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**Food, Asia and The Empire: A Brief Journey of The Humble 'curry'**

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Elizabeth Varkey

M. Phil Research Scholar, Delhi University

*Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT:**

This paper seeks to chart the journey of 'curry' from the colony to the Empire and back. This journey has been a circuitous one and in the process, the term 'curry' has grown to encompass a wide variety of dishes that incorporate the use of certain spices. While on this journey, it has constantly evolved, adapted, and integrated itself with local eating preferences and cooking styles. The ubiquitous presence of curries on restaurant menus in Asia, Britain, and across the globe testifies how far this dish of contested origins has travelled. This paper argues that the journey of 'curry' illustrates the flow of goods and cultural practices between the 'colony' and the 'metropole' and even beyond. Depending on the local availability of condiments and spices and the differing taste buds of its connoisseurs in different parts of the globe, 'curry' has time and again, successfully reinvented itself.

**Keywords:** 'curry', 'Empire', 'colony', 'culinary', 'cookbooks', 'culture'

**Introduction**

The origin and definition of the term 'curry' is elusive, debatable and controversial but its popularity, worldwide remains unchallenged today. The ubiquitous presence of curries not just on restaurant menus in the Indian subcontinent, in Asia, and Britain, but across the globe from “Newfoundland to the Antarctic, from Beijing to Warsaw” (Sen 7) testifies how far this dish of contested origins has travelled. While on this journey it has constantly evolved, adapted, and integrated itself with local eating preferences and cooking styles. This paper seeks to chart the journey of 'curry' from the colony to the Empire and back. This journey has been a circuitous one and in the process, the term 'curry' has grown to encompass a wide variety of dishes that incorporate the use of certain spices.

This paper explores how the journey of 'curry' illustrates the flow of goods and cultural practices between the 'colony' and the 'metropole' and even beyond. Depending on the local availability of condiments and spices and the differing taste buds of its connoisseurs in various parts of the globe, curry has time and again, reinvented itself and thus emerged a veritable “product of globalization” (ibid 117).

The recent concern over the dwindling of 'curry chefs' and shutting down of 'curry shops' in post-Brexit Britain coupled with the hardening of immigrant laws has once again brought to light the geopolitical importance of this innocuous food. The future of 'curry' is at stake today in Britain, making it an occasion worth pondering curry's peculiar place in 'colonial' and 'culinary' history.

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## The Rise and Evolution of 'Curry'

Colleen Taylor Sen, a culinary writer and journalist in *Curry: A Global History* (2009) speaks of the difficulty of defining a term like 'curry'. Attempting a definition she offers that curry refers to “a spiced meat, fish or vegetable stew served with rice, bread, cornmeal or another starch”. “The spices” she elaborates “may be freshly prepared as a powder or a spice paste or purchased as a ready-made mixture... These include “turmeric, cumin seed, coriander seed, chillies and fenugreek [as well as] curry leaves” (7-8).

Most food historians including Colleen Taylor Sen, Lizzie Collingham and Cecilia Leong Salobir trace the etymology of the word 'curry' to the Tamil word *kari* denoting “a spiced dish of sautéed vegetables and meat”. Sen also points out that in the early seventeenth century the Portuguese used the word *caril* or *caree* to describe “broths” containing spices, condiments, fruits and nuts which was poured over “boiled rice”. The term was anglicized to “curry” which thus entered the *Hobson-Jobson Dictionary of British-Indian English* (1886), as “meat, fish, fruit or vegetables, cooked with a quantity of bruised spices and turmeric” and eaten with rice (Sen 9).

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Food and Culture* the earliest reference to 'curry' in English is found in a Dutch travel account dating to 1598. The Dutch helped popularize 'curry' but in the process they also transformed it. Giving a twist to the 'curry' they introduced the *rijsttafel*. The first curry recipe was published much later, in 1747 by the English cookbook author Hannah Glasse in *The Art of Cookery*.

Till the eighteenth century “Indian-style curried sauce and rice” was a regular component of the typical colonial meal; but on travelling back to England, “it changed into a meat stew with rice added or into something else altogether—such as the main flavouring for mulligatawny soup” (Katz). Glasse's recipe too treated curry not as a 'sauce' but as a 'stew'. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century “curry powder” became a rage in British households both in the colony and back in the metropole. The invention of 'curry powder' while making this food more accessible was at the same time responsible for reducing 'curry' to just another marketable commodity from the East. Thus most culinary historians view “curry powder” as a British “fabrication” and “commodification” of indigenous flavours to suit British taste. However Salobir in her work *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A taste of empire* (2011) argues that the colonialists did not “deliberately choose curry to domesticate in the colonial project but appropriated and modified it in numerous dishes to enhance and transform poor-quality chicken, fish and meat” in far flung regions of the colonies.



