

## Curries, Chutneys and Imperial Britain

Terri Rolfson

This paper examines the dynamic assimilation of Indian food into British culture, during the expansion, height and decolonization period of the British Empire. Cultural perceptions of The British Raj contributed to both the popularity and prevalence of Anglicized curries and chutneys in British cookery books and on British tables into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interest in Anglo-Indian food waned in popularity, coinciding with Indian independence and the transition from empire to commonwealth. The period of post-colonial immigration to Britain in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an embrace of new iterations of Anglo-Indian food, with more interest in authentic, regional Indian cuisines. This dynamic assimilation of Anglo-Indian cuisine into British culture mirrors Imperial Britain's complicated and enduring four hundred year relationship with India.

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“Oh, I must try some, if it is an Indian dish,” said Miss Rebecca. “I am sure everything must be good that comes from there.”  
“Give Miss Sharp some curry, my dear,” said Mr. Sedley, laughing.  
Rebecca had never tasted the dish before.  
“Do you find it as good as everything else from India?” said Mr. Sedley.  
“Oh, excellent!” said Rebecca, who was suffering tortures with the cayenne pepper. (W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Vol 1, p 31)

From Miss Becky Sharp's surprising introduction to curry set in the early nineteenth century, to British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's proclamation in 2001 that Chicken Tikka Masala was Britain's true national dish<sup>1</sup>, Indian cuisine has had an intimate, evolving and complicated expression in British culture and culinary experience, and has mirrored Britain's imperial relationship with the Indian sub-continent. Many essential ingredients contributed to this dynamic assimilation of Indian food in British culture throughout their shared history, including cultural perceptions arising from the Great Exhibition, the nostalgia of returning imperial officials and nabobs, political events and even Queen Victoria's personal interest. Add a dash of female Victorian domesticity

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<sup>1</sup> Rohit Varman, “Curry,” *Consumption Markets and Culture* (May 24, 2016), 5.

with a sizable helping of popular cookery books in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the Anglo-Indian table was perfectly set: curries and chutneys served on Wedgwood china in dining rooms throughout Britain. The British didn't just adopt new types of Indian cuisine; they did what any self-respecting British imperialists would do. They radically altered recipes and methods to suit their own English tastes, which became unrecognizable and unpalatable to Indians, and claimed them as their own.<sup>2</sup> When Anglo-Indian food waned in popularity in the twentieth century, coinciding with Indian independence and a transitioning from empire to the Commonwealth, a different trajectory evolved. The British embraced new iterations of Anglo-Indian food from post-colonial immigration, and renewed their romanticized notions of empire, with increasing interest in authentic, regional Indian cuisines. Anglo-Indian cuisine has become a visceral and lasting cultural symbol of imperial Britain's conflicting, complicated and enduring four hundred year relationship with India.

The earliest reference to Indian curry in Britain was in Hannah Glasse's cookbook, "The Art of Cookery", published in 1747, almost 150 years after Queen Elizabeth I signed the East India Company's inaugural charter.<sup>3</sup> As officials of the EIC completed their service in India and returned to Britain, they did so with newly acquired tastes.<sup>4</sup> Curries started appearing on menus of restaurants, and curry houses opened in London, including the Oriental Gentlemen's Club, established in 1824 (and still operating today), which all catered to these officers.<sup>5</sup> Upon returning to their homes, they often taught their own British cooks "the art of preparing a good curry."<sup>6</sup> The interest in foods and the exoticism of India slowly spread amongst the British, from those who had lived and worked in the sub-continent to their families and associates who had never set foot in a foreign country.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until the middle classes became a powerful social and economic force in the mid nineteenth century, that Anglo-Indian food rapidly increased in popularity.<sup>8</sup> It was not just cuisine of the sub-continent that grabbed the attention of the rising middle classes, but a wholesale fascination with India itself, the "brightest jewel in Britain's crown."<sup>9</sup> One of the most significant influences was the Great Exhibition held in

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<sup>2</sup> Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 115-116.

<sup>3</sup> William Sitwell, *A History of Food in 100 Recipes* (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 171.

<sup>4</sup> Collingham, 133.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Howells, "The British Curry: a Victorian Invention", <http://lovelyoldtree.com/the-british-curry/>, accessed October 24, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Collingham, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Troy Bickham, "Eating the Empire: Intersections of Food, Cookery and Imperialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain." *Past & Present* 198, no. 1 (February 2008), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Collingham, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Lara Kriegel, "Narrating the Subcontinent in 1851: India at the Crystal Palace", *The Great*

