



# SEEDS OF SEPARATION: How the India-Pakistan Partition Shaped India's Food Culture

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## ABSTRACT

The partition still wanders the corridors of Indian history and polity as a constant reminder of a painful separation; A separation of communities, lineages and cultures. It shook the very foundation that once shaped India, so while traditions and cultures were rendered extinct or were exiled from their very being, even food history and culture was redefined owing to this very Partition. India's food culture took a sudden and drastic turn. While traditional mughlai cuisine composed of ghoshts and golu kebabs ceased to exist, sanjha choolas and tandoori soon began to define the new age of widely accepted and now normative "traditional Indian cuisine". While robust curries and gravies dotted the Indian landscape, distinct markers of cuisines and cultures such as Shapla Bhela Bhaja and other remnants of East Bengali food now disappeared the dominions of a nation that it was once very much integrated with. This paper investigates and questions the evolution of Indian cuisine post partition and how it reflects the legacy of an India that was once whole.

**AIM:** To understand and draw a timeline of the cuisine culture in India as affected by the Partition

**OBJECTIVES:** To trace the evolution of the food culture in India due to the effects of the partition

**KEYWORDS:** Partition, cuisine, culture

## INTRODUCTION

The Indian Independence Act of 1947 signified the British government's formal move to end its imperial dominion over India. Nevertheless, a significant hurdle emerged due to the growing lack of trust among religious factions that had developed over the British colonial era. Despite Hindus constituting the majority, the existence of Indian Muslims, districts with Muslim majorities, and a substantial Sikh community introduced intricacy.

At the core of the issue was the dilemma of defining the borders between areas dominated by Muslims and those with Hindu majorities. This tension was epitomised by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, acting as representatives for Hindus and Muslims respectively. The matter was anything but uncomplicated.

Places such as Punjab and Bengal presented especially complex circumstances due to their diverse populations. Punjab was almost evenly split between districts where Muslims formed the majority and those where they did not. Bengal encountered a similar intricate situation. The responsibility of handling these delicate concerns rested with a boundary commission, and the urgency was intensified by the deadline stipulated by the Indian Independence Act. The British were resolute in their intention to withdraw, irrespective of the forthcoming challenges.

"The drawing of the boundary proved to be extremely contentious causing fear, uncertainty and widespread death and destruction" (partitionmuseum.org). Cyril Radcliffe, a barrister from London was put in charge of drawing up the boundary with the help of a local advisory community based in Punjab and Bengal, Radcliffe lacked essential socio-cultural and geographical knowledge to do this task and was given only 5 weeks to redraw the boundaries of all of South Asia. These lines were that of communal nature Muslim majority areas were awarded to Pakistan meanwhile Hindu dominated areas reflected what was supposed to be the topology of a contemporary India, with places that had a mixed and diverse population such as Punjab and Bengal it was decided the demarcation would be done on a regional level where constituencies would be divided between India and Pakistan based on a similar religious principle. As a result of this haphazard partition that escalated the already growing conflicts between two primary religious communities, multiple families were looted, absconded, raped and massacred on both sides of the border. People had to leave their ancestral properties, languages, traditions and deep-rooted ethnic identities behind and became alien to a land that was once their own. This was especially prominent in Areas such as Bengal and Punjab which bore the worst brunt of the partition. These areas did not only see themselves divided, alienated and brutalised on an extremely microscopic level but its locals saw themselves leaving behind what was once their own in order to attain and secure the idea of a 'home' and a 'nation' that their colonisers had determined for them. Areas such as Delhi and West Bengal saw huge influxes of refugees from West Pakistan and East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) respectively. These changes brought along with them innovations and compositions of new intricate cultures but the extinction of old ones.

Ahmed Ali the author of 'Twilight in Delhi' who had grown up in Delhi but owing to the nature of the partition was now based in Karachi was quoted saying "The civilization of Delhi came into being through the mingling of two different cultures, Hindu and Muslim," he told me. Now "Delhi is dead. . . . All that made Delhi special has been uprooted and dispersed." He lamented especially the fact that the refinement of Delhi Urdu had been destroyed: "Now the language has shrunk. So many words are lost."(NewYorker, 2015) Not only words, but stories, practices, traditions and quite literally a sense of self had been lost as a result of this partition. The Radcliffe line did not just divide a pre-partition India into 2 countries i.e India and Pakistan, but it also divided a culture that was once composite and whole into fragments of what it once was. Among these divisions those accounted for usually encompass language, literature and regional as well as cultural practices, what is less talked about though is the idea of food.

