

Doors to Delightful Dishes: Historical Analysis of Culinary Advices through the Prism of a Late Nineteenth Century British Cookery Book

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Abstract:

Cookbooks are used as primary source materials by the food historians for reconstructing the culinary past. Cookbooks are usually considered as a form of prescriptive literature. Authors of cookbooks usually try to prescribe paths for preparation of various kinds of palatable dishes. In the context of colonial India, an explosion in the number of household manuals and cookbooks became visible since late nineteenth century as more and more British women began to arrive in India, to serve their gendered role as the gatekeepers of the British Empire. Through the prism of a particular cookery book published in late nineteenth century, the present paper will elaborate how such cookbooks appeared as something more than a mere compilation of various recipes. This paper will also highlight the ways in which English cookbooks tried to instruct the *memsahibs* about appropriate meal preparation as well as maintenance of a proper culinary setup in British Indian households.

Keywords: Cookbook, Culinary History, Colonial Period, *Memsahibs*, Advices, Native Servants, Prescriptive Literature

Cookbooks are regarded as a very significant primary source for writing culinary history of any particular place and time. In fact, food history writing remains incomplete if cookbooks and cookery columns are not studied in detail for reconstructing the culinary past. Cookbooks are not to be seen as a mere compilation of various traditional and innovative recipes; rather they can act as a reservoir of detailed prescriptions and recommendations for the culinary set up. In the context of British India, the escalation in the number of British women (*memsahibs*) arriving in India since the late nineteenth century, caused a noticeable explosion in the number of household manuals and cookery books which were highly prescriptive in nature. These texts were intended to teach the *memsahibs* the ways of maintaining the 'white, pristine household in colonised land'. These manuals, guidebooks and cookery texts became instrumental in tutoring British women how to prepare appropriate meals in the Indian climate, how to supervise Indian servants while maintaining a proper distance from them, how to handle emergency situation with home remedies and how to maintain cleanliness and hygiene in preparation and serving of various dishes. The present article will elaborate the ways in which such a late nineteenth century cookbook i.e. '*The Wife's Help to Indian Cookery: Being a Practical Manual for Housekeepers*' highlighted the culinary advices for the British Indian households. Through the prism of the above-mentioned text, edited and compiled by W.H. Dawe, this paper will bring out the instructions and prescriptions which were recommended for an ideal meal preparation and appropriate culinary set up in British households in Indian atmosphere.

Victorian England witnessed tremendous development in transport, technology and the production of material goods. These had an impact upon the British domesticity and upon the books produced to assist the women involved. Literacy became widespread in Victorian England with many elementary schools being set up throughout the 1850s-1860s even before compulsory education was introduced in Victorian England in the 1870s. Domestic science became essential in the curriculum for girls who were supposed to become ideal home-maker, care-giver and suitable wives in the companionate marriages. From the 1850s onwards cookery books proliferated as a part of the expansion of the domain of book publishing which followed the removal of tax on paper and the improvements in the printing technology. Books became cheaper and had a new and wide market among the people; readership got expanded.

The huge number of young women, who had to go to India as colonial wives, created a market for books on culinary advices and household guidance. As these *memsahibs* were burdened with the ‘gendered role of the gatekeeper of the Empire’ therefore, the cookery texts contained advices regarding the preservation of the Victorian ideals of behaviours in a seemingly less than ideal environment. *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, Wyvern’s *Culinary Jottings*, Steel and Gardiner’s *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, Edmund’s *Curries and how to Prepare Them*, Franklin’s *The Wife’s Cookery Book*, Brand’s *Fifty Ways of Cooking Vegetables in India*, Dawe’s *The Wife’s Help to Indian Cookery: Being a Practical Manual for Housekeepers* - were just a few of the numerous household guides and the cookbooks published during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed at tutoring the *memsahibs* in various culinary skills.

