



The Patkar family—Jayant, 48, Sangeeta, 42, daughter Neha, 19, and son Akshay, 15—in the living room of their home in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, India, with one week's worth of food. Cooking method: gas stove. Food preservation: refrigerator-freezer.

Poha Breakfast

ONE WEEK'S FOOD IN APRIL

Grains & Other Starchy Foods: \$5.35

Chapatis (flat bread), 1 1/2 lb; wheat flour, 8.8 lb; potatoes, 3.3 lb; white rice, 3.3 lb; poha (flattened white rice), 2.2 lb; Modern Special white bread, sliced, 1 loaf; porridge, 1.1 lb; chickpea flour, 1.1 lb.

Dairy: \$9.70

Milk, 2 1/9 gal; yogurt curds, 4.4 lb; Nestlé Everyday Dairy Whitener milk powder, 1.1 lb; ice cream, assorted flavors, 15.9 oz; ghee (clarified butter), 8.8 oz.

Meat, Fish & Eggs:

The family is of the Brahmin caste, and does not eat either meat or fish.

Fruits, Vegetables & Nuts: \$7.73

Watermelon, 6.6 lb; oranges, 4.4 lb; green grapes, 2.2 lb; limes, 12.8 oz; coconut, one-half; red onions, 5.5 lb; gourd, 3.3 lb; bitter gourd, 2.2 lb; cabbage, 2 heads; cauliflower, 1 head; tomatoes, 2.2 lb; yellow lentils, 2.2 lb; eggplant, 1.7 lb; chickpeas, 1.1 lb; cucumber, 1.1 lb; green lentils, 1.1 lb; okra (also called lady fingers), 1.1 lb; red beans, 1.1 lb; black-eyed beans, 8.8 oz; coriander, 8.8 oz; green bell pepper, 8.8 oz; green chili peppers, 3.5 oz; ground nuts, 1.1 lb.

Condiments: \$4.47

Soybean oil, 1.1 qt; salt, 1.1 lb; Nilon's pickles, 8.8 oz; white sugar, 8.8 oz; Maggi tomato ketchup, 7.1 oz; cumin seed, 3.5 oz; fenugreek seeds, 3.5 oz; mint, 3.5 oz; mustard seed, 3.5 oz; black pepper, 1.8 oz; garlic chutney, 1.8 oz; mango, dried and powdered, 1.8 oz; parsley, 1.8 oz; red chili powder, 1.8 oz; aniseed, 0.9 oz; turmeric powder, 0.9 oz; asafoetida (powdered gum resin), 0.4 oz; cloves, 0.4 oz.

Snacks & Desserts: \$2.33

Gulab jamoon (deep-fried dumplings), 1.1 lb, served soaked in cardamom-flavored syrup; upma rawa (savory semolina dish), 1.1 lb; papad (thin, crisp, sun-dried wafers of dal flour) 8.8 oz.

eaten as a snack or served sprinkled on soup; biscuits, 3.5 oz; corn-flour crackers, 3.5 oz; extruded noodle, 3.5 oz; rice-flour crackers, 1.8 oz; wheat-starch crackers, 1.8 oz.

Prepared Food: \$1.94

Khaman (sweet, steam-baked chickpea cakes), 1.1 lb; Maggi 2-minute noodles, 7 oz; Everest chhole masala (chickpea masala), 3.3 oz; poori (fried wheat-flour flat breads), 3 pieces.

Street Food: \$3.07

Chhole bhature (spicy chickpea curry with flat bread); idli (steamed rice cakes); pav bhaji (bread rolls with spicy mashed vegetables); pizza, 1 small; uttapam (thick and crispy flat bread made with coconut milk), served with spicy vegetables; dosa, (crispy savory pancake), 5, served with chutney or other spicy relishes; bhel poori (savory puffed rice with chutney); tomato, cucumber, and onion sandwich, 1 small.