Fig. 1 Advertisement for Marshall's Curry Powder, 1899

The growing popularity of curry powder coupled with the rise of British cookbooks featuring curry recipes such as— *Domestic Cookery* by Maria Rundell (1807), *Domestic Economy and Receipt Book* (1841) by Dr Robert Flower Riddell, *Modern Cookery* (1845) by Elizabeth Acton, *Book of Household Management* (1859) by Isabella Beeton, *Culinary Jottings for Madras* (1878) by Colonel Arthur Robert Kenney- Herbert and *A Handbook of Cookery for a Small House* by Jessie Conrad (1923)— firmly established the place of curry on Britain's gastronomical map.



Fig. 2 *Domestic Cookery* by Mrs Maria Rundell, 1806

Curry's position was further solidified by Queen Victoria's growing interest in all things Indian; especially post the Great Exhibition of 1851 in which the Indian exhibit had occupied centre stage. The Queen is known to have had a retinue of Indian servants as well as an Indian cook. The popularity of curry also received impetus with the establishment of Edward Palmer Veerasawmy's food speciality company in 1896 followed by a restaurant on Regent Street in London in 1926. In 1957 Veerasawmy also published a book titled *Indian Cookery* where he is said to have stressed on “authenticity” in preparing curry dishes. By the end of the nineteenth century the British were using the term 'curry' to refer to an array of dishes prepared across the Indian



subcontinent such as the Pakistani *korma*, the Kashmiri *rogan josh*, the Kerala fish *moilee*, the Portuguese-Goan *vindaloo*, the *doh piazza* and the *karhi* (Sen 10). This attempt to simplify and homogenize the culture of the colonial 'Other' undermined the rich diversity prevailing in the region but further contributed to the popularity of 'curry'.

### Domestication of the 'Curry': The Role of *Memsahibs*

The spread of curry's popularity throughout the Empire was made possible not only through cookbooks but also by immigrants, officials and most importantly British women/ wives— the white *memsahibs* of the Raj. Susan Zlotnick in her essay titled “Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England” charts the “domestication of curry” in her attempt to unravel the “tangled relationship between the potent domestic ideology and imperialism in the first half of the nineteenth century” (52). Drawing an interesting parallel between the functions of British men and woman in the colonial project, Zlotnick argues that while:

[...]Utilitarians like Macaulay and James Mill were busily trying to assimilate India into the British Empire and anglicizing it through educational and legal reforms, British women... incorporated Indian food, which functioned metonymically for India, into the national diet and made it culturally British.

(ibid)Borrowing from the work of culinary writer Nupur Chaudhuri, Zlotnick asserts that the Victorian *memsahibs* played a significant role in diffusing curry and rice into Britain's “national diet” through their active involvement in the English homes and kitchens apart from the cook books and curry recipes they wrote. (ibid) Zlotnick views cookery books produced in eighteenth and nineteenth century England as “cultural documents” wherein “the Other presents itself not as a source of threat and contamination but of nourishment”. By “domesticating” and “naturalizing” these 'foreign', 'oriental' products and foods of the 'Other', these English *memsahibs* hand-in-hand with their native servants and cooks helped “neutralize the threat of the Other”. By transforming “foreign delicacies” into “local specialities”, the “exotic” into the “familiar” and the “familial”, women were involved, albeit unconsciously, in “incorporating” and “domesticating the Other.(53, 63) Thus Zlotnick asserts that a “nineteenth century” English “fabrication” named “curry” was “appropriated”, “domesticated” and “completely naturalized” by the men holding administrative positions in the Empire as well as their wives back home, both in England and India, writing and preparing curry recipes in their kitchens.

### Curry' and Popular Culture

Curry became such an integral part of colonial life that it was incorporated in the contemporary popular, colonial as well as political discourse. This is revealed in some of the cartoons that were published by *Punch*, a British weekly magazine. In the first cartoon depicted below (Fig. 3), the English unaccustomed to heavily seasoned, spicy foods are being introduced to the “legendary” spiciness of the *vindaloo*. Seats have been replaced by lavatory commodes to meet any exigency. The commodes placed near a dining table challenge the age old Hindu ritual notions and practices of 'pollution' and 'purity' practised in the Indian subcontinent. *Vindaloo* that



'By all accounts, their  
*vindaloo*s are legendary'

Fig. 3 'By all accounts, their *vindaloo*s are legendary'.

emerged as a result of the comingling of Goan and Portuguese cuisines is derived from the Portuguese *vinha e alhos*, i.e. wine and garlic. It refers to a “sour, fiery hot pork curry made with coconut vinegar, spices and red chillies” (ibid 22). The cartoon seems to suggest that the British who took over control of Goa from the Portuguese now have to contend with all that their predecessors left behind including this fiery, hybrid curry!

