japanese locals to find communities where they could escape from Japanese corporate and economic pressures.

When I asked Yamada-san how he had formed close relationships with the Bengalis in Tokyo, I was surprised by his response: "I'm not very friendly with Bengali people in Tokyo. Most Bengalis living in Tokyo live in their own narrow communities." This showed me that there was something different about Puja. It was not only a space for the Bengali communities, which I had initially expected it to be. Instead, it catered to also educate the Japanese public and bring in people

like Yamada-san with strong connections to Bengali culture, and who were looking for community. In Puja, Yamada-san became a kind of cultural ambassador for Bengali culture, introducing the restaurant to his Japanese friends and therefore helping to promote Bengali and Bangladeshi culture in Tokyo.

Along with Yamada-san, Tomomi-san came wearing Indian clothes, her hair tied back in a bun that really made her look Indian. Very quiet in nature and seemingly wise, she told us that being a *Baul* singer was "a lifestyle," and not just a passion, using music and dance as a means of meditation and access to spiritual fulfillment. Baul is a Bengali folk and religious music form famous in the state of Bengal, specifically in the area around the town of Santiniketan. Tomomi-san, like many Japanese I met who were interested in Bengali culture, chose to travel to India to learn Baul music and study under a *guru*—or teacher. She was trilingual and could speak Japanese, English, and enough Bangla to sing in the language. Now a professional Japanese Baul singer, she performs both in Tokyo as well as India.

It was in fact because of Baul music that the Puja restaurant had developed. It was his interest in Baul music that inspired Hiroaki to travel to Santiniketan, India where he met his wife and fell in love with Bengali food. In fact, Hiroaki first became interested in Bengali culture after seeing a Baul performance in Tokyo. He found it amazing how one single Baul performer by himself could play the melody on the *dotara* instrument also while singing and dancing.

"With one person, an entire performance is created," said Sanchita.

In the Puja restaurant, Tomomi-san closed her eyes and began to sing in Bangla, as if fully changing her persona. Her deep voice effectively pronounced the Bangla lyrics. I had watched a video of her on YouTube with long hair falling onto her shoulders, wearing the typical red clothing of Baul performers, dancing while playing the *ektara*. Her Facebook bio reads, "Proudly

unemployed." She had claimed the Indian name "Paromita," which combined with the choice to wear Indian clothing, illustrated a sort of attempt to embody and perform Bengaliness."

Puja promoted education about the region of West Bengal through the tangibility of food, transporting its clientele to the senses and tastes in Bengal. However, as I show here it was also a space for exchange of cultural artforms, engaging with the Bengali community as well as the broader Japanese community. In the past Puja had hosted an Indian Baul singer from Santiniketan to perform for clientele in the restaurant, while also promoting Tomomi-san's musical pursuits. I came to understand that the recreation of home and belonging in these intercultural spaces relied on the Japanese local community. This Japanese interest in Bengali culture aided in the smooth adjustment to life in Japan and the ability for Bengalis like Sanchita to feel at home in Tokyo. In this sense, recreation of home was not dependent on "pure" replications of cultural forms, but rather, through the exchanging of this culture with the Japanese locals.

There was a literal recreation of home within the space of Puja and this extended beyond food, décor, and music. It was all about the people. These regular customers seemed to have become a kind of family for Sanchita. They all called her "Sanchita Mama," making her into a motherly character who cared for the clientele like children. When Nanami was exhausted from work to the point of tearing up at our table, Sanchita handed her a glass of water, telling her to drink and eat slowly so she would feel better. This was all said in the way that you would talk to a daughter. As we all left, Sanchita stood in the doorway of the restaurant and waved to us like a mother saying goodbye to her children leaving home. I realized that it wasn't simply the dynamic preservation of her Bengali identity in Tokyo that had helped with her transition to life in Japan. It was also the ensemble of Japanese people she had met through the restaurant, who had shown a love and appreciation for Bengali culture, that made her truly feel at home in Tokyo.

4.5 A Bangladeshi Side of Tokyo

Through my relationship with clientele from Puja, I managed to expand my networks in Tokyo. I discovered that through initial connections I was granted access to the shared networks of Japanese, Bengali, and Bangladeshi people. Surprisingly, it was not Sanchita who connected me to other Bengalis and Bangladeshis in the city. Instead, she directed me to Yamada-san, whose business connection to Bangladesh gave him insight into the wide array of Bangladeshi restaurants in Tokyo.