Restaurants: \$2.88

Shree Ganga Restaurant: dinner for four, including Mala kotha (mashed potato dumplings in vegetable gravy), navratan korma (fruits and vegetables cooked in a creamy sauce and flavored with herbs, spices, and cashews), jeera fried rice (fried with cumin seeds), tandoori roti (flat bread), cooked in a tandoor, or clay oven; fried dahl (lentil-flour flat bread); papad; green salad; pickles, dessert.

Beverages: \$1.80

Thumbs Up cola, 2.1 qt; Godrej chai house tea, \$3.50; Nescafé Sunrise instant coffee, 0.5 oz; well water, for drinking and cooking.

‡ Not in Photo

Food Expenditure for One Week:

1,636.25 rupees/\$39.27

Hindus believe that long ago, during a fierce struggle between gods and demons, four droplets fell to the earth from a pot brimming with the nectar of immortality. Those four drops are said to have been absorbed into the sacred rivers in the cities of Allahabad, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain. Millions of pilgrims, sadhus, and yogis flock to one of these four cities every three years, in a 12-year cycle determined by the celestial clock. Kumbh Mela—the Festival of the Pot of Immortality.

IN HONOR OF THE KUMBH MELA half of the Patkars are on a monthlong break from work and school in their city of Ujjain, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. But for Jayant Patkar, this is no break. He's a public-works engineer with the city's water department, and the strain on Ujjain's water supply during this time is unparalleled. Many of the millions of Hindu pilgrims who come to the city during the *mela* (festival) stay for the entire month. Jayant's wife Sangeeta, the principal of Oxford Junior College, is having a more relaxing time, as is their 15-year-old son Akshay. Their daughter Neha, 19, has time off from her studies but is cramming for the entrance exam to medical school. She'll race off on her scooter for a tutoring session right after her mother finishes cooking breakfast.

Sangeeta heats a thin film of vegetable oil in a frying pan, then adds mustard seed. When it sizzles, she tosses in thinly sliced potatoes, onions, and chopped chili peppers and stir-fries them until the onions are golden yellow. Previously she has drained a pot of soaking *poha*—rice flakes—and set it aside to rest. Now she adds the *poha* to the frying pan, along with a little sugar and salt, and a pinch of turmeric for color. After stir-frying the mixture a bit more, she covers it and puts the *poha* on the table with condiments—chopped cilantro with grated coconut, and the crisp chickpea-flour noodles called *sev*. The Patkar family's breakfast is ready.

Everyone sits down to breakfast under a poster-size print of the Patkars' spiritual leader, Shri Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari. Sangeeta serves the *poha*, topping each mound of fluffy vegetables and rice with the coconut and cilantro, and sprinkles on the *sev*. Meat is never served at their table. Like most Hindus, they are vegetarians, although the parameters of vegetarianism are wide. "We are not as strict as in my father's house," says

Sangeeta, whose family is of the Brahmin caste—the social class associated with priests and scholars. Fifteen-year-old Akshay is an unlikely vegetarian. He doesn't like many vegetables, especially the gourds and squashes common in India, but because his family eats this way, he does as well. He has eaten chicken, he admits, and likes it.

Dietary restrictions notwithstanding, what all of India loves is a snack—the nation has thousands of street vendors. *Chhole bhature* (spicy chickpea curry with flat bread), steamed rice cakes, *pav bhaji* (spicy mashed vegetables in a bread roll), *uttapam* (thick and crispy flat bread made with coconut milk) with spicy vegetables, *dosa* (a crisp savory pancake) with chutney or other spicy relishes, *bhel poori* (savory puffed rice with chutney), curries of all types, *lassi* (yogurt drinks), fruit juices, and, of course, chai (Indian tea). Although every region of this vast, ancient country has its own unique foods, to some extent the lines dividing the regions have become smudged due to India's increasingly mobile society. The Patkars themselves have relocated a few times to accommodate Jayant's career.

