



The Muslims and 'British Curry'

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ABSTRACT

The author looks at the development of Indian food within Britain using the interface of the British with the various Indian communities they met during the Raj. He describes the impact of Muslims from central Asia, India and Persia on the Indian curry that we enjoy in Britain today. There are, additionally, illustrations of how food moves between and through cultures to meet the different palates and needs of new communities.

Indian food has become quite popular in the United Kingdom. People fondly go to Indian restaurants in the evenings and order such dishes as biryani, naans and various curries. At home, more and more British households take the plunge and cook an Indian meal in their kitchens, especially now that supermarkets stock a variety of Indian spices and, for the less experienced, ready-made curry sauces. Indian food has so much become the staple food in the United Kingdom that the then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook was reported to say in 2001 that 'Chicken Tikka Masala' had become a true British national dish. He further argued that it was the perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.¹

The question arises as to how this is related to Muslim food. Unfortunately it is too often assumed that Indian food is a product of Hindu culture and has no relation to Muslim or Sikh culture. However, India is a vast country of many regions with a rich history, influenced by many religions and a large number of ethnic groups. What is today termed 'Indian cuisine' is a result of diverse culinary influences from across various regions of India such as Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sind etc. Many of these regions today are a part of modern Muslim states such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. Hence, the Muslims of pre-modern India have had an immense impact on the Indian culinary tradition throughout history, especially since the late 15th century.

The first Muslims to arrive in India settled on the coast of Malabar during the last part of the 7th century. They began trading with the local natives as far down as the Sind province (in present day Pakistan). By the 8th century many of these Muslim traders were being

¹ Robin Cook's 'Chicken Tikka Masala' speech, *The Guardian* (05/04/09), www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/apr/19/race.britishidentity,



beleaguered by Sindhi pirates and they requested help from the Caliphate in Damascus. General Muhammad Ibn Qasim was commissioned by the Caliphate to lead an army to conquer the instable area of Sind. Through conquest, Sind became the eastern most province of the Umayyad Empire based in Damascus. However, Sind was only destined to be a province of the Muslim Empire for a short period, and as early as late 9th century Sind was cut off from the new Muslim empire in Baghdad.² Most of the Muslim Arabs continued to stay in Sind and Malabar and slowly intermarried with the native people. Their descendants and the converts of that time are recognized as the earliest native Muslims of India and these merchants, traders, artisans and Sufis began to propagate Islam towards central India.³

The next wave of Muslims to arrive in India, did not come from the Arab world, but instead appeared from central Asia. During the 8th century, Turkish, Persian and Afghan dynasties in central Asia had accepted Islam en masse and were now trying to gain a foothold in the surrounding areas. This zeal for conquest of these dynasties in central Asia led various Turkish, Persian and Afghan troops to the Indian subcontinent. The first of these expeditions were led by Mahmud al-Ghaznavi (998-1030 CE) during the 10th century. It is interesting to note that Muslim traders, artisans, mystics and scholars followed these expeditions and are known to have settled down in the various sultanates that became established in India. However, it was from 1526 CE that Muslims would truly become a part of India and leave behind such memories as the Taj Mahal in Delhi, the 'Badshahi' Mosque in Lahore and the colorful Moghul cuisine that would reach all the corners of the world by the 21st century.

The first Emperor of Moghul India was Zahir ud-Din Muhammad Babur (1483-1530), a contemporary of King Henry VIII (1491-1547) and Caliph Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566) of the Ottoman Empire. He hailed from central Asia (today's Uzbekistan), unable to hold on to his empire there. After a number of years in the central Asian mountains he led his army to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. It was from here that he launched his decisive attack on India in 1526. Babur's descendants continued to follow in his footsteps with regards to the conquest of India, but they decided to establish themselves in India.⁴ One of the main complaints of Babur had always been the food of India: 'There is no good ...meat, grapes, melons and other fruit. There is no ice, cold water, good food or bread in the markets,' he wrote in his autobiography *Baburnama*.⁵ His complaint is understandable in the light that he and his fellow central Asians were used to a diet of meat skewered over the fire and eaten with pilau, a stew cooked with vegetables, meat and rice. At the time of Babur's conquest of India the local food had become influenced by strict vegetarianism, which had been promoted by Jainism, Buddhism and Hindu Brahmins over time.

However, not all Hindus were vegetarian: the Rajputs, the ruling warrior cast of Rajasthan, continued to be major hunters, famous for their 'shikar' (game) cuisines. Nevertheless, at that time for most newcomers to India the majority of Hindustanis seemed to be vegetarian; in the Hindu culture food was mostly a mediocre moral activity and one's social caste normally dictated who one could dine with. Many village Hindu households followed the tradition of serving food first to the male head of the household who would normally eat alone while others of the household followed later. This totally contrasted with the Muslim custom of eating rich food consisting of meat and fish and making the dining experience a relish and an enjoyment

² There was a revolution in 750 which replaced the Umayyad Empire in Damascus to Baghdad under the Abbasid Empire. See: K. Ali, (1980), *Indo-Pakistan up to 1526*, Lahore: Naeem Publishers, p30.