"Yamada-san will show you many wonderful restaurants here," Sanchita assured me.

With Yamada-san's strong connection to the Bangladeshi network in Tokyo, I had the opportunity to visit the Bengal Curry Factory, a Bangladeshi restaurant in Kiba, Tokyo, owned by Yamada-san's friend. Unlike Puja, which served West-Bengali food, this restaurant served authentic Bangladeshi cuisine, distinctly different from West Bengali cuisine. The restaurant was a one-man-business. The Japanese owner, Junpei-san, stood in a kitchen behind a very narrow counter with limited seating space. He wore a green washcloth wrapped around his head and a big black apron, as he prepared *haleem*—a Bangladeshi beef and lentil stew—upon request from his Bangladeshi customers.

"It's exhausting to make," he complained.

Junpei-san went to a cooking school in Osaka where he mostly learned Italian and French cuisine, initially interested in Western cooking. He used to be an Italian chef, with no knowledge or interest in Bangladeshi food. That is, until he made a Bangladeshi friend who introduced him to this entirely new cuisine. At that time, he said he had no interest in opening up a restaurant, but within the next two years, he developed Bengal Curry Factory.

"This was my destiny," he said.

He realized that Bangladeshi food is where his heart is as he learned to cook authentic dishes from his Bangladeshi friend's wife and by watching YouTube tutorials. Through forming friendships with local Bangladeshis, Junpei-san decided to develop a restaurant to further introduce Bangladeshi cuisine in Tokyo, while simultaneously creating a space for Bangladeshis to feel more at home.

Much to my shock, Junpei-san opened his restaurant before having ever traveled to Bangladesh. He first went to Bangladesh last March, with the help of Yamada-san. But before going to Bangladesh, Junpei-san's friends strongly warned him against it.

"Go at your own risk," they told him.

They thought that going to Bangladesh would be a death wish. Yamada-san showed me videos he had taken of people standing on the tops of trains and hanging out from the sides. The image made me think back to the YouTube videos of overcrowded trains in Tokyo, with train station workers pushing people into train cars in order to safely close the doors. Before studying in Tokyo my greatest fear was riding the trains alone and navigating the city. I had read countless horror stories of the extreme crowds during rush hour. But upon arriving in Tokyo and actually experiencing the city for myself, I realized that these Western videos only served to perpetuate the skewed image of Japan as a wildly different place. Similarly, Junpei-san's exposure highlighted this Japanese assumption that Bangladesh was an exotic and dangerous place.

The more difficult side of Bengali immigration in Tokyo lies in the neighborhood of Kinshichio, an area with a large percentage of Bangladeshis. The biggest industry in Kinshichio is the *Nomiya*—"girls bar lounge"—which hires many Bangladesh men to work as barkers for these businesses. In the past the majority of the female workers were Filipina women who had entertainment workers, so they started working as singers and dancers in bars. This hostess bar

industry was a "form of disguised cheap labor, because it provides workers for positions viewed as unattractive by Japanese women: singers, dancers, bar hostesses and prostitutes—all at the lower rungs" (Yamanaka 1993, 72). Now because of the Filipino government's refusal to grant them visas, they haven't been able to come to Japan. The majority of the women working in the bars are Russians, Kyrgyzstanis and Ukrainians. According to Junpei-san, there was a fight between the Bangladeshi and Japanese Mafia which eventually ended in peace and good terms, which is why there are so many Bangladeshis in the area now.

Because Junpei-san knew the Bangladeshi owner of a girls' lounge, he said he would take us there. His friend had told him that this is a "dark reality" of Bangladeshi migration and it may be valuable for my research. In the end, however we did not go to the lounge as I had expected. Instead, he took us to many different Bangladeshi restaurants all located side-by-side in Kinshichio. It was late in the night, nearly 11 PM and I was a bit stressed about the long commute home and my early-morning exam the following day.

Nanami, from Puja who had studied Bangla, surprised me by later writing an apology in a text message in English, "We are not strict rules about plan and time… So maybe you were confused our plan… But don't be angry… it's our and Bangladesh style… haha."

