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# An Indian restaurant experience in Glasgow

## A tale of two curries

In Glasgow Indian cuisine is extremely popular and widely enjoyed. As **Andrew MacLaren** and **Sonya Purewal** show, Scotland's largest city is also the epicentre of a twisted and complicated mixture of debate, conjecture and rumour surrounding the development of Indian cuisine in the UK.

**T**HE DEVELOPMENT OF Indian cuisine both in popularity and style in Britain has been so great that Robin Cook once hailed Chicken Tikka Masala as Britain's national dish. Indeed, the ostensibly Indian dish is widely claimed to have been invented in Glasgow's infamous Shish Mahal restaurant in the city's West End. This claim is so passionately supported that local MP Mohammad Sarwar backed an early day motion in parliament to secure the birth rites of Tika Masala, recognising that it was invented in Glasgow by Ali Ahmed Aslam, proprietor of the Shish Mahal.<sup>1</sup> Such is the hype around this debate, it is easy to lose focus on the fundamental elements involved.

Chicken Tikka Masala is termed a 'British' dish, yet it is Indian cuisine; it was invented in Scotland and if one was to ask someone from India, they would never have heard of it. This is an intricate and confusing debate and one that infers the notion that 'British curry' restaurants could be offering products that are so far removed from their country of origin that it becomes difficult to identify aspects that distinguish them as authentic Indian restaurants. Perhaps the 'Glasgow Scale' might evolve into a measurement of curry authenticity rather than coma severity. In the following discussions the concept of authenticity is explored and applied to the experience in one of Glasgow's offerings that claims to be an authentic Indian restaurant, the Dhabba restaurant.

### Authenticity

There is not one absolute definition of authenticity; it is a concept that has proved very difficult to distill in the past and researchers have defined it in various ways. Authenticity has been defined as being that which is genuine or real or at least believed or accepted to be such. Authentic food products are prepared using the same ingredients and processes as found in the country, region or culture of origin. Globalisation and mutual influence amongst cultures and subsequently that of food production and consumption have had an effect on cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> As a result 'authenticity' has become a cherished entity that is protected by legislation outlining the appropriate use of certain terms and names.

Attempting to understand authenticity is nothing

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new; it is a question of one's interpretation of reality, as there may be a 'distinction between "appearance" and "reality", between what things seem to be and what they are.'<sup>3</sup> In this sense, depending on one's interpretation of reality, an experience could both be authentic and unauthentic simultaneously. From a societal perspective of reality, a restaurant experience

could appear to be unauthentic within the framework for authenticity that the society has created yet, at the same time, an individual within that society could

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interpret the reality of the experience as authentic. Thus the restaurant experience in question is neither proved nor disproved to be authentic, it simply just exists.

There is a general consensus within the literature that suggests authenticity is a construct focused on providing an exact and accurate encounter of a particular experience, in this case a restaurant experience. However, difficulties with this are encountered when one tries to define exactly what the word authenticity means and how subjectivity is accounted for.<sup>4</sup> Although there are areas of agreement, tensions exist within the authenticity literature that illustrate basic difficulties in defining authenticity as discussions seek to classify different concepts and incarnations of it.<sup>5</sup> Authenticity is such a general term that it must be married to a particular concept and that concept must be treated as a distinct entity.

Much of the literature on authenticity is concerned with defining 'object authenticity' and thus applies tangible criteria to determine the extent to which something is authentic. Difficulties arise when an attempt is made to measure the authenticity of an experience. Furthermore, often intangible concepts such as experience are measured using criteria developed for 'object authenticity', causing inaccuracies and incomparable arguments for debate.

The focus of this article is on an authentic restaurant experience and, in particular, an authentic Indian restaurant experience. The idea of an authentic restaurant tries to provide something more adventurous for diners and essentially it tries to promote a sense of genuine culture through cuisine and surroundings. It is important to acknowledge that food is only a component of a restaurant experience and, therefore, authentic food does not equate to an authentic experience.<sup>6</sup> However, food is a focal component of an experience and surroundings may well contribute to the interpretation of that food being authentic. These discussions relate back to the subtleties in defining authenticity, particularly where experience is concerned as experience is an intangible concept and tied closely to one's own sense of reality. Thus it is very possible that one could consume truly authentic food



Vinod Pandey (left) and Manoj Sharma, the chefs of the Dhabba, Glasgow in the kitchen. (Opposite) Vinod tosses a *roomali roti* (literally, a handkerchief) as its name suggests, a soft and delicate bread which is incredibly thin and it's a first for Scotland. (Author)

whilst interpreting a wholly unauthentic experience.

