



## **Food for the soul: How immigrants use food blogs to heal during times of crisis**

By Newly Paul

---

Food is a powerful medium that brings people together. Some express their love for others by cooking for them. Some who are bothered by the chaos of the outside world find a sense of calm in the order and method involved in cooking. Then there are others, such as me, who read food blogs and watch food-related videos. We derive immense pleasure in watching complex dishes come together in under three minutes. Food blogs are therapeutic for me. I subscribe to several, but the ones closest to my heart are those that demonstrate Indian cooking. While I am an adventurous eater, during times of crisis I tend to fall back on comfort food from my country of birth. I find it calming to taste familiar flavors that remind me of my childhood home and the warmth and love of my family. During the shutdown caused by the pandemic, one particular Indian food blog, [Bongmom's Cookbook](#), has been my go-to for coping with the ongoing sense of dread and uncertainty in the world.

Food serves as a marker of ethnic identity for immigrant communities (Holtzman, 2006). Food evokes memories of people and a way of life that they have left behind (Sutton, 2000; Ray, 2004). Consumption of food blogs is a common method for

immigrants to connect with their roots. Readers' comments on such blogs act as a validation of their ethnic identities that are constructed and maintained through food (Lockwood & Lockwood, 2000). The discussion forums demonstrate the resilience of immigrant communities in celebrating their ethnic differences within the melting pot (Holtzman, 2006). They also create a sense of community by encouraging feelings of membership by creating shared emotional connections that stem from a common sense of history (Blanchard, 2004).

*Bongmom's Cookbook* showcases food from the Kolkata region of India. It was started in 2006 by a New Jersey-based mother of two who immigrated to the U.S. from Kolkata. The blog's name signifies the writer's regional roots—she is a Bengali, which is a name used for residents of the state of West Bengal (Kolkata is the state capital), who are affectionately called “bongs.” I stumbled upon the blog one day while feeling homesick and craving my favorite aloo posto (a dish with potato and poppy seeds). I found the recipe in her blog, but I also found a sense of community in *Bongmom's* blog posts and comments. The author wrote food fiction where she wove recipes into stories of her life in America and India.

I read about the three-ingredient dishes she rustled up as a graduate student in the U.S.; the everyday chicken biryani she cooked in her early days of marriage; the fish curries and kebabs she took to neighborhood potlucks; the sweets she made for Durga puja, and the fritters and tea she enjoyed on snowy evenings. Her food fiction created a

shared space for readers to bond over their common experiences. Readers praised her recipes, asked for substitutions for hard to find Indian spices, and shared stories about their immigrant lives. Her posts made me nostalgic. There were cultural similarities between her thoughts and mine. When she described her parents, they seemed similar to mine; her experiences in college and the workplace might well have been mine. I found solace in the familiarity of her virtual community.

Two years ago, when Bongmom started a [Facebook page](#), I followed her there. A few changes accompanied this move: She began posting more frequently; her posts were short and snappy and included multiple pictures and the occasional video; and her small community expanded to more than 16,000 followers. The posts, however, remained unchanged in tone and content.

Having followed Bongmom for a few years, it was natural then, that I turned to this virtual community for strength and inspiration during the pandemic. While the headlines predicted rising fatalities and the White House touted junk science, Bongmom's Facebook posts were a source of respite. The author refrained from criticism, rumor-mongering, and negativity. Her posts were lighthearted and authentic. Her advice was useful, never sanctimonious.

She discussed simple recipes from pantry staples; talked about her failed attempt at preparing jalebis; reminisced about missing her favorite pork dish at a restaurant; and did a live video where she cooked eggs in her home kitchen.

*“Sometimes I feel guilty sharing food and what we are cooking at home while a pandemic rages through our state,” she wrote recently. “(But) there are two sides to this story. On one side there are the heroic frontline workers...patients, and their families. On the other side, there are people depressed staying home...When I share stories from my kitchen, I hope someone in the second category will read and find some joy in staying home today. Maybe they will find a reason to get up and make a meal for themselves.”*

The pandemic posts brought Bongmom’s community closer. As a blogger, Bongmom had shied away from posting pictures of herself or her family, which is why it felt like a special treat to “visit” her home via Facebook Live and watch her cook. Her posts portrayed the highs and lows of her home-bound life, and her readers appreciated the authenticity.

*“This is love and warmth on a plate,” a reader commented under a picture of a three-item meal. “These three things single-handedly can pull me out of my pandemic depression any time of the day.”*

Some may see food blogs and virtual communities as escapism, but I think of them as self-care. In my mind, the kitchen is synonymous with nourishment, and a connection to my immigrant heritage. The rhythmic sounds of knives chopping vegetables and meat, the measuring of spices, stirring of sauces, mixing of batters, and plating of dishes are nothing short of therapy. Seeing familiar ingredients coming together into familiar dishes makes me feel hopeful and fills me with encouragement to face the unknown.



#### Works Cited

- Blanchard, A. (2004). Blogs as virtual communities: Identifying a sense of community in the Julie/Julia Project. In Gurak, S. A. L., Johnson, L., Ratliff, C., Reyman, J. (Eds.), *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, community, and culture of weblogs*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Holtzman, J. (2006). Food and memory. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35, 361-378.
- Lockwood, W. & Lockwood, Y. (2000). Finnish American milk products in the northwoods. In Walker, H. (ed.) *Milk: Beyond the Dairy. Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, 1999* (pp. 232–39). Oxford: Prospect Press.
- Ray, K. (2004). *The migrant's table: Meals and memories in Bengali-American households*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sutton, D. (2000). Whole foods: Revitalization through everyday synesthetic experience. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 25(2), 120–30.