

The Immigration of Indian Food

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In today's world, the international food scene is vast. The globalization of society has brought foods together from many different lands. Through such factors as trade and immigration, countries' cuisine cultures have become altered by the new flavors brought to them via these means. This phenomenon has introduced cultures in one continent to the diets and dishes of those in another. Indian cuisine is one such example of a food culture that has travelled the globe. From the Punjab region alone, innumerable dishes such as Saag Paneer, Lassi, Tandoori Chicken, Curry, and Naan have migrated, joining the cuisine of cultures in such countries as Great Britain, Singapore, Malaysia, and America. Under the influence of new host cultures, Indian cuisine has undergone notable changes. Over time and through travel, Indian foods have adapted to the societies they encounter, often experiencing changes in flavor to suit a new society.

Before a proper understanding of Indian food migration can be gleaned, it is first necessary to understand what defines Indian food. According to Lizzie Collingham, author of *Curry: A Biography*, Indian food is governed by certain principles which are based on what is known as Ayurvedic, or "science of life," medicine. Historically, the ancient physician, Ayurveda, wrote two medical treatises around the first century B.C. which outlined principles necessary for maintaining a good diet. A good diet, in traditional Indian cooking, called for healthy food that was good for the body and was, at the same time, delicious. It called for a balancing of flavors and temperatures. Collingham states that "the idea of mixing hot and cold foods to achieve a sublime blend of the six essential tastes (pungent, acidic, salty, salty, sweet, astringent and bitter) still lies at the heart of Indian cookery today".¹ Examples of such balance includes the "imaginative use of spices,...the judicious balancing of salt with a little sugar,...the combination of black pepper with cooling yogurt, [and] the addition of a little tamarind to cut a cloying sauce".² Clearly, the principles of Ayurvedic medicine in that all their intricacies provide "a culinary foundation for Indian food".³ It is these inherent characteristics that define Indian food and allow it to preserve its foundation, even amidst migration.

The immigration of food cannot exist apart from the movement of people. People are responsible for the spread of culture and, with it, cuisine. Therefore, before one can consider the movement of an inhuman thing such as

¹ Lizzie Collingham. *Curry: A Biography*. (London:Chatto and Windus, 2005), 8-9.

²Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 9.

a food, one must consider the patterns of the people responsible for a food's movement. For instance, over the last decade, there has been a notable influx of Punjabis to other parts of the world. Millions of these people – mainly men – leave Punjab, specifically the districts of Phagwara, Jalandhar and Kapurthala, to become migrant workers in other countries. The migrants are drawn to plantation work in Southeast Asia, industrial work in England and Canada, and farm work in countries such as New Zealand, California, Germany, and Italy.⁴ This migration is deemed necessary for reasons of economic growth and because farm work, formally relied upon in India as an occupation and means of sustaining a culture and way of life, is suffering. These conditions have driven Punjabis to make new homes and to bring their culture to new locations around the globe.

Between the years of 1900 and 1917, there was a mass of Punjabi migrants that came into southern California. These people came to America for labor opportunity and as a result of British rule. Many of the migrants that came were former members of the British army and they had since saved enough money through their medial salaries to afford to leave their country and settle in a new one. In larger cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, the Indian populations were denser than in other places. As a result, Indian food became more prominent in these regions and attracted even more people from India looking for better economic possibilities. The majority of people coming out of India were looking for jobs that they could do and make enough to send remittances to their families still in India. Restaurant owners from India came for the same reason, but found a more open avenue to explore and found more potential for making larger amounts of money with their chosen professions.⁵ Nearly eighty-five percent of the Punjabis who migrated were Sikhs and, because of this, many of the dishes brought over did not often contain meat.⁶ In addition, being from the Punjab region, much of the migrants' cooking was

⁴ Devinder Sharma, "Escape from Punjab - Hidden Numbers," *Mera Bharat Mahan* (blog), May 8, 2007 (2:47 P.M.), <http://kisanbharat.blogspot.com/2007/05/escape-from-punjab-hidden-numbers.html>.

⁵ Monte Williams. "Neighborhood Report: Madison Square The More Cab Drivers Change..." *New York Times* (Jan 22, 1995): 1. Accessed July 25, 2011. http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggdocs/AWNB/1144587E510DF0D9/998219EB600644C1909231D20ABC E407?p_multi=NYT3&s_lang=en-US.

⁶ Leonard, Karen. "California's Punjabi Mexican Americans: Ethnic choices made by the descendants of Punjabi pioneers and their Mexican wives." *The World & I*, May 1989, 612-623.

calorically dense as a means of sustaining their labor-intensive lifestyle. Many of the jobs in Punjab were in the agriculture industry because the land in Punjab is extremely fertile.⁷ While in California, many of the Punjabi immigrants worked agricultural jobs, such as cotton picking. At the same time, there were many Mexican immigrants who were working the same sort of jobs.

