

CHRISTINE PALAMIDESSI MOORE

The Brown Rice Scene in Dehradun

A white Range Rover with a thick bull bar headed straight at us. Rageev pushed the heel of his hand hard into the horn, uncurling his finger tips as if they were tender tea leaves dropped in hot water. He continued to smile. At the last moment, he jiggled his two-door Mitsubishi to the right, around a donkey-pulled cart, barely missing a man on a bicycle and a family jammed onto a motorcycle. We brushed by a cow chewing sugar cane stalks on the side of the road.

I let go of my breath. “What if we had hit the cow?” There were plenty of cows, regal skinny beings with fly-bitten hides, wandering around everywhere. And there were plenty of skinny dogs, too, pooping near the cows, kids poking through trash, and men relieving themselves next to the dogs.

“Depends.” Rageev broadened his smile. Everyone, even beggars, had lovely white teeth in India, and most everyone smiled. Smiling reduced personal stress: an inexpensive, sensible solution to the environment.

A car darted from a dirt path into the chaos of traffic on Raja Road. In response, dozens of vehicles swarmed sideways. Rageev shifted into the lane of oncoming traffic. Yellow lines meant nothing. What a mess.

The turmeric-and-cumin laden food inside my stomach shot up from the bottom regions to pummel my esophageal reflux valve, a flap which I had never noticed existed until I came to this absolutely crazy country where everyone was in a rush to get ahead of someone else, anyone, so as not to be left behind.

“A cow? For sure everybody will be stopping.” Rageev had a proud, pigeon-like chest from doing so much pranayama; he wore clingy three-button knit shirts that showed off his trim physique. The moment we met, this gentle guy with playful, darting green eyes had reached beneath his strong chest to his heart and welcomed me like a sister.

But I didn’t dare ask him to not press on the horn. It would be like him asking me to ignore red lights, if we had been on the road in Boston.

We were in Dehradun, the capital of the newly formed state of Uttranchal, a town experiencing such tremendous growth that additional stories emerged on top of buildings overnight, planks of timber vied with mangos for space in every type of cart imaginable, and the number of automobiles stretching across the two lane highways multiplied daily, adding to a suffocating race towards progress. The city is located in the Doon valley, a green expanse about 150 miles north of New Delhi. Flanked by the Himalayas to the north and hills to the south, Dehradun is host to the water divide of the sacred Ganges and Manama rivers. Compared to the rest of India Dehradun’s standard of living is pretty good.

Rageev held the wheel with both hands to pass a dented blue bus packed beyond possibility with men, women, and children whose dark arms dangled out the windows like laundry. “Even buses are stopping if you hit a cow and everyone inside is soon exiting the bus to look at the cow to see if it is dead.”

“Everybody?”

“Yes. A cow will cause a very big crowd.”

“Right.” Rageev’s sister, Anjula, sat in the backseat filing her nails into perfect ovals. “And if the driver who hit the cow is a Hindu, then oh-my-god he has committed a grave sin and his family is in big trouble.” She snapped the file against the back of my seat. “They have to pay the cow’s owner, pay to

move the cow off the road because they cannot touch the dead cow. They go to the temple. For weeks they will be saying prayers and paying people. If the driver is Muslim,” she continued, “then a big fight is going to break out because the Hindus will say the Muslim was intending to hit the cow on purpose to insult them. You don’t want to be hitting a cow.”

We passed the guard at the clock tower roundabout in the center of ‘Doon’ and entered a tributary of traffic heading north on Rajpur Road, passing shops and groups of well-groomed students who each day gambled their lives to cross the road. Rageev pulled into the lot near Vishal Mega Mart, the only store in the state that accepted credit cards and the only shop in town with designated parking spots. We were on the rich side of town, Rajpur. Pizza Hut, which had a clean bathroom, was across the street, as were most of the banks, a fancy sneaker shop, and a block of stores under construction. Dark men in flip flops hauled concrete, lifted heavy buckets to their fellow workers who stood on a flimsy looking scaffolding fashioned from thin tree trunks.