This statement felt almost as if the study of the Bangla language had changed Nanami's personality in some sort of way and made her feel "Bengali." This intercultural interaction between Bengalis and Japanese had caused some Japanese to "buy into" some stereotypes about Bengali people. The intercultural exchanges facilitated in these restaurants certainly created positive relationships, but they also sometimes produced stereotypes about Bengali culture which served to create a license to act in ways that sometimes defied Japanese norms. There was a kind of desire to "truly" become Bengali and that somehow one's personality can change after

extensively studying a different culture. Yamada-san asked me if my mother was very chatty and outgoing, because he was under the impression that Bengalis were very talkative. I could see what he meant, but it also made me wonder if these Japanese chose to present themselves as more outgoing in order to fit into the assumed Bengali social standards.

Junpei-san took us to many different Bangladeshi restaurants all located side-by-side in Kinshichio. Before we left, he changed into Bangladeshi clothes, even bringing along a little cap that Muslims wear. According to Nanami and Yamada-san, it really felt as if we had been transported to Dhaka. Just walking through the streets, we passed Bengalis, hearing Bangla.

We went to the restaurant Bangla Tandoori & Bar, a restaurant open 24 hours for people who worked night business shifts. The workers were all friends of Junpei-san, referring to him as *Sensei* (teacher). It seemed to me that the Bangladeshis didn't mind that Junpei-san was Japanese and regarded him with respect and admiration.

"Sensei knows everything Bengali!" the waiter said, laughing. "He is practically Bangladeshi himself!"

It was strange for me to be shown the "Bangladeshi side of Japan" by a Japanese man, who had an insider's access, despite not being Bangladeshi. In this experience, I felt more like an outsider, an audience member following Junpei-san's lead. In this setting and context, he became a cultural ambassador for Bangladesh, and I became the tourist, despite my closer ethnic connection. This Bangladeshi space served as a second home for Junpei-san, whose livelihood now depended on the Bangladeshi experience in Tokyo. I wondered if I would have felt more "at home" in this setting if I had been introduced by a female Bangladeshi insider.

I asked the owner why he had chosen to come to Japan, and he said it was because Japan was very safe, and there was security. He explained that unlike in the US where the police often

abused their authority, the policemen in Japan were there to protect not harm, even if you were a foreigner. If your visa expired, you could still continue working in Japan as long as you didn't get caught. If you got caught, however, that would be entirely another story. I had heard in the news that some Bangladeshis in Kinshichio had been arrested by the police because of their visa status. It seemed to be an area that was especially vulnerable due to the large Bangladeshi immigrant population.

Many Bangladeshi migrants chose to transition from irregular worker jobs to entrepreneurial positions, opening up their own business. The lack of halal foods and the strong language barriers in Japan, made initial adjustment to Tokyo a challenge for migrants, particularly Muslims. As a result, many Bangladeshi migrants open their own shops to serve this foreign population (Rahman 2011, 254). The halal food industry was first introduced to Japan in the 1980s by Pakistanis and then by the mid 1980s with the influx of Bangladeshi migrants, more of these halal shops became Bangladeshi-owned (259). The shops serve as spaces of familiarity and home for many different foreign populations, importing goods not only from Bangladesh, but also often India, Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Australia (269). As of 2014, Tokyo had 22 of the 55 halal shops in Japan (Yusof and Noryuki 255).

Around 11:30 PM, Junpei-san took us to a halal shop called Spicy Food Network, selling Indian and Bangladeshi branded products, ranging from electronics, to snacks, frozen packets, shampoos, and fresh mangos. The owner, a friend of Junpei-san eagerly welcomed us, offering many different snacks to taste. Nanami and Junpei-san insisted that I introduce myself in Bangla, explaining my cultural background. I had spoken nothing but Japanese for the past five hours. We always spoke in Japanese, and despite my slow speech, I somehow felt more confident in the language that I had only spent the past three years learning. Suddenly changing from a Japanese

mindset to Bangla seemed an impossible feat. The words couldn't come to me as I struggled very slowly with broken sentences.

The shop owner, Ahmed, just stared at me in disappointment, reminding me of the frequent moments of embarrassment from my childhood.

"Have you ever been to Bangladesh or Bengal?" Ahmed asked me.

No, I actually had never been, not even to West Bengal. He scoffed, as if it made sense.

"You should practice Bangla more," he told me. "Practice with your grandmother."