Another cartoon (Fig. 4) set in the 1930s titled “A Controversial Curry” depicts Gandhiji seated before a “hot” bowl of curry labelled “Purna Swaraj”. The spiciness of 'curry' is equated here with the 'unpalatable' demand made by Gandhiji and his followers.

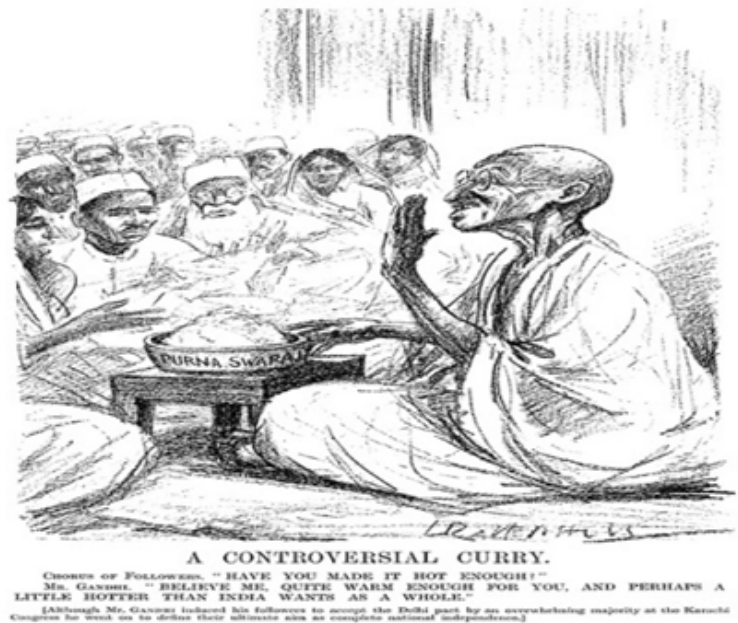


Fig. 4 'A Controversial Curry'

A humorous poem by W. M Thackeray titled “Ode to Curry” also appeared in Punch's “The Poetical Cookery-Book”. The poem describes a dutiful wife cooking a meal for her husband. The poem's reference to “Sami-wel”, a cockney form of the English name 'Samuel', hints at the speaker being a Londoner, from the middle/ lower class. The ubiquitous curry seems to have made its way even into this humble domestic scene. The poem ends with the note: “P.S. Beef, mutton, rabbit, if you wish;/ Lobsters, or prawns, or any kind of fish/ Are fit to make A CURRY. 'Tis, when done,/ A dish for emperors to feed upon.”

### Curry's Chequered Past

While debating the authenticity and ownership of 'curry', those who vehemently insist that it originated from the Indian subcontinent and was merely 'appropriated' and 'altered' by the colonial masters, must ponder how the development of the curry, although not known earlier by this name in the Indian subcontinent, itself owes a great deal to early trade interactions and transcontinental flows of goods and cultural practices across the seas. For instance one of the vital ingredients of 'curry' today namely 'chilli pepper' or *mirch* reached Asia and the Indian subcontinent as a result of the 'Columbian exchange'. This is the term applied to the “global exchange of fruits, vegetables, nuts and other plants between the western hemisphere, Africa, Oceania and the Indian subcontinent” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This exchange took place along the Spice trade route, then under the Portuguese control that extended over “the Persian Gulf, the Malacca Straits, Indonesia, India and South Africa”. (Sen 13)

Sen also points out that the “history of curry” is intertwined with the “abolition of the slave trade” in Britain in the early nineteenth century with the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. When the slaves were freed, the British brought in millions of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent “to work on plantations in the West Indies, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Fiji”. These immigrants “integrated local ingredients into their eating habits to create new varieties of curries”. (ibid 13) A parallel can be drawn here with present-

day Britain where once again, it is immigrants who helped revive and keep alive 'curry'. In the 1940s the Sylheti migrants from Bangladesh who were mostly engaged on British ships as boiler stokers joined the catering business. They took over “bombed-out fish-and-chip shops”, rapidly transforming them into “curry shops that became popular among inebriated men returning from late-night soccer matches” (Tamura). Today Bangladeshis own approximately eight out of ten Indian restaurants in the UK. (Gillan)