Even today India has a diverse sense of palette with northern areas of the country pioneering themselves as the breadbasket of this nation while propagating their idea of tomato heavy curries being the norm of the normative, something that comes in stark contrast to south and the east regions of our country and their fixation with rice and bhats. Our sense of understanding of what comprises an ideal Indian taste palette is only a fraction of what once existed in pre-partition India. Partition changed India's food culture for worse and for better. While dishes like Shapla bhat and golu kebab seized to exist, Sanjha chulha and the wonders it reproduced soon defined what mainstream Indian cuisine would look like. Through the scope of this paper we shall inspect how and to what extent did the partition influence India's food culture and its long lasting impact on what we see and perceive as 'Indian cuisine'.

## BANGAALS AND THE GHOTIS: ALIENS IN THEIR OWN LAND

In the olden days there was no Bangladesh, or West Bengal, these were abstractions and all that existed was a single and composite Bengal. Even though they were seen as being a part of the same state, East Bengal and West Bengal were vastly different lands with vastly different national identities as well as different cultural practices. In Fact these differences were so stark that when East Bengal (then known as East Pakistan) achieved nationhood in the form of Bangladesh, "General Ziaur Rahman the then Military ruler of Bangladesh even amended the constitution of Bangladesh to uphold and strengthen Bangladeshi nationalism instead of Bengali nationalism, making it clear that the Bengalis of Bangladesh were distinct from the Bengalis of India" (Hardnews,2018). This divide was stark even in Post partition West Bengal where East Bengali immigrants were called Bongaals whereas Elite local West Bengali people identified themselves as ghotis. East Bengali people lived with what can only be called faint recollections of their land that was snatched away from them suddenly and harshly. East Bengal was far more expansive, diverse and multicultural as compared to West Bengal. Going back in time, West and East Bengal, while having a similar cuisine, displayed vast and distinct cultural variations that were based on local resources and eating customs.

With Assam at one end and Burma at the other, the former East Bengal was primarily a multicultural region, with different culinary traditions freely circulating throughout and fostering diverse identities. Three major rivers run through the lush terrain, which produces more than 100 different types of leafy greens and more than 500 different types of fish in the numerous bodies of water that dot the landscape. Contrarily, West Bengal, which is geographically distinct and has fewer resources than the east, was only a small portion of the huge canvas that was Undivided Bengal (Sen,2018). Not only did East Bengali people find themselves bereft of the resources that once controlled and dictated their cuisines and culinary practices but they faced an increased amount of Shame and stigma regarding their eating and dietary practices, West Bengali traditions had heavy Vaishnav connotations and thus even passed over the occasional garlic and onion in their food, hence for them East Bengali people who utilised all part of a plant including its stems and leaves and consumed all kinds of meat including that of snails, eels and pigeons were both uncultured as well as uncivilised. East Bengali people soon started to feel a deep sense of shame and guilt regarding their traditional culinary practices and soon what came to be known as 'Bengali cuisine' was only a reflection of West Bengal and its dietary practices. According to Arundhati Ray's article Food Prints of Partition for East Bengali refugees or Bongaals "Kolkata's familiar yet alien food was a daily reminder of their rootlessness. "Here too, meals featured rice, dal, vegetables, fish. But they yearned for what their palates were accustomed to: ingredients suffused with the freshness, smell and taste of a landscape's soil, water and air.

For the humble greens and small fish that Kolkata's urbane markets did not deem worthy of stocking. And most of all, for rice from their fields- Saha" ( Mint, 2017). Ray in this article interviews descendants of East Bengal refugees who are striving to maintain and uphold their culinary practices and traditions in order to maintain and extend the life of their culture as well as socio-cultural identity they fondly talk of their rich culinary heritage as well foods such as Khando a sweet made with coconut flakes and liquid date-palm jaggery that is cooked slowly as well pithey and payesh, a delicacy made up of milk, jaggery and flour. For them, keeping these

traditions alive over the pioneering and hegemonic cultural as well as culinary identity of West Bengal is an attempt to keep their 'Bangaaliyat' or East Bengali heritage alive.

