

## **HOW PARTITION CHANGED DELHI'S FOOD CULTURE**

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South Asian R5B: India in the Writer's Eye

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Around the world, people have embraced Indian cuisine, especially the flavorsome and fragrant curries. Any Indian restaurant, irrespective of how you classify ‘Indian’ or ‘restaurant’, has on its menu items such as Tandoori Chicken and Dal Makhani. This identity of Indian cuisine has been associated with these dishes. If the level at which non-Indian people have taken to curry surprises you, it should come as even more of a surprise that Indian people had not had accepted these dishes about 70 years ago. In fact, the majority of Indians had barely tasted these dishes up until the 1950s. It was just because they had not even been created by that time. It was only during the mass exodus of people following the partition of British India, that in modern-day India a situation arose in which these recipes could be developed. Millions of Punjabi immigrants from Pakistan had settled in Delhi. Kundan Lal Gujral<sup>1</sup>, one of the numerous migrants, led the transformation of the identity of the cuisine in Delhi, and eventually, the cuisine of India as we know today. The tandoor style of cooking was unheard of in India pre-partition. With dishes like Tandoori Chicken, Kundan Lal led the mass use of Tandoor in Indian cooking. His creation of Butter Chicken and the *makhani* gravy, based on Punjabi flavors, replaced the predominantly Mughlai cuisine of Delhi. Anoothi Vishal, a famous food writer, columnist, and author of *Mrs. LC’s Table*, says, “What the city [Delhi] lost in terms of its artful, elaborate dishes was replaced by newer, bolder, tomato-laden flavours from Western Punjab. As a new immigrant community poured in from across the border, new tastes and techniques gained ground. *Tandoori* became the food of Delhi. *Mughlai*, the older cuisine that had come about as a result of a composite culture of Shahjahanabad [Delhi] faded.”<sup>2</sup> Following the partition, with the resettlement of millions of people

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<sup>1</sup> Monish Gujral, *Moti Mahal’s Tandoori Trail* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2004), A Legend and the Man, Kindle.

<sup>2</sup> Anoothi Vishal, “Partition Changed India’s Food Cultures Forever,” *Food* (blog), *The Wire*, August 14, 2017, <https://thewire.in/food/partition-food-punjab-mughlai-bengal>

in cities, a change in culture was bound to happen; the food culture was a part of it. Delhi was at the forefront of this shift in the food choices. Through an analysis of the food scene in Delhi, one can see how the Punjabi style of cooking replaced the Mughlai cuisine to prevail over Delhi and how it defines the Indian cuisine now.

Before we get into how and why this change happened in Delhi's food culture, we first should know what the food in Delhi was like initially. Highly syncretic, Delhi's Mughlai food was one that outlived the Mughal emperors themselves. It developed through the assimilation of the Muslim aristocracy, the *kayasth*'s, the *baniya*'s and the *khatiri*'s. Kayasth's used to be part of the court, while the latter two were involved in banks and commerce.<sup>3</sup> *Nihari, shabdegh, shami kebab, ishtoo, alu gosht, do pyaaza* and biryani – all meat-based Mughlai recipes - were few of the most popular dishes. There was a lot of for people who did not consume meat as well. The sweet *Halwa sohan* and savory *Berhvin puri* served with *methi ki chutney* were signature dishes in their own right. Pushpesh Pant, a noted food historian, documents the quintessential *Purani Dilli* (Old Delhi) which consisted of places like *Parathe wali Gali, Ghantewala ki mithaiyan, Gali kebabian, Bengali Market and Gole Market*. These places were located around the old city; each famous for items such as *parathas* (an Indian flatbread), sweets, and kebabs. *Chaat* sellers and *khumche wala*'s dotted the streets. These vendors, specializing in a particular kind of food, went door to door selling their food. In the early 1940s, European and Anglo-Indian food places had sprung up. Some were classy restaurants and hotels, some were cafes, some had live bands and dancing floors. United Coffee House, Kwality, Wenger's and Gaylord were some of the 'continental' places.

