

Mirch Masala: British Interactions with South Asian Culture from 1960 to 1990

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Introduction

“Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish... because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.”- *Robin Cook, 2001.*

In 2001, British Foreign Secretary: Robin Cook, stood true to his name and expressed the importance of food, acting as a reflection of multiculturalism within British society. Cook insinuates British acceptance of South Asian cuisine was reflective of their integration with the South Asian community. The assumption that the two were linked suggests that food is symbolic and therefore discussions surrounding food are often linked to external factors, particularly relating to race (Stajcic, 2013). I aim to identify the extent to which Cook’s statement is true. Did Britain welcome South Asian cuisine with open arms? And was this hypothetical acceptance indicative of a wider embrace of the South Asian community? To answer these questions, I will assess white British interactions with South Asian culture during a period where the South Asian presence in Britain was rapidly increasing. The 1960s saw the 1962 and 1968 Commonwealth Immigration acts, followed by the 1971 and 1988 Immigration Acts in the subsequent decades, clearly illustrating immigration was a hot topic during this period.

White British Interactions with South Asian Cuisine 1960-1990

As London was a hub for the South Asian diaspora during the indicated period, I will analyse *The Illustrated London News*, an easily accessible, digitised newspaper (Striking-women.org, 2013). The newspaper industry aimed to reflect the perspective of its target audience (Robinson, 2019), hence, exploring presentations of ‘curry,’ within this paper highlights the way that white Londoners interacted with South Asian cuisine. During my archival investigations, I searched for articles with the term ‘curry,’ during the period 01/01/1960-31/12/1990, to gain an insight into the social commentary surrounding South Asian cuisine in London at the time.

Margaret Costa’s article: *Dining Out*, recommended a Pakistani restaurant in Soho called ‘The Ganges.’ During the 60s and 70s, Costa was a popular food writer who often wrote newspaper articles endorsing up and coming restaurants and exciting new recipes (Tovey, 1990). Costa described ‘The Ganges’ as “something quite different from those Grubby, friendly little places... where you can find instant, cheap filling and totally uninteresting curries” (Costa, 1968). Here Costa is referring to the ‘curry houses’ which became commonplace in Britain by the late 60s, when Costa wrote this piece. These ‘curry houses’ were an integral part of British culture as ‘going for an Indian,’ became the Friday night norm for many working-class white

Britons across the country (Buettner, 2008). The description of the 'curry house' as 'grubby' and 'cheap' highlights that the South Asian cuisine consumed by most British people was considered subordinate to the "unique repertoire of authentic dishes," offered at 'The Ganges' (Costa, 1968).

Costa reinforced this point two years later in her article *Shezan*, which endorsed yet another Pakistani restaurant. She stated that in "Pakistani restaurants ... cooking is far removed from the agreeable nosh of the curry houses" (Costa, 1970). The use of the adjective 'agreeable' in combination with Costa's earlier article, implies that the kormas and chicken tikka masalas which became commonplace within 'curry houses' across Britain, were sub-par to the seemingly 'authentic' cuisine offered by Pakistani restaurants. On the surface, this may appear to champion South Asian cuisine, however, Costa's praise of Pakistani food acted as a simultaneous belittlement of the Bangladeshi cuisine which was far more established throughout Britain.

Whilst these dishes were indeed designed to cater to British taste buds, the implication that they were subordinate to the 'authentic' Pakistani cuisine of 'The Ganges,' and 'Shezan,' is indicative of the reluctance to embrace South Asian culinary culture in its entirety. On one hand, Costa's encouragement of 'authenticity' suggests a shift towards South Asian food consumed by Asians, therefore signifies that Britain was moving towards bridging the culinary gap between the two communities. However, by doing so, Costa synchronously undermined the dishes curated by Bangladeshi migrants to cater to their British customers, the dishes which created a unique faction of South Asian cuisine. This faction, for the most part, introduced Britain to the culinary world of South Asian cooking. Naben Ruthnum (2017) presents the convincing view that 'curries' by their very nature are designed to cater to the taste buds of those who consume it, hence it has always been an everchanging dish. I adopt this view in my assessment of Costa's articles, and therefore consider her rejection of the dishes found in 'curry houses,' to act as a wider dismissal of South Asian cuisine.

Costa was not alone in this inadvertent shunning of South Asian food. In an article written by Tim Beaumont in 1979 titled "Indian Ethnic, Indian Experimental" (Beaumont, 1979). Beaumont spoke favourably of one Asian chef, Mr. Ali Ashraf, who trained in classic French cooking. Ashraf married "the ideas of two classical cuisines," creating new hybrid dishes (Beaumont, 1979). Here, Beaumont is complimentary of Ashraf's adaptations of classic Indian dishes which is reinforced in his description of Ashraf as a "master of his craft" (Beaumont, 1979). Whilst Ashraf's new dishes may be almost unrecognisable to the 'curries' found in India or Pakistan, when using Ruthnum's understanding of 'curry,' they fall into this category. Beaumont implying that these dishes are something 'other' than their traditional namesakes highlights his inability to grasp that South Asian cuisine is

adaptable in its nature. Thus, rejecting South Asian cuisine in its entirety by overlooking its long history of adaptations. This lack of understanding is again reaffirmed with his recommendation of Patak's spices. Beaumont states: despite them being "made in Lancashire (they) are authentic" (Beaumont, 1979), suggesting these spices were somehow 'more worthy' of consumption due to their apparent authenticity. This further fed into the notion that the Indian food which was commonplace in Britain was somehow inferior.

