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WHATSUP

Migration on a plate

A plate of food rarely tells just one story. Behind familiar flavours lie journeys across rivers, borders and generations, carrying memories of migration, adaptation and survival. That was the central thread of the latest session of Crossing Borders Sharing Flavours at Kolkata Centre for Creativity, recently, where food researcher Dr Amrita Bhattacharya and photographer Amit Sen explored how movement has shaped what Bengalis eat today. "I am a foodie, not a great cook. What keeps me hooked is uncovering the anthropological legacy of food and the countless stories woven into every recipe. There's always another layer to discover," said Sen.

Rather than focusing only on recipes, the discussion traced the people behind them. Migration through marriage, trade, politics and livelihood has continually reshaped regional cuisines. While men often migrated in search of work, women carried culinary traditions into new homes, recreating the flavours they had learnt from their mothers and grandmothers. Over time, those heirloom recipes absorbed local ingredients and techniques, creating entirely new food cultures. The conversation travelled from Bengal to Tripura, Amritsar and

Food, memory and the maps we carry



Every dish has a journey. Dr Amrita Bhattacharya and Amit Sen delved into the anthropology of food and migration

Sri Lanka, revealing how migration has quietly rewritten the history of food. In Tripura, the speakers explored the cultural significance of *shutki*, a staple born from preservation and local ecology that continues to define the region's culinary identity. Geokhali in Bengal offered another fascinating link, where a local souring agent called *aamshik tok* is believed to have found its way into an early adaptation of *vindaloo* before vinegar became synonymous

with the Portuguese-influenced dish. In Amritsar, the centuries-old tradition of *langar* was presented not just as a community meal but as a promise that no one would go hungry, drawing migrants, including Bengali sanitation workers, in search of a livelihood. The journey ended in Sri Lanka's Jaffna, where Tamil cuisine preserves stories of trade, conflict and resilience through recipes rooted in native herbs, seafood and age-old culinary traditions.



The audience followed the conversation as forgotten food histories and personal memories came to life

Migration, the speakers noted, often sharpens our emotional relationship with food. People living away from home miss not elaborate feasts but humble ingredients and everyday flavours. During their research, migrants from Calcutta spoke longingly of *radhuni*, homemade spice blends and the taste of meat cooked back home. Today, frozen foods and imported produce such as avocados may bridge distances, but nostalgia continues to season every meal. Traditions of foraging, recycling leftovers and wasting little also emerged as lessons inherited from generations that lived with scarcity rather than abundance. The evening left the audience with a simple yet profound thought: much of what we consider 'our' food is the result of countless journeys. Every spice, technique and family recipe carries traces of people who crossed borders,

adapted to unfamiliar landscapes, and, in doing so, quietly transformed the Bengali palate. "Our mission is to understand food through an anthropological lens and help people connect with the stories behind it. We try to explain, document and curate these food histories because every dish carries a journey of culture, migration and memory. One of my favourite recipes is the fermented tea leaf salad from Mandalay in Myanmar. I also learnt to cook *kochu saag* in the Andamans, while Tripura introduced me to oil-free cooking with fermented fish, a wonderful example of living that's deeply rooted in tradition," said Amrita Bhattacharya.

Tanisha Hirawat