Even though the partition through its impact caused much damage to East Bengali culinary practices, the Duration of British Raj in itself was extremely detrimental and damaging towards the cultural identity of this community. Undivided Bengal included what is now Bangladesh, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam. Soon the British came to India and Established Calcutta as its Capital, as a result cash cash-generating crops like indigo, cotton, and poppy took the place of a number of other crops. Over time, construction activities also caused ponds to fill up. This resulted in a significant loss of numerous ingredients and recipes that were used in traditional and regional cuisines. For instance, Shapla Bhela Bhaja (water lily rafts), a snack in which water lily stems were sliced and assembled into constructions resembling rafts, dipped in batter, and deep-fried, was a highly prized delicacy of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) which as a result of colonial exploitations ceased to exist (TelegraphIndia, 2022).

Along with that Many recipes (and ingredients) vanished due to convenience as well. That is the history of choi, a pepper that Bengalis frequently used to spice up cuisine before chillies became commonplace in India. In the end, the humble choi was defeated by the chilli because, unfortunately for the choi, the chilli delivered pungency right away while the choi needed time and effort to bloom. Bengali ingredients and British cooking techniques started to blend during the British occupation of metropolitan Bengal. As the middle-class, cosmopolitan Bengalis grew accustomed to the stew, they added ghee and turmeric to make it their own. "Kitchens were divided by an invisible boundary and a line through the ground in 1947" (TelegraphIndia,022).

## SANJHA CHULHA: THE CHULHA THAT DEFINED INDIAN CUISINE

What does one immediately think of when asked about foods that are stereotypical of Indian cuisine? Most common answers would be either Butter Chicken or some sort of Chicken tikka, seen as the child of the northern part of India, North Indian cuisine defines Indian cuisine in a more mainstream scenario. The main centre of the development and enhancement of this cuisine was Delhi, which interestingly enough was initially ruled and dominated by a moghul taste palette which had its own set of intricacies, most curries were yoghurt based with subtle use of spices such as that of nutmeg, saffron, and cardamom this again was a long drawn culinary tradition drawn from Persian cuisine, where the mughal court once resided. Soft and succulent gola kebabs and dry fruit laden *mutanjan pulao*, that were once found abundantly were rendered to the position of faint memories post partition (Wire,2017). According to an Article by The Wire True Mughlai cuisine originated in Delhi as a result of the close coexistence of Shahjahanabad's four original communities—the Muslim aristocracy, the educated kayasths, members of the court, and the banyas and khattris who owned businesses and banks. This coexistence gave rise to a syncretic culture. Over the course of two and a half centuries, this cuisine evolved and flourished thanks to steadfast patronage long after Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last monarch of Hindustan, was banished. All that changed with the partition. The tandoor, also known as a "tannur" in Arabic, has its roots in Central Asia, where bread is still baked in them.

In Punjab, that was also the tandoor's original purpose. In the Punjabi countryside, the sanjha chulha tradition revolved around a shared tandoor, where women would gather and share details of their day while cooking in their shared oven or Sanjha Chulha (The wire, 2017). Tandoor was an integral part of Punjabi community and traditions. Through this tandoor multiple dishes that were to soon define the modern day Indian cuisine were born, the subtle flavours golu kebabs and Shabdegh ki biryani were now replaced by strong bold flavours with tomato laden curries and the flavours of butter chicken, Rajma Chawal and mouth watering chicken as well as paneer tikkas that were to dominate our taste palettes for generations to come, In Fact the popularisation of butter chicken in itself was a product of partition, KL Gujral is credited with creating Butter Chicken in a tiny restaurant in Peshawar. A restaurateur KL Gujral recognised that Tandoori Chicken would dry out if left unattended all day. Then, with the help of some spices, tomatoes, butter, and milk, he created a simple sauce that the Tandoori Chicken pieces could be dipped into to help them restore moisture and taste. The Butter Chicken was created in this manner(Moti Mahal). Shortly following the partition, Gujral changed the name of this eatery to Moti Mahal and established a branch in Daryaganj, Delhi, where Butter Chicken quickly became a global sensation. Not only that since the Partition did lead to an exchange of sorts of culinary traditions a fusion of flavours that defied the legacy of partition soon emerged, a prime textbook example of the same being Pindi chole that dominates the culinary ethos of both of these countries. Due to The rising popularity of Punjabi cuisine Delhi saw a sharp decline in its Anglo- Indian culinary traditions as well as practices Instead of cutlets, chops, and scones, upscale eateries in Connaught Place now served Indian delicacies that were run by Punjabi families. Early 1940s Anglo- Indian cafes and restaurants like United Coffee House and Kwaliti catered mostly to Europeans and soldiers stationed in Lutyen's Delhi during World War II. The European and Anglo Indian cuisine served at these establishments evolved after Partition as tandoori took over and the Punjabi taste gained popularity(Wire, 2017).