Overall, by the 1970s there was a shift in the way that white Britons viewed South Asian cuisine. The dishes that were made popular by Bangladeshis throughout the 1960s, were an integral part of British culture. Despite this, the 1970s saw a clear sense of caution which came with the appropriation of 'curry' into British culinary culture. A caution to accept that these new recipes were truly Indian caused a frenzy of recreating an "authentic" version of an ever-changing cuisine, which is evidently impossible. The hesitation in accepting it for what it was created a barrier in welcoming South Asian cuisine in its entirety, indicating that Robin Cook's earlier statement was less of a reflection of the British psyche, but rather an exaggeration.

White British Interactions with South Asian People 1960-1990.

When assessing British responses to South Asian culinary culture, it is vital to consider British interactions with other elements of South Asian culture, and by extension, South Asian people. Only when comparing the two, can we identify whether Cook's earlier statement is reflective of multiculturalism, or appropriation. To obtain the most accurate understanding of the experiences of South Asian migrants, it is vital to assess their own recollections of their past. The oral history interviews preserved by the UEL Refugee Archives are crucial here, as they hold interviews with members of the South Asian community. These are vital in showcasing the South Asian perspective of their treatment when they arrived in Britain. Therefore, these interviews are necessary to assess and understand the prevalent discourses surrounding the South Asian immigrant community in Britain during 1960-90.

Throughout these interviews, South Asians reflect on how they endured high levels of violence, primarily in the form of racism. This indicates that South Asian culture was only accepted on British terms; South Asian food was embraced, whereas the people were not. The interviews conducted by the Eastside Community Heritage project highlight these themes (CADG, 2007). This project interviewed current and ex-residents of the Brick Lane area to promote and record local history in East London for the documentary 'The Changing Face of Brick Lane.' In 60% of these interviews, themes of violence and racism are found, highlighting that the reception from the white British was far from welcoming. One interviewee, Ismiah, arrived in Brick Lane from Bangladesh in 1969 and recalled that

there was “a lot of fighting there” (Ismiah, 2006). When pressed for further comment by the interviewer, who asks: “was the fighting very bad? The racism?” Ismiah responds with: “not regular, not enough, every couple of weeks” (Oral testimony from Ismiah, 2006). Ismiah’s dismissal of the racism, as being irregular, despite occurring fortnightly is indicative of how commonplace racist abuse and violence was for many of the South Asians that migrated to Britain during this time.

The argument that racism towards the Bangladeshi community was both frequent and normalised is supported by the interviews of two unnamed interviewees from the Eastside project. For the purposes of this article I will from now on refer to them as Interviewee A and B. Interviewee A states that when he arrived in Brick Lane there was “a lot of violence in that area, attacks” (Oral testimony from unnamed Interviewee, 2006). When the interviewer asked: “what kind of attacks?” he responded with: “often for money, they took money from us because we are foreigners” (Oral testimony from unnamed Interviewee, 2006.). Here it is evident that South Asians in the area were targeted due to their foreign status, emphasising the problem of racial harassment within the area. This is seconded by Interviewee B, who spoke of the racism they were faced with when they arrived in Tower Hamlets in 1977. They noted that this was a huge problem then, but “now, for maybe 12 years more, it’s fine” (Oral testimony from unnamed, 2006). The discourse within interviewee B and Ismiah’s interview mimic one another as they downplay the issue of racial harassment by writing it off as ‘fine’ and infrequent. The dismissiveness of this racial violence is indicative of how racism was part of the social norm during this period, suggesting that the white British response to immigrants was largely negative. This is further supported by the fact that public surveys revealed: four out of five members of the British population felt that “too many immigrants had been let into the country” (The National Archives, 2003). A sentiment that only grew worse with the implementation of the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act which differentiated between ‘belonging’ citizens and ‘non- belonging’ ones, with preference being given to those ‘belonging,’ due to having a parent or grandparent that was born in the UK (Callaghan, 1968).The implementation of the act provides an explanation of how racism became so normalised for Ismiah and Interviewee B, as ethnocentric and xenophobic rhetoric derived from the law which is designed to shape the attitudes of those who follow it (Crenshaw, 2010).

Through assessing these interviews, it is clear that during the 1960s to 1990s the South Asian community were habitually faced with racism and violence. The normalisation of this abuse highlights that the British population did not ‘absorb and adapt external influences,’ as Cook suggested in the quote at the beginning of this article. Instead, it conveys that Britain rejected South Asian immigrants in the most aggressive ways, whether that be through racial attacks, or through the implementation of legislation which favoured white immigrants to those of other ethnicities.

This is not to overlook the more subtle rejections administered by the media which masqueraded as embracing South Asian cuisine whilst simultaneously disparaging the most popular form of South Asian food in Britain. When these factors are looked at in combination with each other, it clearly shows Britain was far removed from the multicultural haven which Cook described.

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