Cecilia Leong-Salobir in her article “Spreading the Words” has argued that these cookbooks can be seen as ideological tools as well. In the prefaces and dedication pages, authors of cookbooks boldly and proudly proclaimed the colonial women’s role in upholding the home as the white and ideal household in the colonised environment. Leong-Salobir has found the tone of the cookbooks mostly as authoritative. Both Mary Procida and Leong-Salobir have highlighted a common feature of these British cookbooks i.e. the advice to the British women to have little direct involvement in the kitchen, as it was marked as a site of ‘dirt and pollution’. Moreover, Mary Procida has suggested that the British Indian cookbooks served many imperial purposes beyond the function of simple didactic and prescriptive texts. These texts helped in reconfiguring the domestic sphere of the British Raj, to construct new ideas about gender in the Empire and to contribute to the dissemination of the imperial knowledge. The present study of Dawe’s cookery book will reveal that this cookbook can be regarded as a perfect example of the typical prescriptive literature of the time with an aim to guide the British women in India in maintenance of an ideal household and it is also crucial to note that culinary prescriptions became equally significant with the recipes discussed in the text.

W.H. Dawe, who was the Assistant Secretary of the Board of Revenue posted at North Western Province, published his book from London in 1888. Dawe’s book entitled *The Wife’s Help to Indian Cookery: Being a Practical Manual for Housekeepers* clearly stated in the preface that it was “designed to be a Guide” and it “affords opportunities of gaining information, especially in the Art of Indian cookery”. As a compiler he claimed the book might become a “very desirable Reference Book and a most valuable Gift Book”.

The recipes which were incorporated in this cookery book, were marked as ‘carefully selected’ for satisfying the needs of the British residents in India as well as the Anglo Indian families. Like many other cookery books, Dawe’s text also highlighted many hybrid dishes, suitable for the British in the Indian climate. Thus, ‘curry’ formed a crucial part of valuable culinary information based on British Indian experiences. Lizzie Collingham in *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, has argued that British-Indian dining tables were not complete without bowls of curry, which added bite to the rather bland flavours of boiled and roasted meats. The idea of a ‘curry’ is in fact a concept which the Europeans imposed on the Indian food culture. The British learned this term from the Portuguese who described as ‘*Caril*’ or ‘*Caree*’ the broths which the Indians made with butter, pulp of Indian nuts and all sorts of spices. Although they used the word curry to describe dishes from every Indian region, the British were aware of regional differences in the cooking of the subcontinent. In *Curries and How to Prepare Them*, Edmunds stated that “In India there are at least three separate classes of curry, the Bengal curry, the Madras curry and the Bombay curry”. Curry became not just a term which the British used to describe an unfamiliar set of Indian stews, but a dish in its own right, created for the British in India. Dawe in the ‘Analytical Index’ offered a long list of curries-like *Chhackki-Tarkari* or vegetable curry, *Khatta Sabji* curry, *Kaddu-Imlī* curry, *Anda* curry, Bengal Curry, Dal Curry, Hindusthani curry, Portuguese Vindaloo, Malay Curry, Mutton curry, Hilsa Curry, Jhinga (lobster) curry, Hussaini (Beef) Curry etcetera. One special recipe was Lord Clive’s Curry mentioned in page 58 of Dawe’s text and the recipe goes like this—

Cut into thin slices half a dozen onions, one green apple, and a clove of garlic; let them stew until they will pulp in a little good stock, add to them about a teaspoon of curry powder, a little cayenne pepper and salt, a few tablespoon of stock. Any kind of meat cut small may be stewed in this gravy, with a small piece of butter added, rolled in flour.

Another interesting recipe was of Vindaloo which was marked as a Portuguese curry. The British were first introduced to Vindaloo in 1797 when they invaded Goa and then they began to gradually discover delights of the Goan cookery. According to Colleen Taylor Sen, “Vindaloo is normally regarded as an Indian Curry, but in fact it is

a Goan adaptation of the Portuguese dish *carne de vinho e alhos*, or meat cooked in wine vinegar and garlic “. Dawe provided a detailed note on Vindaloo in page 65-66.

The best Vindaloo is prepared in mustard oil or *karwa-tel* (*sarson*). Beef and pork or duck can be made into this excellent curry. The following ingredients are employed in the preparation: *Ghee*, six *chittacks*, lard or oil may be used, garlic, ground, 1 tablespoon full; garlic, bruised, 1 tablespoon full; ginger, ground, 1 tablespoon full, chillies, 2 teaspoon full; coriander seed, roasted, 1 teaspoon full; *Zira* or cumin seed, roasted and ground, half a teaspoon full; bay leaves or *tejpath* 2 or 3; peppercorns, quarter-*chittak*; cloves, half a dozen, roasted and ground; cardamoms, half a dozen, roasted and ground; cinnamon, half dozen sticks; vinegar, quarter-pint. Take a seer of beef or pork, and cut it large square pieces and steep them in the vinegar with salt and the ground condiments given above, for a whole night. Warm the *ghee*, lard or mustard oil with the ingredients in which it had been soaking over night and add the meat with peppercorns and bay-leaves and allow the whole to simmer slowly over a gentle fire couple of hours, or until the meat is quite tender. When preparing pork into Vindaloo, omit the cloves, cardamoms, and cinnamons.