KUMBH MELA

This spiritual festival transforms the four sacred cities into celebration sites without equal. Millions of Hindu pilgrims come to commune with swamis, gurus, and yogis, offer prayers to Lord Shiva, and take a spiritually cleansing dip or two, called a *snan*, in Ujjain's sacred Shipra River. Tent encampments housing the pilgrims and the holy stretch for miles, and ashrams (spiritual communities) feed the thousands of pilgrims who arrive at their compounds every day during this month. The local government is stretched to the breaking point, but manages to create an instant city that works, generally. Hordes of people of all ages shuffle shoulder-to-shoulder along both banks of the river, on the ghats (steps leading into the water), and across the bridges spanning the river, at all hours of the day and night. The Patkars too will visit the Shipra several times during the month, and join the other pilgrims for a *snan*.

There are as many different sects and branches of Hinduism as there are leaves on a tree, and all are here on parade. Hinduism en-

compasses many movements and schools and is largely inclusive; its followers keep the basic tenets of Hinduism, then cherry-pick from the various schools of thought to create a personalized version of belief. The most successful of these gain followers.

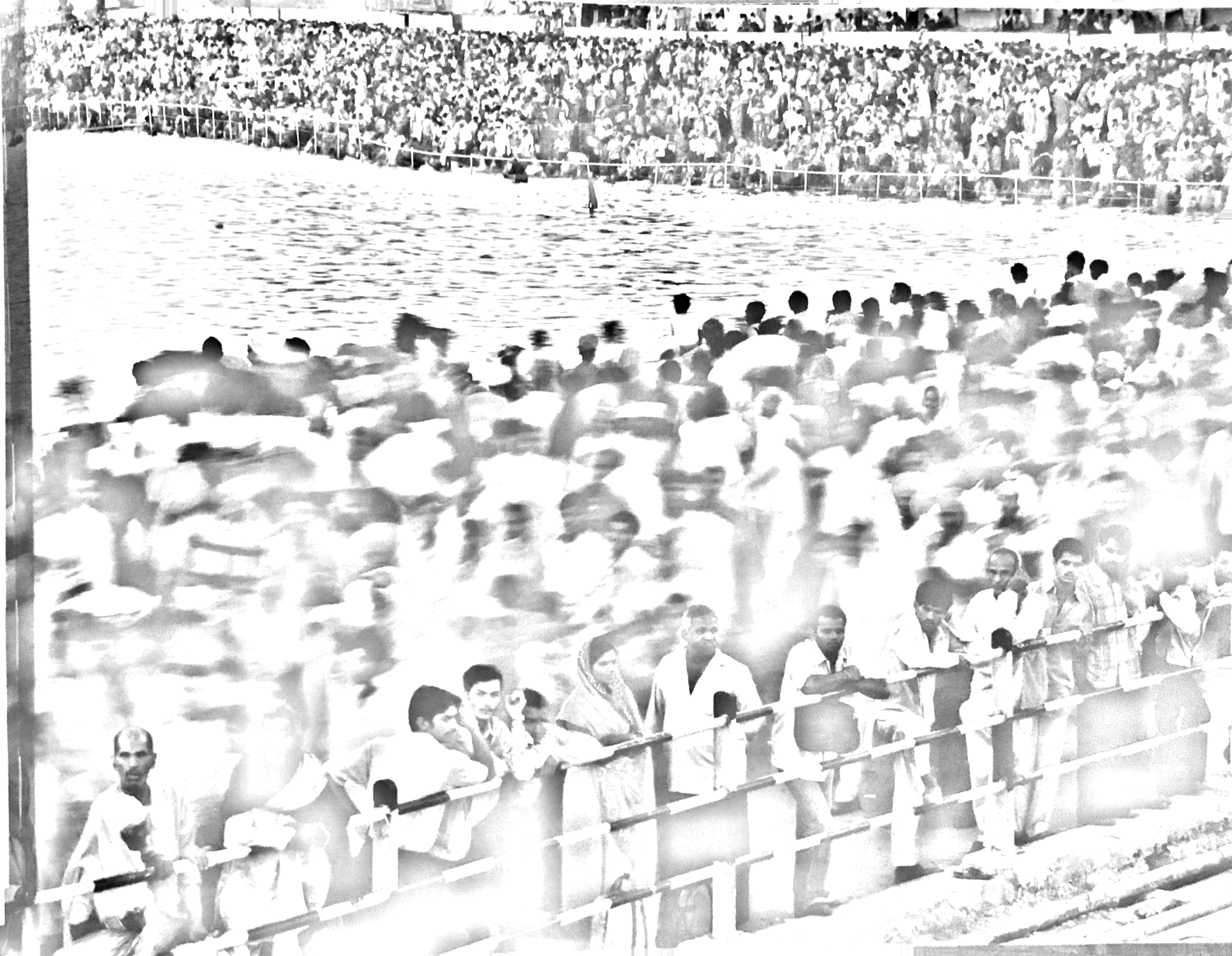
Ascetic holy men emerge from their solitude and meditation. Some—the sadhus—wear saffron-colored dhotis (long loin cloths). They have given up everything in the material world in the pursuit of enlightenment and are revered throughout the country. Other sadhus, called *nagas* (the naked), a more bellicose group, are virtually naked and cover themselves with a thin film of ash. The scent of hashish permeates the tented areas of the holy. A *naga* in a contorted pose loses his balance and rolls down a little hill. Nobody laughs. In fact, nobody seems to notice. Some of these holy men either claim, or are said by others to have, special qualities or capabilities, such as consuming no sustenance other than milk in the last 50 years.