There were very few, if any, Punjabi women who came in the early 1900's and because of this, many of the men who migrated from Punjab had to find wives of different ethnicity, and the most readily available source of women was from the Mexican migrant population. Punjabi men and Mexican women started families whose children carried little of the original Punjabi tradition. It was easy, however, for these two cultures to meld. The Punjabi men saw many similarities between the two cultures. Moola Singh, a Punjabi man living in California was interviewed and stated that:

I never have to explain anything India to my Mexican family. Cooking the same, only talk us different. I explain them, customs in India same as in Mexico. Everything same, only language different. They make roti over there, sit on the floor—all customs India the same Mexico, the way of living. I went to Mexico two, three times, you know, not too far; just like India, just like it. Adobe houses in Mexico, they sit on floor there, make tortillas (roti you know). All kinds of food the same, eat from plates sometimes, some places tables and benches. India the same, used to eat on the floor, or cutting two boards, made benches.⁸

Men worked very hard and did not have the time or knowledge to teach their children about Sikhism or specific Punjabi culture. Because of this, many of the children were raised Catholic and spoke either Spanish or English. Two of the Punjabi traditions that were considered to be extremely important and kept alive in the family were that of funeral practice and of eating. Punjabi men taught their wives how to cook many Punjabi foods, such as Chicken Curry, Lassi, and Saag Paneer. Being of a different race and having a different palate, the Mexican women were quite likely to have put their own touches on the traditional Punjabi dishes. Families such as the Rasul family

⁷ “Government of Punjab India.” *Punjab Government*. 2010. Accessed July 18, 2011.

<http://punjabgovt.nic.in/stateprofile1.html> .

⁸ California's Punjabi Mexican Americans: Ethnic choices made by the descendants of Punjabi pioneers and their Mexican wives, 612-23.

even started restaurants that blended foods from the two cultures. Today the Rasuls own a traditional Mexican restaurant in California that, while serving a full Mexican menu, also serves Chicken Curry and Indian Roti.⁹

In addition to far-off destinations such as the United States, Punjabi foods have also migrated to nearer locations such as Malaysia. This migration began as early as the 10th century when Tamil Muslims brought traditional Indian recipes and cuisine to India. It wasn't long before the food was adapted to the supply of local spices in Malaysia.¹⁰ Another large influx of Indians into Malaysia occurred in the 19th century when thousands of Punjabis came for labor opportunities. This large recurrence of Indian people in Malaysia solidified the place that Indian food had in Malaysian culture. There are now, in fact, certain Indian dishes that are specific to Malaysia, such as Nasi Kandar, which is steamed rice that is served with a variety of curries that have formed from both the Indian and Malaysian palate. Both North and South Indians made the move to Malaysia to work on the railways and on the rubber plantations. Because populations from both of these locations came to Malaysia, the full Indian food spectrum was covered. Indian food has had heavy influence on Malaysian food, but is also seen in its original form throughout Malaysia. There are many similarities in Indian and Malaysian food such as the heavy use of spice – namely chilies – for heat, and onions for flavor. There are also similarities in the styles in which food is consumed; traditionally, food is eaten with the hands both in Malaysian and Indian culture.¹¹

Indian foods have also migrated to Singapore with the immigration of Indians to this country. As can be expected, Indian cuisine has undergone a significant amount of adaptation to accommodate the available ingredients and the personal tastes of the people to whom it is served. As in the case of Indian dishes affected by British cuisine – resulting in Anglo-Indian food – the food that has found its way to Singapore has tended to take on an Indian-

⁹ Karen Leonard. "California's Punjabi Mexican Americans: Ethnic choices made by the descendants of Punjabi pioneers and their Mexican wives." *The World & I*, May 1989, 612-623.

¹⁰ "About Malaysian Food - Delicious Diversity." malaysian-food-and-cooking.com., Last modified 2011. <http://www.malaysian-food-and-cooking.com/>.

¹¹ "Indian Food in Malaysia: Roti Canai, Tandoori Chicken, Mutton Kurma." Asiawebdirect.com., Last modified 2011. http://www.malaysia-hotels.net/food_dining/india-food.htm .

Singaporean taste: that is, a combining of cultural flavors.¹² Tandoori food, including Tandoori Chicken and Naan, is one noteworthy type of Punjabi food that has made its way to Singapore. In Little India, Singapore, Tandoori food flourishes and is recreated by migrant Indians in as authentic a manner as is possible given the available ingredients. Tandoori food's domain of influence is smaller than Curry, however, which is one such food that has made Singapore its home and has adapted to fit the Singaporean culture.