London in 1851, showcasing the cultural conquests, colonial spoils and industrial exploits of imperial Britain.<sup>10</sup> The Great Exhibition's "enormous and largely unexpected success influenced the life of a nation and the image it had of itself for decades, and into the present times."<sup>11</sup> Notions of imperial power, supremacy, benevolence and grandeur were embedded in the hearts and minds of British visitors who came by the millions to experience over 7,500 exhibits about Great Britain and the empire,<sup>12</sup> making the empire "personal and accessible."<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, commissioners for the Exhibition gave the Indian sub-continent a place of honour in the Crystal Palace. The India exhibit was located near the main entrance and the Queen's retiring room, with over 30,000 square feet of exhibition space, more than any other colony or imperial territory.<sup>14</sup> The Great Exhibition was an opportunity to "dazzle and astound"<sup>15</sup> visitors with romantic ideas about India to "simultaneously glorify and domesticate the subcontinent."<sup>16</sup> Exhibitor guide books punctuated the message, "India ... the glorious glowing land ... the golden prize ... the far-off ... the conquered ..."<sup>17</sup> This brightest jewel sparkled, and its collections stood out among the "most complete, splendid and interesting, enticing the British and cosmopolitan public alike."<sup>18</sup> It did not matter that there was not one speck of curry to eat at the Refreshment Court in the Crystal Palace.<sup>19</sup> The Great Exhibition influenced the British middle class, which "resulted in changed patterns of consumption and more openness to foreign foods."<sup>20</sup>

Queen Victoria's personal fascination in India influenced her subjects. She is known to have loved the sub-continent, even though she never set foot there.<sup>21</sup> She had a state room at Osborne House decorated by an eminent architect of the Punjab, ensured there was an Indian advisor on staff, and insisted that "the royal kitchen prepare a curry every

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*Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Louise Purbrick (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), 149.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Leapman, *The World For a Shilling: How the Great Exhibition of 1851 Shaped a Nation*. (London, UK: Headline Book Publishing, 2001), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Prasch, "Eating the World: London in 1851." *Victorian Literature & Culture* 36, no. 2 (September 2008), 588.

<sup>14</sup> Lara Kriegel, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Kriegel, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>19</sup> Leapman, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Prasch, 589.

<sup>21</sup> Janangir, Rumeana. *How Britain got the Hots for Curry* 2009. (Accessed October 24, 2016), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8370054.stm>, np.

day of the year, in case visiting Orientals should drop by.”<sup>22</sup>

When the Indian Mutiny took place in 1857-58 during Queen Victoria’s reign, the British public was horrified to learn of the reported atrocities committed against British women, children and officials.<sup>23</sup> In response to this initial negative reaction, there is some evidence to suggest that interest in curry cooled amongst the British people,<sup>24</sup> while British officials in India rejected Indian food.<sup>25</sup> However the political determination of Britain to hold on to India was only strengthened by the outcome of the Indian Mutiny: “injured national pride demanded it.”<sup>26</sup> In 1858 the job to govern India was put directly under the control of the British crown and parliament, referred to as the British Raj.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, food historian William Sitwell reports that when this occurred, “so the appetites for Indian food increased back in Britain.”<sup>28</sup> Historian Uma Narayan explains, “eating curry was in a sense eating India ... the imaginary India, whose allure was necessary to provoke an imperial interest in incorporating this jewel into the British crown.”<sup>29</sup> Or, as Thomas Prasch states more bluntly, “What Britain conquers, it also eats.”<sup>30</sup> During the 1870s, when Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli championed the empire, and when Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1877, curry’s popularity even increased.<sup>31</sup>

By 1900, there were as many as 30,000 British officials in India, many accompanied by families and staff, almost all of whom returned home after service.<sup>32</sup> While in India, these Anglo-Indians ate Indian food but only after altering and simplifying recipes to suit their own tastes.<sup>33</sup> They generally ignored regional differences and often “lumped a wide variety of dishes into such vague categories as curries and pillaus.”<sup>34</sup> Curry became “a dish in its own right created for the British in India,”<sup>35</sup> just as curry powder was a strictly British invention.<sup>36</sup> Classic dishes, like Mulligatawny soup, chutneys, Kedgeree and relishes – all with Indian origins – “became an established part of the British

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<sup>22</sup> Howells, np.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Lion’s Share: A History of British Imperialism 1850 to the Present*. (London & New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Janangir, np.

<sup>25</sup> Varman, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Porter, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Sitwell, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Uma Narayan, “Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity and Indian Food.” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 1 (1), 66.

<sup>30</sup> Prasch, 589.

<sup>31</sup> Janangir, np.

<sup>32</sup> Collingham, 107-8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Procida, “Feeding the Imperial Appetite.” *Journal of Women’s History*, Summer 2003), 123, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 3, 2016), 140.

<sup>35</sup> Collingham, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 115.

culinary repertoire, [and] represent in physical form the process of exchange, distortion and nostalgia that go to create an imperial cuisine.”<sup>37</sup> Family members back in Britain, eager to learn about the exotic lives of their sons and brothers would relish letters containing recipes for Anglo-Indian curries and chutneys.<sup>38</sup> When returning home, Anglo-Indians became “powerfully nostalgic for the foods of their imperial sojourn”<sup>39</sup> and often brought their Indian servants, cooks, and ayahs (nannies) back to Britain with them.<sup>40</sup> These Anglo-Indian dishes were disseminated quickly through a remarkable number of cookery books written by memsahibs (upper-class, white women living in India) and retired government officials. These Victorian memsahibs, who assisted in the diffusion of curry and rice into the British diet functioned as “agents of cultural exchange between colonizers and colonized.”<sup>41</sup>