I agreed with him except that my grandmother's stroke prevented her from speaking as she used to. When I told him this, he changed his attitude and he handed us mangos to taste. To disguise my shame, I ended up buying *jilebi,* my favorite Indian sweet with sticky orange spirals, but one that Japanese tend to hate because of the strong sweetness. I was eager to escape from the situation, from the isolation I felt once more, which I thought I had finally managed to escape. I missed my grandmother, wishing I hadn't given up Bangla, wishing I had continued to speak with my mother during my childhood, had chosen to go upstairs and play with the other children at Bengali events, rather than hiding between my parents.

The last place that Junpei-san took us was the Asia Curry House, a street corner shop with a stand selling kebabs and small seating area on the side. As we approached the restaurant, nearly everyone inside looked out through the glass at me, the only woman besides Nanami. They were all Bangladeshi men. Junpei-san told the owner that he had brought two friends with him, and when I said that my mother was Bengali, they all smiled and laughed. One of the men inside was the owner of the girls' lounge. His name was Jacky and he was stylishly dressed, wearing a low-cut shirt with a purple blazer. He said that many of the girls were currently from Russia and that we could come any time we'd like, even as women. The other men wanted to chat with me and

Junpei-san, but he said that we had to leave. He later told us that if we had stayed, they probably would've kept us for at least another hour.

As we left the owner said, "I'll be waiting for you!"

Although we had only met briefly, the owner's son immediately recognized me when I returned several weeks later. It was a family-owned restaurant and his father told me that he had lived in Japan for ten years now, coming on a chef visa. Japan's support of ethnic restaurants has allowed cooks to come on chef visas. This immigration policy helps ethnic restaurants employ foreign cooks to preserve their "authenticity" (Rahman 264). The chef had a wife, two sons and daughter who was 12. His daughter could speak fluent Japanese. It was a fairly new restaurant, having only opened about four years ago, and then expanded two months ago to a second restaurant next door. Bangladeshis would sit outside of the restaurant on a small bench and call out to passersby. As we sat and ate, many Bangladeshis stopped to say hello. One was their uncle. Another was a family with two children. This restaurant resembled more what I had expected in Tokyo—a site for a close-knit Bangladeshi community. In this Bangladeshi restaurant, home was created by providing a space for Bangladeshi community members to gather and share familiar tastes and language.

4.6 Bangladeshi Businessmen

When I visited Bimi Kitchen, a tiny Bangladeshi restaurant in Asakusabashi, Tokyo there was one chef, who, seeing our foreign faces, began to speak in perfect English. This restaurant presented itself as a purely authentic Bangladeshi restaurant where Bangladesh-specific food was served, rather than adhering to the popular mainstream Indian cuisine. The tiny restaurant appeared

rather run-down with a cramped kitchen to prepare home-cooked meals, surprisingly low-priced for the labor that came with preparing it. We were shocked by the amount of food for such an affordable price. There was *daal*, *biryani* (with raisins, cinnamon sticks and cloves added for flavor), chicken curry (a drumstick), egg curry, salad, and a soft drink—we chose *lassi*. The food was very filling, and it was probably the closest to the kind of food that I was used to having at home when my mother cooks meals. There was also *paratha* available at the restaurant, which is a bit like a fried and thinner version of naan. For once, naan wasn't even an option on the menu. The restaurant took this risk, attracting Bangladeshis and also Japanese locals, by serving a new kind of cuisine.

Around 7:30 PM, a young well-dressed South Asian man in a business suit, and two Japanese businessmen entered the restaurant. So, *this* was the owner. Unlike other Bengalis whom I had spoken to, the owner started his restaurant as a side hobby, working as a businessman. He handed out his business card and we noticed that he had a high-ranking position as a sales executive. I learned that the owner had settled in Japan by starting a family, having a Japanese wife whom he had met there, and child in Tokyo. Marrying Japanese locals is one pathway to a work and residency permit, making it much easier to find secure jobs (Rahman 268). He came as an undergraduate through a scholarship to attend a Japanese university. Now fluent in Japanese, he works for a Japanese company. This was my first exposure to the business relations in Japan from a Bangladeshi perspective. He decided to open up this restaurant to provide a place for authentic Bangladeshi food in Tokyo. He also hoped to create a safe and supporting space for Muslim communities in Japan. There were pamphlets reading: "Muslims' Guide to Tokyo," with lists of places to go to where halal food is served, as finding places to eat can be very challenging for Muslims in Japan.