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<sup>3</sup> Vishal, "Partition Changed India's Food Cultures Forever."

Soups, roasts, grills, bakes and cakes, mousses and soufflé were served primarily to Europeans and troops posted in Delhi.<sup>45</sup>

But come 1947 and the partition of British India into modern-day India and Pakistan, the whole food scene in Delhi changed with a massive influx of Hindu and Sikh refugees from the urban areas of Western Punjab. By 1947, about five hundred thousand, a little over half the total population, Hindu and Sikh refugees entered into Delhi and replaced the outgoing Muslim residents of the city.<sup>6</sup> There was movement in other cities as well. For example, Mumbai witnessed an inflow of Sindhi people. But, among all cities, it was Delhi which drew the largest numbers. The most common reason was that the great metropolis of Delhi seemingly had the best opportunities for economic development. The present-day industrial areas of Punjab like Jalandhar and Ludhiana had not developed by then and thus lacked the employment opportunities. Furthermore, by the time the hapless refugees reached Delhi, they had neither the resources nor the energy and will to carry the onward journey. Being the capital city was an added bonus. This huge influx of people with various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds altered the Delhi life in most of the ways and means possible. Deo notes that “[this] imperial city [Delhi] which was the centre of the Muslim culture for centuries began to be dominated by the Punjabi culture since 1947.”<sup>7</sup>

Why were the Punjabi’s allowed to replace the existing cuisine? Their grit, hardiness, and enterprise were too much for the culturally sophisticated but laid-back *Dilliwalla* (inhabitants of

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<sup>4</sup> Pushpesh Pant, “Disappearing delicacies.” *Dillee Meri Jaan Symposium*, December 2011, [http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/628/628\\_pushpesh\\_pant.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/628/628_pushpesh_pant.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Vishal, “Partition Changed India's Food Cultures Forever.”

<sup>6</sup> Deo, Shashi Bhushan, “The Impact of Partition on Delhi’s Food Culture,” In *Shabd Braham: International Research Journal of Indian languages*, Vol 6 Issue 3 (Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2018), 194.

<sup>7</sup> Deo, “The Impact of Partition on Delhi’s Food Culture,” 194.

Delhi). The migrants from Punjab carried their clay ovens to the imperial city of Delhi.<sup>8</sup> They were not willing to give up their ways of both, cooking and living. The original residents, themselves victims of the trauma post-partition, did not have time to get back on a solid footing though. They were swamped by the was swamped by this aggressive desire of the Punjabi to rebuild. Monish Gujral, the grandson of Kundan Lal Gujral, says in his book *Moti Mahal's Tandoori Trail*, "If the Dilliwalla felt paralyzed by the tragedy, the refugee-Punjabi was fighting for a new avatar or rebirth."<sup>9</sup>

#### KUNDAN LAL GUJRAL AND MOTI MAHAL

In the same book, Monish Gujral documents his grandfather Kundan Lal's journey and the impact he had on the Delhi food culture. Kundan Lal Gujral was a Punjabi-Pathan from the North-West Frontier Province, an area currently in Pakistan. As a teenager, he moved to Peshawar where he worked in a restaurant called Moti Mahal. Monish's book mentions that "Moti Mahal of that period was more of a takeaway joint. The tandoori rotis and kebabs were strung on skewers and cooked in tandoor and constituted popular fare." The eatery was successful. But come 1947 and the Partition, Kundan Lan Gurajal came to Delhi as a refugee. Having known cooking all his life, he set up shop in a *thara*, a small platform for a wayside café in the area of Daryaganj. He gave the new place a familiar name: Moti Mahal. Out of a hole dug in the ground, Kundan Lal, created tandoor over lit with wood and coal and began serving Tandoori Chicken and roti.<sup>10</sup> There are dishes that Monish asserts to have been invented by his grandfather in Moti Mahal such as Butter Chicken and the makhani gravy. Independent and popular sources verify the same.<sup>11</sup> Since there

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<sup>8</sup> Gujral, *Moti Mahal's Tandoori Trail*, A Legend and the Man, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Gujral, A Legend and the Man, Kindle.