According to Anjula, in India, only rich people and intellectuals freed from expected conformity ate brown rice. We would find it. Anjula, a very tiny beautiful woman, never expressed discomfort. She pushed herself out of the backseat, careful not to dirty her new child-sized sandals. A path seemed to clear in front of her. For a small person, Anjula commanded rather than followed. People hepped to, listened, and did what she asked. Unlike most women in India, including her sisters, Anjula’s nose was not pierced, she wore jeans, and her English sounded like an American rather than British accent.

The three of us walked up a skeleton of soon-to-be escalator steps. The mart had been open a few weeks. It wasn’t mega in size as much as it was mega in organization and cleanliness. It smelled antiseptic. Dozens of men in white jackets swept the linoleum floors, straightened bags of snacks near the cash registers, and hurried around as if practicing for the crowds that would soon enter. Bollywood music blared out of corner speakers. A few women pushed around carts but they were more interested in showing off their chubby sons and gold jewelry than buying canned carrots and frozen green beans.

Anjula whispered, “Even rich people want to buy the cheapest.”

Vishal Mega Mart didn’t carry brown rice. “Sorry ma’am.” The clerk looked horrified, not for the lack of an item: what person could possibly want to eat hard nutty brown when they could enjoy polished aromatic white?

The next afternoon, at about 1PM, Anjula’s friend Vikrum picked me up at the Osho Center, located in the Tibetan district of Dehradun. One reason I had travelled around the world to India was to learn about meditation so that I could teach it back in the States. The Osho style of mediation incited a state of rapture brought about not by sitting but by swaying, jumping and free dancing to sitar and flute music for over an hour. Needless to say, I was spaced out when I swung my leg over the back of Vikram’s motorcycle seat. The metal gates closed behind us, and I was suddenly frightened, struck by a vision of falling off the bike into the traffic, my unprotected body smashed under bus tires.

Vikrum was an unusually big Indian man, about six feet tall. He wore jeans--an automatic signal in Dehradun that you were a bit of a rebel, not a totally traditional Hindu. I wrapped my arms tight around his torso, inhaling his moist-tumeric-saturated-hot-weather scent. Off we went. Within a minute we sidled into a swarm of carts, bikes, horns, exhaust, gravel, buses, cows, dogs, oxen, pigs, loud Range Rovers, and louder diesel fueled trucks, and past men hauling bricks and piles of lumber on their backs, past women hitting stones on the side of the road with metal hammers. Their job was to turn the stones to gravel so that someday, in the future, the road could be widened, modernized, advancing the crumbly infrastructure of India.

Neither of us wore helmets. Because he was big, and his motorcycle turquoise with an orange seat, Vikrum called attention to himself. A lot of people in Doon recognized him, either with scornfulness or

admiration. But me? In that particular season--the end of summer and beginning of the rain season--I happened to be the only white woman on the Majra side of Dehradun. Not only was I white, I was a tall, bright blonde white woman, wearing a sparkly cream-colored *shalwar kameez*, and I was hugging a hunk of an Indian man who sported not only jeans but also cowboy boots.

That afternoon we might as well have been a cow. Everyone stopped for cows. Around us a pod of traffic halted, inciting the tempers of drivers, ahead and behind, who weren't privy to our show. We caused a frenzy of horn honking. Men leered and waved. The women in dirty saris stopped hammering the stones. Kids dropped rag sacks to point. Vikrum drove through the milky slowdown, moving ahead of the masses; pleased to have an advantage.

My *kameez* outfit was drenched with sweat. It was midday, ninety degrees, sunny and humid. The motorcycle radiated heat, as did the asphalt road. We were being baked all around. Still, I wanted Vikrum to slow down to a reasonable 40 miles per hour. But if I asked, we would prolong our parade and it would take longer to get home. Mostly I wished he would stop tooting his horn.