The owner told us that he easily got a job after college because he came with a student visa. However, without this kind of visa, finding a job is much more difficult as an immigrant. Even with his good financial standing, the owner openly criticized the Japanese government's attitude towards migrants and the challenges that they faced to adjust to life in Japan. He described how race plays a role in the workforce. The Western businessmen in his company are given special care and attention, although they can't always speak proper Japanese, simply because of their physical white appearances. There is currently a very high demand for English speakers in Japan. The owner explained that it is very hard to find a job as a foreigner even if you can speak perfect English. A Westerner will always be chosen over a foreigner of color to teach.

"So, if you want to work in Japan in the future, I think you will have a very bright future," said the chef, joining the conversation, his voice lined in sadness. The chef told me that he was surprised that I had ordered the *paratha* (a special type of baked bread) but now he understood because I'm half Indian, so I know "Indian things." Having come to Tokyo with his wife and children, he didn't think his Japanese was good, and he took free language classes in Japanese. When coming to Tokyo, he immediately connected with the Bangladeshi community through Mosque and Masjid events.

When I asked what some differences between Japan and Bangladesh were, they laughed. "Well for one thing, Bangladesh is a developing country, and Japan is a first world country." Bangladeshis tend to choose Japan because it is one of the safest countries in the world, an answer that I frequently hear. The owner had lived in Japan for 16 years. He said that the biggest problem for migrants in Japan is the visa. They have to keep renewing it and as a result, many people work illegally.

Those few Bangladeshis who come legally with student visas and scholarships, are a minority, able to permanently work in companies in Japan. However, the majority of migrants and immigrants feel a sense of isolation in Japan, struggling to make ends meet, and facing many challenges that make it difficult to settle down. Hasan Mahmud (2017) discusses the condition of middle and upper-class Bangladeshi families who send their sons abroad to Japan to make money—remittances—to send home. These Bangladeshis are the small percentage that are able to come with legal status and student visas, for the purpose of studying Japanese language and attending vocational schools (413). However, even with the student visas there are limitations as to how many hours foreigners are allowed to work. As a result, many of these migrants end up working illegally in unskilled jobs, exceeding the 28 hours that they are allowed to work under the student visa. (414). Many of the businessmen whom I talked with in Japan were able to come to Japan under special circumstances, receiving scholarships to attend Japanese university and eventually be hired in a business. These Bangladeshis explicitly said that their circumstance was unique, and they were in a minority. Their experiences do not reflect the condition of the majority of the Bangladeshi immigrants living in Tokyo. In Bangladesh it is the child, specifically the son's responsibility to support the family. The daughter is expected to marry into other families (414).

From 1987 to 1989, Japan had a visa waiver program and granted Bangladeshis entry for 15-30 days. However, many stayed longer, working in manufacturing factories and becoming undocumented migrant workers. At that time about 50,000 immigrants entered (414). As seen in neighborhoods like Kinshichio, there are certain areas with large Bangladeshi populations. As of 2019, about 16,030 Bangladeshi nationals have been counted as registered foreigners in Japan (Ministry of Justice 2019). Recently it was reported in the news that some Bangladeshis in Kinshichio were arrested for having illegal status. The immigration reform act of 1990 ended the

visa waiver program in Japan. Many undocumented immigrants were deported. Now, it is easier to enter Japan through education with a student visa. While in the past Bangladeshis could enter with no specific educational background, they are now required to have at least 12 years of prior education. The prices of coming to Japan have also increased. Now, students must pay for the student visa and college admission (Mahmud 2017, 415). The majority of these men are unmarried, coming for the sole purpose of providing for their families back home.

The most common work is at Bengali businesses such as Bangladeshi or Bengali restaurants and halal shops, or in Japanese restaurants doing manual labor jobs such as washing dishes. For many Bangladeshis this kind of work is considered low class, and—too embarrassed—they are unwilling to tell their families back home where they are actually working. They often lie as a result, saying that they are working in better positions like as hotel managers or cashiers. There is high pressure to earn immediately to pay off loans and support the family. The more money sent home, the higher the social status, success being measured by money. One of Mahmud's interview subjects said, "We come to Japan for success, which is measured solely in terms of money, nothing else" (418).

The life of these kind of migrants is stressful, to say the least. The schedule typically involves waking up extremely early to work a five-six-hour shift, then going to school, and then working another long shift after school. They don't return home until the last train and then do their studying until late at night. After earning money, they immediately send it back home in fear of being caught for working illegal hours (419). Mahmud cites author Oishi who describes that these migrants "realized that Japan was not the place to settle and raise a family because of their marginal living situation, the restrictive immigration laws and limited prospects for upward mobility" (Oishi 2012). As I expected, the life of foreigners in Japan is not easy, especially for

those of a working-class background without English language ability. Those few Bangladeshis who come with a student visa and a scholarship, are a minority, able to permanently work in companies in Japan. However, for the majority of migrants and immigrants, working in Japan poses many challenges that makes it very difficult to settle down.