Migration of Punjabis from North West Frontier Province also gave rise to what is now known as the infamous Indian Dhaba Culture. The renowned dhaba culture of Punjab developed as a result of the displaced people of Punjab fleeing their homes on both sides of the border after India's Partition(Outlook 2022). The food they served was standard Punjabi comfort food including rotis, parathas, dal, and subzi. Due to refrigeration issues, the meal was fresh, the service was rapid, and there were no leftovers. So you cooked, sold it, and that was that. The Grand Trunk Road served as their ideal environment for growth, and these dhabas eventually became the lifeline for truckers. The Sher-e-Punjab chain, which included tandoori chicken, roti, and special dal(lentils) as staples, was a pioneer in its day. Additionally, the dhabas were crucial in spreading Punjabi cuisine to the rest of the world Following Partition, fleeing Punjabis migrated across the nation, bringing their culinary traditions with them. Songs have been written in praise of Amritsar's dhaba culture for the incredible variety of foods served there, including stuffed kulchas and chicken (Outlook, 2022). Even Traditions such as snacking, chaat and other corresponding components that seem to essentialise Indian culture were a product of the partition. Immigrants from the modern-day Pakistani city of Karachi brought with them a distinctive tradition known as "evening snacking" to modern-day Mumbai. a little serving of food that should be consumed after lunch but before evening, possibly at tea time. In Mumbai, there were many different types of street cuisine to choose from, like chaat and bhel puri (edtimes,2021). Even Awadhi cuisine went through considerable change with its aristocratic

culinary traditions centred around food items such as malai paan and Shammi kebab dying down a slow and eventual death because of being replaced by street food items such as kali mirch chicken (black pepper chicken) and other forms of chaat.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the 1947 Indian partition had a significant impact on the nation's food culture, affecting regional culinary customs, preferences, and practises. Along with enormous changes in politics and geography, the division had a profound impact on how people prepared, consumed, and related to food.

Millions of people left the country due to its separation, which caused food customs to interchange and cuisines to converge. Borders had divided families who had once shared meals and recipes, which spread culinary knowledge and skills. People had to adjust to new flavours and ingredients as a result, which led to the fusion of many regional cuisines. The sharing of recipes and blending of culinary techniques was beneficial. In combining numerous regional cuisines' ingredients and flavours. The sharing of cooking techniques and recipes led to the emergence of a rich tapestry of delectable foods that reflected the adaptability and resiliency of the populace. Additionally, the division had a significant impact on cultural identity and food symbolism. Food evolved as a symbol of one's background and heritage, representing both communal and religious affiliations. Those who had to leave behind their homes and culinary traditions experienced a sense of nostalgia as a result of the division, which sparked an ongoing initiative to preserve and pass on such customs to the following generation. The impact of the barrier expanded beyond the home kitchen and into the restaurant business. The emergence of new food businesses and eateries catering to different tastes and preferences highlighted the economic and entrepreneurial dimensions of the changing food culture. In essence, the partition of India left an indelible mark on the nation's food culture, influencing what people ate, how they cooked, and what those culinary choices represented. It demonstrated the dynamic nature of food as a cultural artefact, subject to change and adaptation in the face of historical upheavals. The legacy of partition continues to influence Indian food culture today, underscoring the resilience and diversity that define the nation's culinary landscape. In a contemporary setting this becomes more important than ever as India continues to become a melting pot of cultures thereby moving groups to seek out their own cultural traditions.

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