Instructions were also there regarding how to prepare various kinds of broths essential for keeping good health in Indian climate, like chicken broth, veal broth, mutton broth, even calf's foot broth.

British cookery books, besides highlighting various recipes, also gave elaborate discussions about maintenance of an appropriate kitchen set up. Prescriptions regarding proper conduct in the kitchen became a crucial and common part of the manuals and cookbooks, highlighted in the prefaces, introductions and conclusions of such texts. *Wyvern's Indian Cookery Book, Being a New and Revised Edition of Culinary Jottings for Madras* (1904) had a thorough discussion on the most suitable materials for the kitchen utensils: 'copper, aluminium, wrought iron, seamless steel, American agate and enamel ironware'. Such cookery texts further elaborated various minute details essential for the kitchen setup such as how to use a frying pan, what should be a cook's essential equipments in an Indian kitchen, what kind of surface was best for pastry making, and how the kitchen and dining area should be kept clean.

Dawe's cookery book provided a long list of useful utensils and equipments which he marked as 'absolutely requisite in every kitchen or *Bawarchi-khana*'. This list included a couple of *Degchas* for boiling milk, custard, 2 iron spits or *Kabab shiks*, a set of copper stew-pans, *degchas* with covers or *dhakni*, 2 large iron kettles for boiling water, 1 coconut scraper *Nariyal-Katarni*, 3 copper frying and omelette pans, a cook's knife and fork, an iron-stove, a good English chopper, a mincing machine, a large pastry-board and 2 rolling pins or *belan*, half dozen iron dish covers or *Bartan Dhakni*, a supply of enamelled plates, 1 spice box or *garam-masala sinduk*, 2 wooden churns or *ghutnis*, a store almira, a kitchen table etcetera. Dawe's text also highlighted the idea of kitchen cleanliness. In page 7 of the cookery book, Dawe stated:

Every part of the *Bawarchi-khana* (the kitchen) should be scrupulously clean; not only the vessels and pans in daily use but the ceiling, floor, walls and every nook and corner should be kept constantly broomed out..... The cook should be well supplied with large earthen jars or *jalas* for water. The drainage should be well constructed and often attended to. The *memsahib* should make it her duty to pay frequent visits to the kitchen, when any disorder or uncleanliness can be pointed out.

Dawe's text not only put emphasis on kitchen's cleanliness, but also advised the *memsahibs* to remain careful about the proper washing of ingredients of meal preparation. It advised that all the vegetables or *sabzi* should be carefully cleaned from insects and nicely washed, picked over and laid in cold water before being cooked. Particular prescriptions were provided regarding cabbage and cauliflower which were suggested to be washed well in salt and water to destroy the insects which often lurk behind the leaves. The vegetables and meat used for preparing soups were also advised to be cleaned well before getting added to soups. Even for making an omelette, Dawe's prescription was "to have the pan perfectly clean before using". Dawe felt these suggestions as intimately associated with the art of cookery.

The colonizers, who took pride in considering cooking as an art, constantly grumbled against the Indian indifference to consider eating or cooking as an art. Dawe complained that “eating and drinking is far from being observed as an art in India.” Indian natives were criticised for being ignorant of the finer details of cooking which was quite a significant concern of the households of Victorian England. This alleged indifference and ignorance in the matter of cooking heightened the characterisation of the colonized as ‘inferior’ and ‘uncivilized’.