Hindu Brahmins, the traditional priestly class in India, are a reserved, non-self promoting lot who cook for their own family, not outsiders. Households in Dehradun eat breakfast at 8AM, lunch at 2PM, and dinner at 8PM. The schedule and menu rarely varies. For breakfast: milky sweet tea and flat bread or leftover wheat chapati stuffed with beans, potatoes or dal. For lunch: rice, dals, bean, potato, vegetable, and perhaps chapati. For dinner: wheat chapati, more legumes, vegetable, bean, yoghurt, maybe potato again. Indians consider potato a vegetable, not a starch. It was summer and only five vegetables--potato, okra, squash, cucumber and corn-- were available in the open markets and from vendors' carts. No one brought in vegetables from outside the Doon. We ate what grew nearby. The Tyagis were strict, restricting eggs.

It took a good six hours to digest the food, which was primarily carbohydrates, heavily oiled, salted and spiced. Mouth puckering pickles accompanied every meal. Pickles--mango, carrot, mushroom, eggplant, tomato--are essential to digestion and completeness. Poor Hindus could forgo vegetables and make a meal with chapati and pickle, or rice and pickle. Always pickle.

Vikrum steered his fandangoed motorcycle off the road into Chamanviha colony and behind the gates to the Tyagi house. He had done okay: delivered me in time for the mid-day meal. I jumped off the bike. A sticky residue of steamy petrochemical pollution coated my face and hair.

The screened door swung open. Anjula came outside in her jeans, crisp blouse, and clean sandals to greet Vikrum, who towered above her. He smiled. I shook his hand. Bits of grey grit from the road peppered his bright teeth. As soon as his bike pulled away, I ran upstairs to my room to shower.

Dehradun is famous for growing a special variety of rice known as Dehradun, which is considered the best basmati in the world. The flavor and texture complements curries and pilafs because it is a dry rice and the grains stay separate. The special Dehradun rice fields begin about three blocks from the Tyagi house and abut the Delhi-Meerut Highway. But, just like brown rice, people in Dehradun and India, except for the wealthy, do not eat Dehradun rice. They eat the standard basmati grown in Punjab, a state in northwestern India, or from fields in eastern Pakistan. Dehradun basmati is grown for export. In Boston, for example, a pound of Dehradun rice goes for \$7.99. A pound of organic short grain brown rice goes for \$1.59. Basmati, by the way, means "the fragrance of virgins."

I sat down at the dinner table with Rageev, Anjula, and their father Ravishankar. The women in the family prepared the food and might eat a little bit before the men, or eat what was left after the men finished their meal. Anjula ate with her father. He had seven children and she was his favorite. She was unmarried, smart, and very well-educated and never cooked, cleared the table, washed clothes, or shopped

for food--except for that day. In the morning, Anjula had gone out on her own in search of brown rice and found it in an old wood-floored shop near Badi Sabzi Mandi, the randy local open air market.

Anjula fidgeted in her seat. I could tell she was excited. From day one, all the Tyagis were very concerned about pleasing me and serving food that fell in line with the macrobiotic diet I followed back home: whole grains, steamed vegetables, beans. A diet common to most country's peasants. It didn't make sense to them, the way I ate. I was a *gora* and not a peasant. In India white was preferred over brown; skin tone included. The first meal I shared with them, they had pointed out the beauty of Krishna's light skin; Rageev's, too. Plus India's own president, Sonia Gandhi, was white and Italian--like me. The president certainly didn't eat brown rice.

I didn't eat their beloved dairy products either: milk was life.

Rather than serve me okra in a curry sauce, the women boiled the okra but they sprinkled it with turmeric, turning the green vegetable a dull mustard color. They could not imagine a person, any person, enjoying an un-turmericed vegetable. They put aside cups of dal with minimum cumin, and chickpeas without red chilies. Every evening, to tempt me, Krishna placed a stainless steel bowl full of her homemade yoghurt near my plate.

"We eat turmeric and hot pepper," Ravishankar explained. "The spices kill bacteria. We eat salt, because it is hot in India and oil for the same reason. Dal for protein. Yoghurt cools the body for a good night's sleep." He recited this mantra about food at each meal, even breakfast, for my benefit.

Eventually I ate more turmeric and cumin, which was unavoidable. The spices were in everything including cookies, chocolate, the pizza at Pizza Hut, and the veggie burgers at McDonalds.