While culinary scholars like E.M. Collingham, Nupur Chaudhuri, Uma Narayan and Susan Zlotnick contend that the colonizers followed a “British diet” and rejected Indian dishes in order to “differentiate” themselves from their colonial subjects, Salobir challenges this idea. Through her study of a variety of sources like cookbooks, household management guides, memoirs, diaries, travelogues and questionnaires she attempts to demonstrate the “hybrid” nature of the “colonial table”. She informs us that a typical colonial spread included local as well as European dishes covering everything from “curries to mulligatawny, kedgeree, chicken chop [and] pish-pash”. However she asserts that “no other colonial dish was more consumed, debated and critiqued than curry” which became “the signature dish of British colonial cuisine. (6-7)

Adopted by the colonizers from the earliest days of colonial rule, curry's popularity peaked in the days of the East India Company and from there spread to the colonies and was of course taken back to England by the Company's men. Curry's history is a chequered one, influenced by “the availability of local ingredients, the culinary skills of the colonial cook and the tastes of the British in a particular location”. Gradually it developed “both temporally and geographically” to the point where “each Indian presidency's curry was subtly different and it differed even from household to household”. In appropriating curry, Salobir alerts us to the arduous manner in which the merits of the dish were debated and the authenticity of different curries judged by district, region or presidency.(8) This 'interest', bordering on 'obsession', of the colonizer in arriving at the perfect curry dish brings to mind the “curatorial” approach of rare men like Sir William Jones who dedicated themselves to the project of documenting the socio-economic and cultural life of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent.

According to Salobir 'curry' is undoubtedly the “single most important dish that defined the culinary history of British imperialism” and not just “the first pan-Indian cuisine”. Despite its obscure origins, “curry's legitimacy is reinforced by the contest for ownership” even in post colonial times. Her study extends beyond the Indian subcontinent and includes an analysis of Malaysia and Singapore as she attempts to illustrate that “colonial culture in the form of food and patterns of domestic service was transplanted to, or replicated in, other colonies in Asia”.(2,19)

## Conclusion

'Curry' has become a symbol of cultural exchange and assimilation to such an extent that its consumption by the colonizer is described as an instance of “culinary miscegenation” (Chatterjee). Today the term 'curry' is used to refer not only to the “classic Anglo-Indian curries of the Raj” but also for “the elegant *gaengs* of Thailand; the exuberant curries of the Caribbean; *kari raisu*, Japan's favourite comfort food; Indonesian *gulai*s; Malaysia's delicious *Nonya* cuisine; South African bunny chow and bobotie; Mauritian *vindaille*; and Singapore's fiery street foods”. The term has also been applied to hybrid dishes like German *currywurst*, Dutch fries with curry ketchup and American curried chicken salad. (Sen 8)

Ironically today the suffix 'curry' has been thoroughly appropriated by Indians too, to refer to a slew of dishes prepared across the length and breadth of India. The bestselling Indian cook book author Madhur Jaffrey, who is considered to be an authority on curries and Indian food, had once criticized the use of the term 'curry'. She thought the term to be as degrading to India's great cuisine as 'chop suey' is to China's. (Salobir 42) However Jaffrey soon went on to write award-winning-cookbooks with titles like *The Ultimate Curry Bible* (2003) and *Curry Easy* (2010). She is not alone among Indian and Asian culinary experts to have used the very term they once denounced as 'generic', 'reductive' and

'preposterous'.

The undiminished popularity enjoyed by Asian and Indian cuisine worldwide, particularly in Britain was reasserted when UK's former foreign secretary, Robin Cook in 2001 hailed chicken *tikka masala* “a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences” (Cook).

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literally translated as “rice table”, this Dutch preparation was inspired by a similar Indonesian multiple-dish meal known as *nasi padang* developed during the Dutch colonial era. Source

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/rijsttafel>)

Derived from the Tamil word *milagu tannir* meaning pepper water, this hot vegetable soup closely resembles what present day South Indians call *rasam*. Source

<https://archive.org/stream/hobsonjobson029985mbp#page/n648/mode/1u>

Source: <https://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/a-new-system-of-domestic-cookery.html> with a *Preface* by her husband, the famous British novelist, Joseph Conrad

Source: <https://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/a-new-system-of-domestic-cookery.html>

However Salobir and Zlotnick point out that the relationship between *memsahibs* and native servants was not always smooth with the servants often accused of being dirty and of cheating their masters.

[https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000sDos0pw\\_EPo](https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000sDos0pw_EPo)

Gandhiji was demanding *purna* or complete self rule, independent of the British Empire

<https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000eggDCav4rnQ>

Quoted from <https://www.silkroadgourmet.com/thackerays-ode-to-curry/>

Refers to *khichuri*, an easily digestible dish made from rice and lentils.

A chicken recipe for toddlers

I have borrowed the term “curatorial” from Amartya Sen who in *The Argumentative Indian* delineates three approaches of the colonizer towards the colonized namely the “curatorial”, the “magisterial” and the “exoticist”.