Without the programs undertaken by local ashrams to feed the pilgrims, many would go hungry. Many of the city's ashrams may feed 3,000 people a day throughout the month. Well-to-do followers in audience with the guru of the ashram give donations that help pay for the meals. All manner of sadhus, gurus, and yogis ride in the royal parade on decorated pickups, tractors, and painted elephants, and smile at the throngs of people jamming the sides of the road to see them.

From above, the riversides look like slashes of color, slowly moving from the ghats, to the encampments, to the ashrams. The water too is a mass of color during the tightly scheduled bathing periods. On one of the main bathing days—*shahi snan* (royal dip)—we see a man being guided in purification by his own personal guru as another man nearby performs his own simple ministrations. The water is a great equalizer.

With the police in boats caterwauling commands over portable microphones to the bathers on the ghats, safety officials in towers blowing whistles and issuing commands, music blaring from loudspeakers, and ascetics parading, the effect is cacophonous, and incredible—like daily life in India, with the volume turned up a notch.

The Shipra River flows through the holy city of Ujjain, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Every 12 years, millions of devout Hindus celebrate the month-long festival of Kumbh Mela by bathing in the Shipra's holy waters. Hundreds of ashrams set up dusty, sprawling camps that stretch for miles. Under the watchful eye of police and lifeguards, the Patkars join the faithful throng in the cool of the evening and bathe in the river, too.



FIELD NOTE

All my senses are usually maxed out while I'm working in India—I love the country for its intensity. With a population of more than a billion, perhaps 40 percent of whom are terribly poor, India does have huge problems. Yet it also has a rapidly growing middle class, 300 million strong, among them Sangeeta and Jayant Patkar.

Sangeeta keeps their small cement house and tiny yard spotlessly clean, a difficult task in a climate that alternates between hot and dry (perfect for dust) and hot and humid (perfect for mold). Their maid—in India, most middle-class families have a servant—is constantly scrubbing pots and pans in the little cleaning area outside. And they have an indoor toilet, also kept clean.

This last point is more important and unusual than it may sound. When I first visited India 20 years ago, toilets were literally few and far between. Even today, nearly three-quarters of the populace have no access to one. Of India's towns and villages, maybe one in ten has a fully functioning sewage system. Most people have to relieve themselves in the open or use communal toilets, which are usually little more than cesspools.