And while these memsahibs were integrating Anglo-Indian food in British diets, middle class women like Eliza Acton and Isabella Beaton “introduced curry to an even wider audience through the medium of their bestselling domestic cookery books.”<sup>42</sup> The three most influential books written by and for middle-class women (Maria Rundell’s 1807 *Domestic Cookery*, Eliza Acton’s 1845 *Modern Cookery in all its Branches*, and Isabella Beaton’s 1859 *Book of Household Management*) all contain chapters dedicated to curries and other Anglo-Indian dishes.<sup>43</sup> *Modern Domestic Cookery* (an 1851 revision of Rundell’s book) claims, “Curry, which was formerly a dish almost exclusively for the table of those who had made a long residence in India, is now so completely naturalized, that few dinners are thought complete unless one is on the table.”<sup>44</sup> In Mrs. Beaton’s book, there are roughly as many recipes from India as there are from Scotland, Ireland and Wales put together; a telling commentary of British imperial identity.<sup>45</sup> Historian Susan Zlotnick postulates, “as figures of domesticity, British women helped incorporate Indian food into the national diet and India into the British empire. This process of incorporation remains etched on the pages of [these] domestic cookery books.”<sup>46</sup> Both practically and symbolically, Victorian women domesticated India and imperialism.<sup>47</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, the popularity of Indian cuisine had waned, in

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<sup>37</sup> Nicola Humble, *Culinary Pleasures: Cook Books and the Transformation of British Food*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 24.

<sup>38</sup> Collingham, 132.

<sup>39</sup> Humble, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Collingham, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Zlotnick, “Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol.16, No. 2/3 Gender, Nations, and Nationalism (1996), 52.

<sup>42</sup> Zlotnick, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Zlotnick, 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Collingham, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Humble, 19, Prasch, 597.

<sup>46</sup> Zlotnick, 65.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

parallel with the public's conflicted interest in their role as guardian of the Empire.<sup>48</sup> Curries were taken for granted and considered blasé, "no longer containing even a whiff of exoticism."<sup>49</sup> In fact, it was not considered well to do to have a lingering smell of curry in one's house, as French cuisine had superseded British's interest in foreign foods.<sup>50</sup> Prejudice had developed against curry as "spicy and disagreeable to respectable middle-class English stomachs."<sup>51</sup> In 1953, less than six years after the independence and partitioning of India, Coronation Chicken was served at Queen Elizabeth II's coronation lunch. It consisted of some poached chicken, a teaspoon of curry powder mixed with mayonnaise, and a dollop of apricot puree: a bland substitute for the madras curries and mango chutneys that epitomized Queen Victoria's imperial India.

With the transition from empire to the Commonwealth, post-colonial immigration opened Britain's borders and provided opportunity for people living in Britain's former colonies and dependencies to immigrate to Britain. Seaman, called Syhletis, from East Bengal (later Bangladesh) stayed in London and other British port towns when ships were docked, some jumping ship and staying permanently.<sup>52</sup> They saw opportunity opening up Indian restaurants in bombed out fish and chippies and cafes beginning in London's east end after the war.<sup>53</sup> They sold curry and rice right along side the meat pies and fish and chips, and stayed open very late to catch the pub crowds on their way home.<sup>54</sup> Following the war in Bangladesh in 1971, there was an influx of Bangladeshi immigrants, and many opened curry shops.<sup>55</sup> Their food was standardized and very cheap, and they too stayed open late, attracting the business of a generation of young students, living away from home who were benefiting from the expansion of universities in the 1960s.<sup>56</sup> By the 1970s, there were 2,000 Indian restaurants in Britain and a renaissance of sorts in a post-colonial version of Anglo-Indian food.<sup>57</sup> In the years of Thatcher's boom and bust Britain, there was even a longing for a return to the curries and chutneys of imperial India. Lizzie Collingham suggests, "curry appealed to a British public that was hungry for stability and tradition. Indian food could not perhaps be classed as traditionally English, but it carried with it echos of empire and Britain's period of lost glory."<sup>58</sup> In 2012, Madhur Jaffrey published a hugely popular cookery book, *Curry Nation: Britain's 100 Favourite Curries*, including authentic, regional Indian dishes, as well as cherished Anglo-Indian favourites. Authentic India had now

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<sup>48</sup> Porter, 191-194.

<sup>49</sup> Humble, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Janangir, np.

<sup>51</sup> Collingham, 230.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 222-224.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Janangir, np.

<sup>56</sup> Humble, 189.

<sup>57</sup> Collingham, 233.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 239.

colonized Britain, making the circle complete.

Today, there are close to 9,000 curry restaurants and 6,500 pubs that serve curry in Britain. Packaged curry, spice mixes and prepared foods fill the shelves of British grocery stores. Chicken Tikka Masala sales out number fish and chip sales, and Indian food is the quintessential British take-away food.<sup>59</sup> Two hundred years ago, Brillat Savarin wrote “tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are.” If this is true, then Britain’s imperial identity can surely be traced in history by its appetite for Anglo-Indian food.

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<sup>59</sup> Varman, 5.

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