Tandoori food itself, though limited in number of dishes, has experienced its own journey. The history of the Tandoor dates back to 2600 B.C. in the Punjab region where archeologists have uncovered Tandoori remains. Since that time, its uses have evolved with the rest of Indian cooking. For centuries, Tandoors were used only for the purposes of cooking bread. It wasn't until the 1920s that the function of the Tandoor was revolutionized by the introduction of meats. Tandoori Chicken was invented by Kundan Lal Gujral, a Hindu chef, in the then-undivided Punjab region of India in 1920. The chicken was a huge success, but it was not until the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947, that the recipe officially migrated. It was at this time that Gujral left Punjab, taking his newly-popular dish to Delhi, India, where he started his now-legendary restaurant, Moti Mahal. Here his recipe garnered much attention, and Tandoori Chicken was soon spreading to other parts of the world. Gujral was given credit for this gustatory migration in the form of numerous awards including the Indian Association of Tour Operators Lifetime Achievement Award as well as a Gold Medal in the Trans Himalayan Selection Award – both for introducing the world to Tandoori cuisine.¹³ Uma Vasudeva writes in the foreword to the book, Moti Mahal Tandoori Trail that “Kundan Lal not only made Tandoori cuisine popular throughout India, but also strengthened the appeal of Indian food in many parts of the world”.¹⁴ Through the innovation of one Indian chef, Indian food began its meaningful migration around the world. Today Tandoori Chicken is a popular dish in many regions varying from the Middle East to North America to Europe.

¹² Sylvia Tan. *Singapore heritage food: yesterday's recipes for today's cook*. (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2004).

¹³ “Our Story.” *MotiMahal*, 2010, <http://motimahall.in/about/our-story/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Tandoori Chicken is not the only well-received and well-traveled Punjabi specialty in Europe. Since the colonization of India by Great Britain, Europe has become inundated with Indian cuisine, most predominantly Curry. Europeans – specifically the British – came up with the word ‘Curry’ as a general classification for Indian dishes with similar spices or as a “generic term for any spicy dish with a thick sauce or gravy”.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Indians never referred to their own food as ‘Curry’; rather, they had specific names for the dishes which the British collectively summarized as ‘Curries.’ Certain Masala dishes, such as Chana Masala, fit into the category of curry for their possession of spices and stew-like consistency. The actual etymological root of the word ‘Curry’ is based in the words ‘caril’ or ‘caree’ which the British took from the Portuguese descriptions of the “broths” made with butter, the pulp of Indian nuts...and all sorts of spices particularly Cardamoms and Ginger...besides herbs, fruits and a thousand other condiments”.¹⁶ The Portuguese seem to have adopted this word from the Indian words ‘karil’ and ‘kari’ which refers to a description of seasoning spices. Over time, the word has morphed into ‘Curry’ as it is known today.

Though known throughout the world as an Indian specialty, Curry is claimed by more than one nation as a native dish. By 1784, Curry had begun to appear on the tables of travelers returned to Great Britain from extended stays in what was, at the time, the British Colony, India.¹⁷ Having first returned via seamen that had sailed goods to and from India, Curry soon expanded to the middle class’ tables as a symbol of the household’s social status. If a household served curry, it was noted that the house either had ties with a merchant or soldier that had been in India, or one member of the household themselves had been to India. When it was first served in Great Britain, Curry was simply a social sign indicating that the family serving it was rich and accomplished enough to know how to make such a dish. By 1850, Curry had become a must-have dish for the middle classes.¹⁸ Aside from having the means to acquire all the necessary ingredients to make it serve as a social symbol, Curry was also brought back to Great Britain due to the taste the British soldiers and merchants had acquired for Indian foods. In India, Curry was highly

¹⁵ Curry: A Novel, 115.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷Susan Zlotnick, “Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 16. No. 2/3 (1996), 59. [http:// www.jstor.org/stable/3346803](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3346803).

¹⁸ Domesticating Imperialism, 60.

spiced and had a stew-like composition. Composed of vegetables and sometimes meat, it was easily made by all the people in India, regardless of social class. When Curry was moved to Great Britain, it was made with fewer spices than it was commonly made with in India, though this was still more spice than the British were accustomed to.¹⁹

Great Britain had, as a general rule, very bland foods and Curry was a new, stimulating food for British digestive systems.²⁰ After the initial migration of curry to Great Britain, Curry spread, not only among the people with ties to those who travelled to and from India, but across all classes of people. By the mid-eighteen hundreds, Curry was a common household dish, and had begun to be perceived as a very “British” dish. The women of Great Britain first made their curry a heavily-spiced dish, to suit the tastes of their men who had returned from India. The terms ‘heavily spiced’ in Great Britain and ‘heavily spiced’ in India meant two entirely different things; even the most immensely-spiced dishes that the British made were milder than everyday dishes in India. This trend of taming-the-spice continued and, in time, the women of Great Britain had altered curry to make it a fairly mild dish, much less spicy, and fit for the mouths of royalty.²¹ Curry was adapted to make the dish suitable for the European palate, the effect of which was a ‘British’ version of Curry: dishes with less yogurt, ghee, and spices than the originals and containing no cream whatsoever, unlike their native Indian counterparts. Instead, Curry dishes became generic through the addition of more ‘common,’ less exotic spices such as coriander, ginger, and peppercorns.²² Thus came about Anglo-Indian food – Indian food tempered with a British flare: garnishes and taste alterations such as fish, coconut, and mangoes.²³

