

January 18, 2004

Aloo Kofta v Campbell Soup

At a recent dinner event, Amir Tuteja, a retired Washington DC government employee, and Dr Satish Gupta, a Maryland physician, were reminiscing about having to drive miles to go a rare Indian restaurant or access Indian groceries. As some of the earliest Indian residents in the Washington area (both came here in the 1960s), they recalled that it was only the kindness (more likely the business acumen) of a downtown Spanish grocery store that provided them with a supply of pickles and papads. In the event they saw another Indian, they would buttonhole him for fervid conversations about home and hearth that often lasted an hour.

The more recent 1990s Indian immigrant or national, with access to scores of Indian restaurants and grocery stores, not to speak of specialized Indian music, video and DVD shops, desi jewelry outlets, ethnic clothing and fashion bazaars, is a different creature altogether. There are times he can even forget that he is in a different country. Little Indias are sprouting all over the United States. There are parts of Chicago (Devon Street), Los Angeles (Artesia) and New York (Jackson Heights, jokingly referred to as Jaikishan Heights), that look, smell and sound like Karol Bagh or Flora Fountain.

Meantime, Indian population in the U.S has doubled from around 800,000 in 1990 to more than 1.6. million in the 2000 census, and is close to 2 million now. The Greater Washington area (including Maryland and Virginia) has some 100,000 people of Indian origin, up from a few hundred families in the 1960s. And the items on the shelves of Indian grocery stores has to be seen to be believed – from Vajradanti toothpaste (just in case you are used to it and don't like Crest or Colgate) to Amrutanjan, Dettol, Pan Paraag, Britannia biscuits, Maaza soft drink, Parachute coconut oil, you can get it all.

An emerging trend now is the appearance of Indian, and for that matter, Asian products, on the shelves of mainstream American grocery chains. In recent months, stores like Whole Foods have begun to stock Indian relishes

in addition to Chinese, Japanese and Thai items. The Asian section is expanding fast with products ranging from tandoori paste to coconut milk. Naans and related Indian breads are beginning to appear alongside tortillas and pita bread (which Indians used as a substitute for chapattis and rotis till a few years back).

Now Whole Foods is a slightly upscale chain, so it all has to do with not just the rising Asian population, but also their spending power. Several new studies show that Asians are the new moneyed class because of the academic heights they have scaled, and Indians are clearly at the top of the heap. Some 44 per cent of Asians in the U.S have graduate degree, compared to 26 per cent for the total population. Asian businesses – and their receipts – also rose about four times faster in the last decade than other businesses.

According to a 2003 study by University of Georgia's Selig Center, US' Asian buying power has climbed from 118 billion in 1990 to \$ 269 billion in 2000 to \$ 344 billion in 2003. It will reach \$ 526 billion in 2008. The 345 per cent gain from 1990 to 2008 (at a compounded annual rate of 8.6 per cent) is substantially greater than the increases in buying power projected for whites (128 per cent) or the U.S as a whole (148 per cent). Is it any wonder that aloo kofta and pad thai are jostling for space with Campbell's soup and frozen pizza? It's a market that should make anyone drool.

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