The entirely predictable result is a raft of diseases. With all those people defecating in the open, the amount of fecal matter in the air and water is staggering. So are the bacterial and viral counts. (Whenever I go to India, I always catch something from breathing the air.) India and Indians are impatient to join the developed world. The proliferation of cell phones, color TVs, and personal computers there is amazing. But the country will only truly enter the ranks of the prosperous and healthy nations when it emulates the Patkars, and there are toilets in every home. —Peter

The Patkars shop for vegetables and fruit at Ujjain's sprawling main market (above right, buying okra and tomatoes). For treats, they frequent a downtown shop (bottom right) that makes *khova* (partially caramelized condensed milk), a key ingredient in Indian sweets.



INDIA

- Population: 1,065,070,607
- Population of Ujjain: 430,669
- Area in square miles: 1,269,010 (slightly more than one-third the size of the US)
- Population density per square mile: 839
- Urban population: 28%
- Life expectancy, male/female: 60/62 years
- Fertility rate (births per woman): 3
- Literacy rate, male/female, 15 years and older: 70/48%
- Caloric intake available daily per person: 2,459 calories
- Annual alcohol consumption per person (alcohol content only): 1 quart
- GDP per person in PPP \$ (Purchasing Power Parity: an adjustment for what equivalent local goods would cost in the U.S.): \$2,670
- Total annual health expenditure per person in \$ and as a percent of GDP: \$24/5.1
- Physicians per 100,000 population: 51
- Overweight population, male/female: 15/14
- Obese population, male/female: 0.9/1.1
- Meat consumption per person per year: 11 pounds
- McDonald's restaurants: 46
- Big Mac (Chicken Maharaja Mac) price: \$1.12
- Percent of beef in a Big Mac in India: 0
- Number of vegetarian Pizza Huts in the world and in India: 1/1
- Cigarette consumption per person per year: 129
- Population living on less than \$2 a day: 80%
- Undernourished population: 21%
- Population with access to safe sanitation: 28%
- Number of nuclear weapons tests India conducted in 1998: 5
- Number of people in India killed by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004: 11,000



Like most food markets in India, Ujjain's central market is a maelstrom of shoppers elbowing their way around hundreds of vendors sitting on tarpaulins with piles of produce. Cows, revered by Hindus, wander with them, though salespeople and shoppers alike push them out of the way if they get too inquisitive. The Patkars, habituated to the tumult, move with the crowd, calmly picking out what they need.



FAMILY RECIPE

Sangeeta Patkar's *Poha* (Rice Flakes)

1 lb *poha* (rice flakes—roasted and polished rice that has been beaten into thin flakes)

1 T vegetable oil

1 t mustard seed

2 large onions, sliced thin

1 large potato, sliced

3 large green chilies, chopped

1 t sugar

1 pinch turmeric powder

salt

5–6 stalks cilantro, chopped

1/2 lb *sev* (crispy chickpea-flour noodles)

2 oz coconut, grated

- Soak *poha* in a wide-mouthed container, then drain and let sit for 5 minutes.
- As *poha* rests, heat oil in large frying pan. When hot, add mustard seed. After it begins to sizzle, add onion, potato, and chilies to pan. Sauté this mixture, stirring occasionally, until it becomes golden yellow.
- Add soaked *poha*, sugar, turmeric powder, and salt to taste. Stir-fry for 2 minutes, then cover pan and remove from heat.
- To serve, boil water in a large open-mouthed container and put covered pan on top, like a double boiler, to keep it warm.
- Serve and garnish each plate with cilantro, *sev*, and coconut.

Sangeeta prepares a breakfast of *poha* (rice flakes, see recipe above) in her small, carefully organized kitchen (at right). An hour later, the family has consumed breakfast, and Sangeeta's kitchen helper (at left) is outside the kitchen door, sweeping and rinsing the alley beside the house after washing the breakfast dishes.