<sup>10</sup> Gujral, A Legend and the Man, Kindle.

<sup>11</sup> Pant, "Disappearing delicacies."

was no system of refrigeration, the leftover tandoori chicken could not be served the following day. Ingeniously, Kundan Lal made a sauce, with butter, to preserve it. We know that today as butter chicken. With a similar line of thinking, the slow-cooked *Dal Makhani* was created. It became the most sought-after vegetarian specialty. Monish says “Indian food would never be the same again.”<sup>12</sup> A couple other prominent dishes created at Moti Mahal were *Chicken pakoda* (like chicken fritters) and *Gatti pullao* (a fragrant rice dish)<sup>13</sup> Moti Mahal was once the city's best-known restaurants. It was the favorite of former Soviet and Pakistan Prime Ministers Nikita Khrushchev and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, respectively. It enjoyed the patronage of India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who used to get catering done from here. So did Indira Gandhi. Monish Gujral says, and popular sources corroborate, that Maulana Azad told the Shah of Iran that coming to Delhi and not eating at Moti Mahal was the same as coming to Agra and not seeing the Taj Mahal.<sup>14</sup> This increased popularity and acceptance for the restaurant itself propelled the acceptance of the type of food. Monish says, “Moti Mahal became the first venue for local and visiting dignitaries to sample this most innovative and popular cuisine.”<sup>15</sup> As Indians talked up the

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<sup>12</sup> Anwesha Madhukayla, “Tracing The Roots Of Arguably Delhi's Most Popular Food -- Butter Chicken,” *Lifestyle* (blog), *Huffington Post*, June 27, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/05/24/tracing-the-roots-of-arguably-delhis-most-popular-food-butte\\_a\\_22107131/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/05/24/tracing-the-roots-of-arguably-delhis-most-popular-food-butte_a_22107131/).

<sup>13</sup> Pankaj Vohra, “Partition brought Moti Mahal, a landmark in India’s culinary history, to central Delhi,” *Investigation* (blog), *The Sunday Guardian*, June 6, 2015, <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/investigation/partition-brought-moti-mahal-a-landmark-in-indias-culinary-history-to-central-delhi>.

<sup>14</sup> Sanchari Pal, “TBI Food Secrets: The Humble Origins of the Hugely Popular Butter Chicken,” *Food* (blog), *The Better India*, November 15, 2015, <https://www.thebetterindia.com/75100/butter-chicken-history-kundan-lal-gujral/>.

<sup>15</sup> Gujral, *Moti Mahal's Tandoori Trail*, A Legend and the Man, Kindle.

food at Moti Mahal to foreigners, more and more did the food at Moti Mahal started to be the face of Indian cuisine.

Moti Mahal's rise was not an isolated event. As the Punjabi dishes gained rapid popularity, a number of *dhabas* or roadside-eateries sprung all over town. They provided home-cooked like food at affordable prices. Pant says, "The dhabas were originally set up to provide value for money, home-style basic fare for the homeless, uprooted and the unemployed – all those without a roof over their head and no access to a personal kitchen."<sup>16</sup> These roadside *dhabas* got the Indians hooked to Punjabi cuisine - *makke di roti*, *sarso da saag*, *murg tikka*, *rajma chawal*, *chhole* and *paneer* dishes. The refugees begin to invest in big hotels and restaurants. Sashi Bhusan Deo, a researcher at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, calls it the 'restaurantisation' of the capital.<sup>17</sup> Businesses changed hands and Delhi's cuisine became firmly and predominantly tandoori. The older cuisines like Mughlai faded away. Pant notes this transformation,

"By now the myriad culinary streams had made way for the Punjabi refugee 'mainstream'. Kukkad [chicken] in its tandoori incarnation reigned supreme and the slow cooked black daal makhani dislodged all else for the vegetarian. In the beginning, regional variations were discernible – Pindi, Peshawari, Khyber etc. were prefixes used as geographical indicators, vaguely indicating the type of food one could expect, but it wasn't long before the catch-all categories of shahi and karhai (be it murg or paneer) blurred the difference between an item on different menus."