A woman who was my conversation partner in my home university in the US worked for a marketing company in Tokyo and introduced me to her Bangladeshi coworkers who, like the owner of Bimi Kitchen, had gone to Japan for business opportunities. Her Hindu Bangladeshi colleague Ayan lives in an apartment in Tsurumi, a neighborhood that has a large population of Bangladeshis. Recently, Ayan got married in Bangladesh and brought his wife back with him to Japan where they moved into a new place. They invited us to their home for lunch along with another Bangladeshi family with their two children, a five-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl. Their father was another coworker in this company. The children were very lively, and both could speak Japanese and Bangla fluently. They learned Japanese in school and spoke it when playing with other children, while at home they spoke in Bangla with their parents. The third man who joined us was another Bangladeshi company worker, but for another company. They all came to Japan through the same Monbusho scholarship program on student visas when they were about 18 or 19 years old. This program in Dhaka that provided an IT scholarship for students to go to a one-year Japanese language school, two years at technical school, and then finally two years in a university to get a bachelor's degree. The Monbusho program was very competitive and involved taking challenging exams in math and science. After completing their undergraduate degrees, they were able to apply to have their scholarships extended for a master's program in Japan, which is what these men chose to do. After receiving their masters, they entered companies in Japan.

Because they went to a university in Dhaka for one semester, they were able to receive the proper training to prepare for these difficult exams and receive the scholarships.

When asked if it is easy to work in Tokyo, they said that yes, it was easy if you went to Japan in the way that they had—for study or via scholarships. However, they admitted to being in the minority and very fortunate thanks to the business opportunity they had. Coming to Japan gave them a huge opportunity that they would not have had in Bangladesh. Aside from Dhaka, the capital city, there was little opportunity in Bangladesh, and because all job opportunities were in Dhaka, the city was highly congested.

The men's Japanese was fluent, while their wives could speak very little. Ayan's wife had only just moved to Japan a month ago. Ayan described their wedding as huge; there were about 500 people at the wedding ceremony and over 800 guests at the reception party, many of whom they didn't even know. It was an arranged marriage and they met for the first time shortly before the wedding. While talking more with them, I sensed the tensions in their marriage. Ayan's wife's life had completely changed. She had to give up her family and home to move to a foreign country with her husband. She said that it's very lonely for her with her husband gone all day every day.

"If I'd known it would be like this, I wouldn't have gotten married," she said in Bangla, so that my Japanese friend and her husband wouldn't understand.

But I could understand and although she used a joking tone, I could sense the seriousness in her words. Because she was not working, she was now taking Japanese language classes to keep busy. Despite having only just started the lessons, she seemed to have already learned quite a bit of reading and writing. She missed many things about home. Japanese food wasn't the same and while there were halal shops that sold spices and goods needed for Bangladeshi cooking, not everything was available. We briefly talked about a South Asian food called *gol gappa, pani puri,*

or *phuchka*, which is a cracker-like spherical shell that is filled with potatoes and spices, and then dipped in sauces. It is a popular street food in India and Bangladesh. Ayan's wife talked fondly about the food and how much she loved the way the Bangladeshis made it because they made sure to make it spicy enough and added onion.

Her husband then teasingly said in Bangla, "You know, the water they use is dirty water from the streets. It's no good."

"Everything in Bangladesh is dirty and rotten, isn't it?" she said to him. "Now that you're a *Nihonjin*. *Nihonjin ni natta kara*! (Because you've become Japanese!)"