As people migrated from India to Great Britain, a section of London developed that primarily hosted immigrants from India.²⁴ This section was based around Brick Lane, a lane that was commonly known as the Indian section of London. The people on Brick Lane were a community, displaced from their own land as a result of

¹⁹ Domesticating Imperialism, 61.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Domesticating Imperialism, 59.

²² Curry: A Novel, 116-7.

²³ Ibid., 116.

²⁴ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 97.

economic downturn; those with an education came to Great Britain seeking jobs.²⁵ While the Indians brought little with them in terms of tangible belongings, what they did bring with them was their culture – a large part of that culture being their food. The rich, spicy smells of the food that the Indians made could be easily detected by even the daftest snout passing down Brick Lane. Even to this day, Brick Lane is known for its Indian residents and the rich nest of Indian culture amid the bustling city of London. Here traditional Punjabi dishes such as Naan flourish in the Indian subculture of Great Britain.

Naan, a traditional Punjabi bread, arrived in Great Britain both with the colonization of India and with the economic migration of Punjabis in the late 18th century. Since its arrival, Naan has continued to grow in popularity. Its prevalence, in fact, is such that its demand has risen over the entirety of the country like yeast rising in a bowl. Its appeal has grown to the extent that, in 1948, Honey Top Foods opened in Dunstable and became the “most advanced Naan bread production facility in Europe”.²⁶ With the popularity of Naan rising among the British, in 2000 even more Naan production facilities were opening and Indian people were prospering as their cultural contributions to the societies around them grew more popular. In India, Naan was commonly sold from the street vendors, accessible for those on their way home from work.²⁷ Making the Naan and selling it straight out of their hot Tandoors, vendors made a living from Naan and, oftentimes, Tandoori chicken as well. However, in Europe as well as in the United States, Naan is today more commonly sold in restaurants and in stores. Among those of Indian descent living in an Indian community in Europe, though, one might occasionally find a street vendor selling the Indian bread. The street vendors in the United States and Europe are not as authentic in their making of their Naan, and it is more often made using a modern oven – either gas or electric – as opposed to the traditional, charcoal-fueled Tandoori methods inherent to India.

Though it has traveled to the United States, Great Britain, and all over southern Asia, to mention a few only a few locations, Naan is an original Indian staple and was, until Gujral’s invention of Tandoori Chicken, the sole

²⁵ Brick Lane, 56.

²⁶“Naan Bread Revolution.” *Food Manufacture* (2000): 38. Accessed July 26, 2011.

<http://www.lexisnexis.com.www.berea.edu:9005/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

²⁷ G. C. Narang. “Some Social And Cultural Aspects Of Urdu MasNawiiis.” *Mahfil* 3, no. 2/3 (1966): 64. Accessed July 19, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40874137>.

food cooked in the Tandoor. Bread, in general was and is considered a simple staple in India. Author Linda Pastan conveys the sentimentality and close connection cultures like India share with bread in her appropriately-named poem, "Bread." Pastan likens "bread rising in the bowl" to "breath rising in the body," saying "if you knead the dough with perfect tenderness, it is like gently kneading flesh when you make love".²⁸ The poet continues her metaphorical message: "Baguette... pita... pane... challah... naan: bread is the universal language, translatable on the famished tongue".²⁹ Bread is, in fact, universal, and Naan's international voyage has made it even more so.

Through the globalization of today's world, international cuisines have become a universality in and of themselves. Punjabi dishes are no exception. Indian foods such as Curry, Naan, Tandoori Chicken, Saag Paneer, and Lassi have spanned the globe, migrating to countries like Great Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, and the U.S. where they are readily received and adapted to suit the new cultures. The immigration of food is indicative of the immigration of people and the spread of dishes to other regions is testament to the ever-involving global culture. The fact that a food culture such as India's which contains such a plethora of spices and flavors, is so easily and willingly accepted in nearly all parts of the globe is a tribute to the curiosity and adaptive nature of the human palate. Over time, Indian food has joined the many other diverse dishes around the globe to comprise and complete an ever-evolving world cuisine.

²⁸ Linda Pastan. "Bread." *Ploughshare* 33. no. 4 (2007/2008): 158. Accessed July 21, 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40354210>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

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