Krishna, the mother, who was almost as tiny as Anjula and whose eyes were a brighter green than Rageev's, set the brown rice near my elbow. It might as well have been a pork hot dog. Ravishankar, Rageev, Anjula and Krishna tilted their heads in the way Hindus tilt and waited, waited for me to begin. Another reason Indians didn't eat brown rice was because it took so darn long to cook--50 minutes, which meant an excess use of fuel. I was grateful and expressed my gratitude before picking up a fork and taking a bite.

The rice was rancid. It had sat on the shelf in the wood-floored store for six years before Anjula happened to come inside to buy it. The harvest date, stamped on the bag, said 2001.

The store owner refused to take the rice back, or to refund Anjula's money. "You should be looking at what you buy before you walk out of my shop. You gave me your money the rice is yours." He folded his arms. For once, Anjula did not command, but she did a good job of scolding him, calling him brother to add insult to her finger shaking.

In full view of passerby, we poured the rice on the cracked sidewalk outside the shop.

About a month later, Anjula and I hired a three-wheeled taxi to go into Doon center for cups of coffee and to shop at Kumar's on Nashville Road. She needed a good sun screen lotion because her cheeks got dark spots when she spent too much time in the sun. We were scheduled to move out of Doon to go to a village in the Himalayas as part of our Project Pencil.

Ex-patriot Brits and Americans filled their prescriptions at Kumar's. The shop sold European shampoos and cosmetics, aspirins, cough syrup and British cigarettes. The air conditioning inside felt like a blessing. It was a clean place. Clerks in white jackets swept the floor, straightened shelves, and asked over and over again, like a horn: "Welcome madame is there anything I can help you with."

Unlike the Vishal Mega Mart, Kumar's slim aisles were crowded with fair-skinned shoppers carrying straw baskets over their arms. The entire time I'd been in Dehradun, I hadn't been to Kumar's and I had

seen but one or two white people. Here was a pack of us. Anjula whispered that on Saturdays they all came down to Doon from Mousourrie to shop at Kumars. "It's the best place in town." She nodded.

I poked around in the back: boxes of corn flakes, unspiced peanuts, condensed milk, saltines. Next to jars of tomato sauce and pastas imported from Italy, there stood a green and yellow box of instant brown rice. The brown rice, from Spain, had been pre-cooked and freeze-dried to reduce cooking time.

Krishna prepared the brown rice for dinner. She and Anjula, Ravishankar and Rageev tilted their heads while I spooned yoghurt over reconstituted brown rice. By then, however, my tastes had changed. I ate plenty of yoghurt and spicy chickpeas. I raved about Krishna's turmeric-laden fried onions and potato dish. Every pickle, no matter how hot, that crossed my plate went into my mouth. I ate exactly what Ravishankar ate, and although he continued to recite the mantra about "we eat turmeric...we eat salt... we eat dal" he was happy to have straightened me out and made me a sensible eater, not an oddball who limited salt and oil and requested unpolished rice.

Truthfully, I really didn't want the brown rice. I ate it and tilted my head and asked for more yoghurt to put on top and a big side dish of mango pickle.

Krishna never made brown rice again. She knew I was a convert: a normal basmati eater. I stayed with the Tyagis but a few more days.

The family held onto the brown rice. Anjula told me her mother put the brown grains in a see-through jar inside the glass-doored cabinet near the kitchen where it stood next to the chickpeas and dals. The rice reminded them of me, who started out a single grain and ended up in the pot with all of them.

For me, I learned that if I desired to enter the inner workings of the Hindu culture, I had to eat what they ate. Food enters the body and incorporates. India is a loud place. The spices, peppers, pickles and tongue-pinching oils shout back and balance the exterior and interior worlds. Food enters and incorporates into the essential being of a person. The Tyagi household did the dance of accommodating me because they did not want to offend my way of life--my interior world. Like them, I did not eat meat, fowl, or eggs, but the rice is what became my stamp, my calling card, so to speak; the unfulfilled part of my internal identity, my longing, which they could not touch but did understand because every person longs for something. Brown rice, though basic, was a safe longing, not like lost love. We could put it on the table. Like the tomatoes, carrots, leeks, and spinach absent in the Dehradun markets, my brown rice would appear again, in the appropriate season.