Ayan's wife mocked her husband for "becoming" Japanese through his migration to Tokyo. Her irritated tone implied a criticism for his disconnect with Bangladesh and his changing identity. Through migration, Ayan began to feel more at home in Japan, which compared to Bangladesh seemed cleaner and more convenient. Despite the seemingly teasing tone, the conversation was again in Bangla, so that my Japanese friend and her husband would not be able to understand. It was true that Ayan's life was now in Japan. He returned to Bangladesh every few months on business trips or just to visit family, but Japan had become his true home. This transition to life in Japan had shaped his perception of his home country, which when compared to Japan he now saw as "unclean" and lowly. Ayan had developed a critical image of Bangladesh, while his wife still associated her home country with feelings of nostalgia and longing. Other Bangladeshis that I spoke to admitted that they did prefer the economic stability of Japan, even if they always thought of Bangladesh as their homeland. There still existed a sense of pride in the homeland that was apparently not reflected in the Brazilian communities with whom Tsuda (1999) worked. Despite loving their home country, Ayan and the other Bangladeshi businessmen were beginning to "become" more Japanese, adjusting to the comfort of this new lifestyle.

This was not the case for his wife who had far fewer opportunities. I asked if women received the Monbusho scholarship too. They said, yes of course but in 30 years only two women had received it.

"It's because the Mom and Dad don't approve," Ayan's wife told me, showcasing the gender differences.

In 2010, only 3% of recorded migrant workers from Bangladesh were female (Bélanger and Rahman 2013, 356). There are many structural, religious, and political barriers in place in Bangladesh preventing women from migrating, while encouraging men to do so. These barriers primarily serve the interest of "protecting" women (357). Bélanger and Rahman argue that migration is a gendered practice, sometimes liberating and transforming the roles of Bangladeshi women, giving them access to the world beyond the limits of the home (358). The Bangladeshi government's policies, however, have banned female emigration in both 1991 and 1998. Although the ban ended in 2003, women still faced constrains when migrating, having to be 25 years of age (359). *Purdah* in Bangladesh limits women's access to the same opportunities as men. Purdah is "a set of prescriptions aimed at protecting women particularly in the realm of sexual matters" (363). Although many Bangladeshi women go abroad for economic opportunities and even to get away from their husbands, they face judgement and social stigma upon their return (369). Ayan's wife had no choice whether or not to migrate to Japan. She had to follow her husband after their arranged marriage, and thus now lives in isolation in an unfamiliar country. Migrating against her will changed her experience of Japan.

Ayan said that when he first came to Japan it was really hard learning the language. The classes were so intensive, and everything was so new to him. Initially, his mother didn't want him to leave, but she understood that it was a good opportunity. Another businessman who had joined

us told me that college was the best time of his life. They used to play card games and gamble in their dorm rooms. I found out that these Bangladeshis, unlike the others I had met, were actually Hindus and they celebrated festivals like Durga Puja. There were several other Bangladeshis working in the same company and it seemed that it was pretty easy to connect with other Bangladeshis in the city. The wife had cooked an array of Bangladeshi dishes, including *haleem* and various meats—mutton, chicken and beef. The desert was *roshogolla* and a fruit salad with pound cake that the wife made. They ate with their hands as is traditionally done in South Asia while we used forks and spoons. They told me that I took after my father, in that I didn't look Bengali at all. I was used to hearing this and, in the past, it hurt me, or made me feel as if I didn't belong in these communities. However, in this case, they spoke to me in Bangla and they didn't assume I wouldn't understand. Instead they asked when they were unsure, and they really made me feel welcomed.

This exchange had been facilitated through a work relationship between my Japanese friend and her Bangladeshi colleague. In this interaction, I saw the importance of Japanese locals in showing a support for and interest in experiencing Bangladeshi culture. These Bangladeshi businessmen had gained a positive image and experience of Japan because of the opportunities they had been granted, as well as the relationships they had formed with Japanese locals. Exchanging Bangladeshi food and culture with us, allowed Ayan and his friends to preserve and share their Bangladeshi identity in their home. I had initially expected to feel completely out of place among strangers, a large age gap dividing us. Instead, I found myself coming to feel at home in this familial space.

Restaurants not only serve as spaces for the exchange of food. They also facilitate cross-cultural education, communication, and relationships. Through food encounters, Bengali migrants'

pride and preservation of national identity has allowed them to recreate the “Bengali experience” for Japanese locals and other Bengali foreigners. In doing so, restaurants become spaces of comfort and belonging for diaspora communities, but also for members of Japanese society, who as a result, become Japanese ambassadors for Bengali culture within their own city. These intercultural spaces and exchanges of food cultures also provide kinship and home for Japanese locals, who, like migrants, may also feel isolated in their own society.

5.0 Conclusion

Saturday mornings my mother skinned *Ilish maachh* in the kitchen sink, fish scales and fins and flesh staining her palms, the air a dank medley. I winced at the sight of their bodies lying in ice behind grocery store glass, bulging glassy eyes and fins clipped.