The menus at the continental places like Kwality and United Coffee House changed as well. They

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<sup>16</sup> Pant, "Disappearing delicacies."

<sup>17</sup> Deo, "The Impact of Partition on Delhi's Food Culture," 195.

started including *chhole-kulche* on the same menu as fried fish and chips and lamb chops.<sup>18</sup>

A natural question to ask was what happened to the old Mughlai cuisine of Delhi. While it did not disappear completely in Delhi, it was not the same anymore. Salma Husain, Persian scholar and author of the book *The Emperor's Table* says, "There was just one *kebabchi* outside Jama Masjid who did *gola kebabs* till about two decades ago. When he stopped, I asked him why and he replied, '*bibi, ab woh purane log hi nahin rahe*. (The old connoisseurs are all gone)'. His new customers only wanted cheaper indiscriminate kebabs."<sup>19</sup> The *kebabchi's* and *kulfi* and *chaat wallahs* – the popular street food vendors- who had left during the partition, returned later, only to find the old ways of business worked no more. New tastes governed the food scene. Pant laments the "precious gastronomic heritage of Delhi" being lost. He notes that only in the old walled city called *Purani Dilli* that one can "savour the joys of [Mughlai dishes like] nihari or paye" anymore. However, those who still eat chicken under the classic names of the "*Changezi, Jehangiri, Noorjahani, Shahjahani* " flavors, do so without knowing their connection to history. Classic dishes like these and *shami kebabs, Nargisi kofta, pasande, Phalsa sherbet and Takke-paise ki subzee* are rare to find. Except for the latter dish, which is Rajasthani, all were mainstays of the Mughlai cuisine. The ubiquity of *tandoori, shahi* and *karhai variants* chicken and *paneer* has all but vanquished the old dishes.<sup>20</sup>

## THE LOST CUISINE

While the Mughlai cuisine has all but died in Delhi, it still thrives in Karachi. Sumayya Usmani, author of the cookbooks *Summers Under The Tamarind Tree* and *Mountain Berries* and

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<sup>18</sup> Pant, "Disappearing delicacies."

<sup>19</sup> Vishal, "Partition Changed India's Food Cultures Forever."

<sup>20</sup> Pant, "Disappearing delicacies."



Desert Spice, explains in an article for Food 52 the evolution of Pakistani cuisine as a direct consequence of the partition.<sup>21</sup> She notes, “But by far one of the greatest impacts on the development of our cuisine was after 1947: With a mass migration of Indian Muslims to newly formed Pakistan came *nawabi* (nobility) cooking. The spices, slow cooked recipes, and ceremonial dishes of the Muslim aristocracy merged with local flavors throughout Pakistan, which gave rise of a new cuisine: Pakistani.” In a parallel shift, after the partition, about three hundred and thirty thousand Muslims left Delhi for Pakistan in the wake of communal trouble surrounding partition.<sup>22</sup> Similar to what Punjabi’s did in Delhi, the Muslim refugees did in Karachi: they brought their cuisine with them. Now, the old cuisine of Delhi can be found in Karachi. Popular sources have well documented the Delhi cuisine that thrives in this city in Pakistan, especially on Burn’s Road in the city. A CNN report says,

“Many of the storefront signs that tout the road's gastronomical wonders also pay tribute to Delhi, a city over a thousand kilometers, and two generations, away. You see, most of the shop owners in Burns Road are the descendants of Partition refugees from Delhi. They call themselves "Delhi Wallahs" or the "Ones of Delhi." Some even claim they are the purveyors of the true taste of Delhi, now lost to even Delhi itself.”<sup>23</sup>

Karachi has accepted the Delhi cuisine in a big way. One of the main establishments is the Delhi Rabri House, a dessert joint serving *rabri*, a sweet dish made from boiling sweetened milk

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<sup>21</sup> Sumayya Usmani, “Pakistan's National Dish, Beloved by Construction Workers & Nobles Alike,” *Soup* (blog), *Food 52*, March 23, 2017, <https://food52.com/blog/19314-pakistan-s-national-dish-beloved-by-construction-workers-nobles-alike>.