³ K. Ali, (1980), *Indo-Pakistan up to 1526*, Lahore: Naeem Publishers, p.1-50.

⁴ Babur in his autobiography (*Baburnama*) was not impressed with India and longed to return to central Asia with the wealth of India. However, he died in India and his descendants established their empire in India. See: K. Ali, (1980), *Indo-Pakistan from 1526*, Lahore: Naeem Publishers.

⁵ Lizzie Collingham, (2005), *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.18.



with hospitality. Nevertheless, the Muglai cuisine still followed the dietary laws of Islam, thus no alcohol or meat of the pig could be found in their dishes.⁶

By Akbar's time (1542-1605), the grandson of Babur, the Moghuls had made their home in India. The Muslims had by then introduced the concept of community dining to India and the Moghul court had become famous for its lavish and extravagant banquets.⁷ The Moghuls did employ 'Hindustani' cooks in their Palace kitchens and Akbar's father Humuyan (1508-1556) was very pleased with vegetarian dishes like 'Khichari' (a dish made up of rice and peas) which, during his exile in Persia, he presented to the Shah. After 15 years in Persia, when Humuyan regained his empire in India, he brought a number of cooks with him from Persia. The Persians brought with them a refined pilau that had been 'transformed into an exquisite and delicate dish, which had numerous variations such as fruit pilau, turmeric and saffron pilau, chicken pilau and pilau with rice that had variation of colors.'⁸ It was this pilau that was destined to be transformed one more time in India: the spicy rice dishes of Hindustan mixed with the Persian pilau created the classic Muglai dish, biryani. Meat was marinated in yoghurt, which included onions, garlic, almonds and Indian spice. This coated meat was fried before being transferred to a pot to follow similar cooking techniques as the Persian pilau.⁹

Many Indian dishes of today are products of the court chefs of Akbar and the later Emperors. Most of their chefs had experience in central Asian, Persian, Afghani and Indian culinary styles. By meeting each other in the Moghul kitchens, they incorporated some of their favourite foods such as almonds, cream, and dried fruit into Indian cuisine. 'They used saffron, gold and silver leaf reflecting the opulence of Moghul cuisine, especially in sweets.'¹⁰ Under Akbar's son Jahangir (r.1605-1627) and grandson Shahjahan (r.1627-1658) the Mughal Empire reached its zenith in wealth and power. It was Emperor Shahjahan that commissioned most of the architecture of the old city of New Delhi as well as the Taj Mahal for his beloved wife. The Moghul emperors brought a great number of dishes from various corners of the Empire to Delhi, such as, 'Rogan Josh' which originated in Persia and was perfected in Kashmir, the 'Dhansak' which has its origins in Persia and the 'Dopiaza' from Bengal to which the Moghuls added extra amounts of spices. Other famous foods finding their way to the Moghul capital Delhi included the thin chapattis of Hindu provenance, Indian pickles and chutneys from across the country, leavened bread (naans) introduced by the Muslims of Persia and Afghanistan, Persian nans stuffed with honey, sugar and almonds and the famous 'tandoor' (clay oven) which was created by the chefs in the Royal kitchen so that the Indian chapattis and naans could be transformed into tandoori rotis and tandori nans.¹¹

Although the first curry house in Britain opened in London in 1808, it was during the late 1950s that the Muglai cuisine reached the British shores with the major Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigration to Britain.¹² By 1959 Indian restaurants had become well established and during the next 50 years the rise of Indian food, especially Muglai dishes, was dramatic, despite a number of dishes being adapted to suit British palates.¹³ By the early 21st century the

⁶ Ibid, pp21-24

⁷ *The Muslim Culinary Influence on India*, <http://indianfoodsco.com/Classes/MuslimInfluence.htm>, (26/04/09)

⁸ Lizzie Collingham, (2005), *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.27

⁹ Ibid, p25

¹⁰ Priya Wickramasinghe, Carol Selva Rajah, Jason Lowe & Alan Benson, (2005), *The Food of India: A Journey for Food Lovers*, London: Murdock Books, p9

¹¹ Lizzie Collingham, (2005), *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p33

¹² Derek J. Oddy, (2003), *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s*, Uitgawe: Boydell Press, p197



number of Indian restaurants in the UK rose to an astounding 8,000.¹⁴ Although the majority of Britons are familiar with Islam and Muslims, it is safe to argue that the majority of the British population who enjoy the Muglai cuisine, whether at home or in a restaurant, know very little or nothing of the connection between their delicious food and the world of Islam.

¹³ Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones & Ben Taylor, (2004), *Food and Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, p.78-79.

¹⁴ Ian Anderson, *Indian Food Guide*, <http://www.j-tull.com/musicians/iananderson/indian.html>, (28/04/09)