"Don't talk to me," she told us at dinner so she wouldn't choke on miniscule bones hidden in every bite.

My last dinner at Puja restaurant and the *Ilish maachh* special came in seven dishes, head and eggs and tail separated into silver platters. Yamada-san had recently returned from a trip to Bangladesh, bringing back fresh mangos and lychee, leaving some for me. Sanchita put the tree of lychee that he had brought in the alcove by the kitchen, placing a few fruits as offering in the restaurant's shrine. I first discovered lychee in a battered page in my Bangla schoolbook, the red fruit drawn for the Bangla alphabet letter "Li" for *leechu.* Despite appearing in the book, "Li" had become an extinct letter, no longer used in written Bangla, and for that reason, it became my favorite Bangla letter.

During my last dinner at Puja, we spoke in Japanese and Bangla, switching between the two. Sanchita's daughter, who couldn't speak Bangla, pulled on her mother's skirt and squealed, "I can't understand but I know you're talking about me!"

"I'll write to you in Bangla," Sanchita said in Bangla. "Even Japanese words I'll write in Bangla, so you won't forget."

"Next time, you must go to Bangladesh," Yamada-san told me in Japanese. "The stray cats will be happy to see you," alluding to the stray cats that he cared for in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

I had never imagined Bangla and Japanese together in one space. Bangla and Japanese, Bangla vowels with Japanese particles, Bangla alphabet with Japanese characters. But they didn't contrast and clash in Tokyo like the English and Bangla I grew up with. I spent my childhood desperate to find my place within the crowds of saris and dancing feet. I imagined it would always be like that—never succeeding in blending in, always isolated and standing on the outside. I never imagined that in Tokyo I would speak Bangla again.

In our final picture taken together, Sanchita hugs me, her arms around my waist. I showed my grandmother that photo after returning home, describing the details of each person I met that semester in Tokyo. All in Bangla.

Participating in these intercultural spaces allowed me also to change my previously strained relationship with my Bengali roots. This was strongly dependent on the intercultural aspects of these specific Bengali and Bangladeshi spaces, which helped to facilitate relationships, emulation, and exchange.

In this thesis, I have argued that through these particular instances of intercultural encounters, a small circle of Bengalis and Bangladeshis in Tokyo have been able to find a sense of home and belonging, and some Tokyo locals have also been able to find home in contexts of precarity and social atomization. I do not in any way mean to claim that these case studies are representative of the experiences of *all* Bengalis and Bangladeshis in Japan. Home is constantly being reproduced again and again, created by diaspora and local communities. Home is also ambivalent. First-generation diasporas experience the loss of home, but also the creation of a new kind of home that preserves elements of the homeland identity while also mixing these elements with the customs and cultures of the host country. Intercultural relationships between Bengali diaspora communities and Japanese locals whom I met, through cultural emulation and the

exchanging of culture, allowed certain groups of Bengalis and Japanese to find a sense of belonging and home. These intercultural relationships are dependent on respondents' economic background, education, as well as the luxury of time, all of which allow access to these intercultural spaces. In future research I hope to examine the experiences of Bengali migrant workers and asylum seekers in manual labor jobs who contribute greatly to Japan's economy but work behind the scenes and are given little recognition. Japanese relationships with foreigners of color are largely shaped by frameworks of class, gender, and education, which exclude many foreign worker populations. These communities are vulnerable and difficult to access, but through existing connections to Bengali communities and organizations, access becomes more possible. I hope to continue my research through the exploration of smaller Bengali and Bangladeshi cultural organizations in Tokyo, whose events I was unable to attend.

In creating connections through shared cultural interests, these small and unique communities were granted access to aspects of desirability that were previously lacking in their own cultural contexts. For some Bengali migrants, this came in the form of social integration in Japanese society, structural embeddedness, and the preservation of cultural identity. For some Japanese locals, there was a development of social networks and spaces that allowed them to escape from the precarity and rigid structure of Japanese social life to a context that allowed them to engage with their interest in Bengali culture, and freely speak their minds. These intercultural relationships extended from Rash Behari Bose's introduction of *Indo Kari* and Rabindranath Tagore's initial visit to Bengal, into the generation of Bengalis and Japanese I observed who had formed the basis of friendships that I believe can contribute to making a future Japan more welcoming to immigrants.

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