The keeping of enormous number of native servants was a very familiar affair in the British Indian households. Servants were the most accessible source of information on Indian customs and beliefs. The most commonly visible attitude toward the native servants was that of ‘frank distrust and racism’ which was an integral part of the broader colonial discourse regarding the colonised. The entire meal preparation procedure done by the colonized servants in a colonial household was portrayed as ‘unhygienic’ and ‘filthy’. Kitchen in the British Indian household was held as ‘a site of dirt and pollution’ which situated mostly at the back of the house where the main actors were the colonized cooks and helpers. British *memsahibs* were advised to have very little direct involvement with the culinary space. They were further expected not to spend much time in the kitchen and to be cautious that her body and self should not get ‘polluted’ by the contact with the dirt, disease and especially the colonial subjects, perceived as ‘others’, although at the same time it was memsahib’s duty to observe that cleanliness and hygiene were maintained in the process of food production so that her family could get proper healthy and nutritious food. As the anxiety loomed large about the physical danger and filth attached in the kitchen it was British women’s responsibility to supervise that British children could not frequent in the kitchen premises, where also there was a ‘threat of potential moral/sexual corruption’ from the contact with the native servants.

In the discussion of ‘Indian domestic troubles’, Dawe satirically blamed the native servants for most of the troubles.

Who evermore to fool me tries
 And tells my wife a pack of lies
 And charges twice for all he buys?

My Khanshamah

Who smokes my food and cribs my tea,
 or sends the second brew to me,
 and cooks in fat instead of ghee?

My Bawarchi

Khansamah (the chief table attendant) and *Bawarchi* (the cook) were the two most common servants in the British Indian kitchens, as British housewives ‘relinquished control over the domestic space to the Indian domestic servants’. But the colonial discourse reflected through the advice texts always continued to remind the *memsahibs* about their supervisory role in the culinary matters and their strict surveillance upon the natives. The native servants who were regarded as ‘inept and untrustworthy’, were to be strictly monitored and trained. The cookbooks and guides also warned them against the ‘filthy’ practices of the servants. Dawe had commented on the Indian servants (page 4):

The *Naukar Chakar log* appear to be a general source of complaint amongst all, both with the new comer on his arrival and long resident- the complaint is universal: laziness, falsehood, dishonesty and innumerable other vices seem to be innate in them. Every native servant (being more or less naturally indolent and careless) requires strict supervision to have your work satisfactorily performed.

Authors of cookbooks and manuals found the ‘intolerable habit of lying’ as the principal vice among the native servants. The servants were accused of appropriating a little bit of tea, sugar, bread, milk, pepper for themselves. The native servants were criticised further for their ‘carelessness’ in boiling vegetables and in process of roasting, and frying, which was ‘very little understood by the native cooks’. The native servants were viewed as utterly careless in any kind of culinary affairs for which they required strictly to be looked after. The cooks were suggested to be looked after strictly so that they could keep the cooking utensils perfectly clean. Cleanliness was an issue which was never expected from the native people who were allegedly ‘filthy and unclean’ and engaged in ‘unhygienic practices’; therefore, training of these native servants was required in the matter of cleanliness of the British kitchen to prevent various diseases generating from dirt, filth and pollution.

In the concern for hygiene, purification of water always occupied a crucial portion of household manuals and cookbooks. Dawe urged to the British residents that a good filter is to be considered as a matter of utmost importance. Dawe’s text appealed to the readers for being careful about the water which was supplied by the *Bhisti*. The distrust and suspicion towards the native others again becomes visible here. Even the purity of the milk available in India was under question, especially when it was being served by native *goalas*. *Goalas* were always criticised in such cookbooks for their regular habit of adulterating the milk. Dawe advised in page 19 of the text – “It is best to get a *Goala* to bring his cows and to have them milked at your door. Watch the *Goala* while he is milking as they are very crafty in adulterating the milk”. These cookery books including Dawe’s text hence demonstrated clearly the colonial discourse on the native subjects.

Thus, it can be stated in the concluding remarks that, English cookery books written for the British residents in India did not contain recipes only, but also highlighted advices on entire diet, cleanliness and culinary infrastructure. Few books were only restricted to recipes of various kinds. These texts helped to reconfigure the domestic space of the Raj. Cookbooks gave the *Memsahib* a ‘sense of reliability and consistency in her efforts to maintain the colonial home’ and also provided some sort of ‘belonging to the wider colonial community’ in a comparatively isolated land. Dawe’s cookbook was a perfect example of this genre. An interesting journey into the culinary world of British households of late nineteenth century India, can be undertaken through the pages of this text. Dawe’s *The Wife’s Help to Indian Cookery*, therefore, proved to be an essential text for reconstructing the history of culinary advices for the British in late colonial India.

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