



## The Impact of Partition on Delhi's Food Culture

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### Introduction

On 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 India celebrated 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. Independence of India, as we know, was achieved after a long and hard fought struggle against the British Raj. This independence, was however, accompanied by the trauma of partition of the country into India and Pakistan. Though estimates vary, the massive communal rioting in and around the event of partition claimed the lives of about a million people. In the words of Gyanendra Pandey: "Perhaps the most obvious sign of partition of India was the massive violence that surrounded, accompanied or constituted it"<sup>1</sup> The fear created by these riots led to the largest migration of human population in known history. The minority population from both the dominions moved across the newly created borders in huge numbers by the force of the circumstances under unforeseen, inhuman conditions. By the time the huge tide of refugees subsided, about 12.5 million people were uprooted from their settled homes and cut off completely from their old moorings. By June 15, 1948 itself, about 55 lakhs non-Muslims were estimated to have been brought over to India from West Punjab and other provinces of Western Pakistan and during the same period about 58 lakhs Muslims moved across the newly created border into Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Indian states, it was Delhi which attracted the largest number of refugees, mainly because it seemingly provided the best opportunities of economic development. Being the capital of the newly independent state had its own attraction as well. In addition to it, the present day industrial areas of Punjab like Jalandhar and Ludhiana had not developed by then and

therefore, for the Hindu and Sikh refugees from the urban areas of Western Punjab Delhi appeared to be a more suitable destination. Furthermore, by the time the hapless refugees reached Delhi, they had neither the resources nor the energy and will to carry the onward journey.

If we go by the Census of 1941, Delhi's population stood at about 9.18 lakh in 1941. By the 1947 it had risen to about 9.5 lakh. Out of this, about 3.3 lakh Muslims left the city for Pakistan in the wake of communal trouble surrounding partition. At the same time about 5 lakh Hindu and Sikh refugees entered into Delhi. The Census of 1951 put Delhi's population at 17.44 lakh. It is estimated that about 28.4 per cent of this population comprised of the partition refugees.<sup>3</sup> This huge influx of people with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds had the effect of gradual transformation of Delhi in all fields. This imperial city which was the centre of the Muslim culture for centuries began to be dominated by the Punjabi culture since 1947. Corresponding changes also took place in the languages, foods, costumes, art, cinema and what not. Among these changes, the change in the food culture of Delhi is perhaps the most unique. Let us look briefly how Delhi's food culture transformed with the coming of refugees in the wake of independence and partition of the country.

### Delhi's Food Culture

A significant majority among the refugees belonged to West Punjab and therefore, the cultural transformation of Delhi was very much dictated by the Punjabis. The food culture of Delhi also changed the Punjabi way, with traditional Punjabi cuisine gaining



increasing popularity as the time progressed. To put it in the words of Anoothi Vishal, famous food writer, columnist and author of *Mrs LC's Table*: "What the city 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 faded."<sup>4</sup> The emergent food platter of the city came to be dominated by the Punjabi delicacy, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. What are today known as Delhi's delicacies are the outcome of the metamorphosis that its food pattern saw since 1947. The delicious *Tandoori* and the Butter Chicken which command huge popularity among the non-vegetarians are perhaps two of the most significant additions.<sup>5</sup> Butter chicken, now considered as a classic Delhi dish, has its admirers throughout the country. This mouth-watering dish which was popularised by the *Moti Mahal* restaurant in Daryaganj in 1950s has an interesting story of its own. In the 1920s, a person named Kundan Lal Gujral ran a *dhaba* at Gora Bazar in Peshawar (now in Pakistan). He is considered as the person who introduced Tandoori chicken as a major non-vegetarian delicacy in his *dhaba*. Very soon, this delicacy became immensely popular. At times, however, Kundan Lal faced the problem of what to do with the left over chickens. Soon, he found a way out. He began preparing a curry in which the dried out chicken pieces could be softened and served. He invented a butter chicken sauce using tomatoes, butter and cream. The original recipe used very small amount of spices. It was prepared with a little cumin, a spoonful of red chilli and salt to taste. The brilliance of the taste lay in the skilful combination of tomatoes and dairy fat.<sup>6</sup> After partition Lal and his family moved to Delhi and established the famous Moti Mahal

Restaurant which played a very important role in popularising the Punjabi food throughout the country.

Other important additions were the mouth-watering Multani Moth *Kachori*, *Dahi Bhalley* and *Papri Chaat*, *Dal Makhani* etc. The slow cooked *Dal Makhani*, became the most sought-after vegetarian dish. 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 was not long before the catch-all categories of *shahi* and *karhai* (be it *murgh* or paneer) blurred the difference between an item and different items.<sup>7</sup> Mouth-watering *Rajma Chawal*, *Chhole* and Paneer dishes also became an important part of Delhi's culinary landscape after partition.

As these delicacies gained rapid popularity, a number of *dhabas* or roadside-eateries mushroomed all over the city. It provided home-style food at economical rates to those without home and hearth. These roadside *dhabas* along the highways got the Indians addicted to traditional Punjabi cuisine- *makke di roti*, *sarso da saag*, *murg tikka* and many more such delicacies. Seeing their growing popularity, some opened such *dhabas* to keep the family pot boiling and moved to other enterprises later on. Thus, in due course of time, the refugees begin to invest in big hotels and restaurants the 'restaurantisation' of the capital began as a number of new restaurants were opened.

Partition, thus, changed the Delhi's cuisine indelibly. It made it much more rich, varied and perhaps, more mouth-watering.

## References

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