<sup>22</sup> Deo, “The Impact of Partition on Delhi’s Food Culture,” 194.

<sup>23</sup> Sophia Saifi, “A taste of India in the heart of Pakistan,” *Asia* (blog), *CNN*, August 10, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/08/world/taste-of-delhi-in-karachi/index.html>.

and collecting the layers of cream to create a thick, rich mass. The proprietor's father made and sold *rabri* in Delhi. After Partition, he set up shop in Karachi doing the same. Now, at every festival and wedding, the people of Karachi consume *rabri*. Delhi Rabri House has become so famous that it has expanded the business into packaging *rabri* into containers and sending it to cities across Pakistan. Another eatery on Burns Road is a shop bearing the title "Delhi's famous Pakistani Dahi Barras<sup>24</sup> that make the heart happy." It is named so because that is where the owner thinks the best food was from.<sup>25</sup> However, the establishments serving the main Delhi export to Karachi, and eventually Pakistan, are New Dehli Javed Restaurant (often known as just Javed Nihari) and Dehli Nihari House; both these restaurants serve Nihari. Muslim immigrants, mainly from Delhi, Lucknow and Hyderabad, brought with them the recipe for Nihari, a slow-cooked, spiced, on-the-bone lamb or mutton marrow stew. Usmani says, "there are many stories regarding the dish's exact origins, but its history dates back to 18th century late Mughal era, Lucknowi and Delhi nobility." Calling it to be the 'national dish', Usmani points out that Nihari is food that best defines Pakistani cuisine and is eaten by construction workers and nobles alike.<sup>26</sup> She specifically mentions the extra hot and spicy Nihari found in Karachi. Even food blogger Mark Weins talks about one of his experiences in Karachi, "We ate nihari at New Dehli Javed Restaurant (often known as just Javed Nihari), a legendary restaurant – one of the most respected places for nihari in Karachi – and it didn't let us down."<sup>27</sup> These experiences go on to show how much the lost cuisine of Delhi has impacted the food in Karachi. Travelers from far and wide go to Karachi to taste the Delhi style of

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<sup>24</sup> Fried ground lentils soaked in sweet yoghurt.

<sup>25</sup> Saifi, "A taste of India in the heart of Pakistan."

<sup>26</sup> Usmani, "Pakistan's National Dish, Beloved by Construction Workers & Nobles Alike."

<sup>27</sup> Mark Weins, "Pakistani Street Food Guide – A Must-Eat Tour of Karachi, Pakistan," (blog) *Migrationology*, December 19, 2018, <https://migrationology.com/pakistani-street-food-karachi/>.

food. Similar to how the tandoori chicken, butter chicken and *makhani* define the national cuisine of India, nihari became an integral part of Pakistani food. In a simultaneous movement, two countries reformed their food identities.

The partition brought about one definite change in the history of Delhi cuisine, and effectively Indian food. It was this idea of generic ‘Indian’ curries. The standard menu items currently in Indian restaurants all around the world, which are made usually from the similar gravy bases, were created for the Punjabi palette. Anoothi Vishal notes, “In India, where there is such a diversity of cuisines that dishes change their character every 100 km, it is ironical that this Punjabi-restaurant creation became the template for “Indian” food both within and outside the country. Foreigners, with little knowledge of regional Indian food, still identify “Indian” exclusively with these bastardised gravies.”<sup>28</sup> What is most interesting, however, is that a similar change happened on the other side of the border in Pakistan with dishes like Nihari. To be clear, the advent of Punjabi food in Delhi did not cause the rise of the Delhi Mughlai food scene in Karachi. Now was it the other way around. It was the partition that brought about both these changes simultaneously. It just so happens that these changes now define the two national cuisines.

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<sup>28</sup> Vishal, “Partition Changed India's Food Cultures Forever.”

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