When Indian restaurants were first opening up in Britain, guests may have felt they were getting an authentic experience to an extent through the food; they were actually receiving modified food that was thought to suit them better. This was often food being served by first and second generation Indians in restaurants playing Indian music with traditional Indian decor. However, it is now widely realised that a typical menu in an Indian restaurant in Britain is likely to feature dishes one would never find on a menu on the India subcontinent, the term 'Balti' is said to have originated in the curry district of Birmingham.

The Indian restaurant industry in Britain represents a saturated market where differentiation is key to success. According to Britain's Food Standards Agency, eating in Indian restaurants accounts for two thirds of all restaurant custom in the UK. As price differentiation becomes more and more competitive, trading under the label of authenticity has become fashionable. However, a tension exists between the authentic and the successful, as a business that trades on being authentic can only justify being truly authentic if that translates into a business model that will attract customers. As such, it would only seem sensible to try to be authentic if it points toward economic benefits for the business.

## A brief history of 'British' curry

Britain's relationship with Indian food is nearly 400 years old; such is the history of the relationship between Britain and India that certain kinds of 'Indian food' could even arguably be defined as British. This is the case because the first Indian dishes that were introduced in the UK were modified to suit the British palate. With the increasing growth of tourism and service sectors and the era of the 'celebrity chef', people have been given the opportunity to travel and

experience different cultures. Thus, interest in food and travel has become a dominant feature within British society and people are willing to explore and appreciate what the world has to offer. This has allowed Indian restaurateurs to experiment slightly more and start operating their restaurants in a more 'authentic' manner, but it has also made the consumer more discerning, causing them to seek a more authentic restaurant experience.<sup>7</sup>



The word curry originates from a south Indian word 'kari', meaning sauce or gravy. The authenticity of Indian food in Britain is regularly debated as the food served in Indian restaurants in the UK has been subject to varied Anglo-Asian influences, according to Panjabi.<sup>8</sup> Common examples

of inconsistencies between India and Britain in such dishes as Vindaloo, Jhal Farezi or Madras curry fuel the debate as to whether Indian food in Britain can be deemed Indian at all. Traditionally when dining

These customs include consuming food while sitting on the floor or on cushions, and consuming food without cutlery: Indian food should be consumed using one's hands

in India, there are certain customs that are upheld during the meal. These customs include consuming food while sitting on the floor or on cushions, and consuming food without cutlery: Indian food should be consumed using one's hands. Modifications have been made to recipes and procedures, and different eating styles from around the world influence one another. Therefore, most modern Indian restaurants in Britain offer an experience that has been altered to suit the needs and expectations of consumers. Changes to eating practices have been made to make the guest feel more comfortable with their surroundings by being able to identify with particular familiarities, an example of restaurateurs compromising authenticity to achieve a balance between tradition

and consumer expectations. So just what makes an authentic Indian restaurant, and just how authentic can an Indian restaurant experience in Glasgow be?

## The Dhabba

Established in 2002 in Glasgow's city centre, the Dhabba had as its *raison d'être* to provide something that the Scottish restaurant trade had not seen before: a truly, authentic north Indian restaurant. The original concept of a 'Dhabba' in north Indian culture is of small roadside stalls that provide food; over the years they have developed into beloved institutions across the north of India. Dhabbas have become synonymous with good, hearty, Indian home-style cooking. By definition a Dhabba is a modest place, the Indian equivalent of a truck stop, but, by one of India's great culinary ironies, a good Dhabba almost always serves better food than far grander restaurants.

The Dhabba, in Glasgow, tries to emphasise its Indian roots and culture through home-style cooked food and décor to create an overall authentic experience for the guest. Passionate customer service is also cited as integral to the experience. The concept is unique when compared to the typical 'British curry' houses in Glasgow and this has garnered the Dhabba a well-deserved reputation. However, relating the Dhabba experience to the literature covered above exposes a more complicated relationship between the objective and subjective elements of the experience.

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The Dhabba has been widely reviewed and critical restaurant reviews can have a significant impact on any business. The Dhabba has experienced largely positive reviews, which relate its quality to the fact that it offers an authentic Indian dining experience.<sup>9</sup> Phrases such

as 'proper Indian food', 'unique' and 'never seen before' allude to an experience that is substantially removed



from the conventional 'British curry' house. This evidence illustrates that creating an experience perceived to be authentic can create success for an Indian restaurant. Such reviews give the business a reputable status, a driver of custom, and a benchmark for competitors.

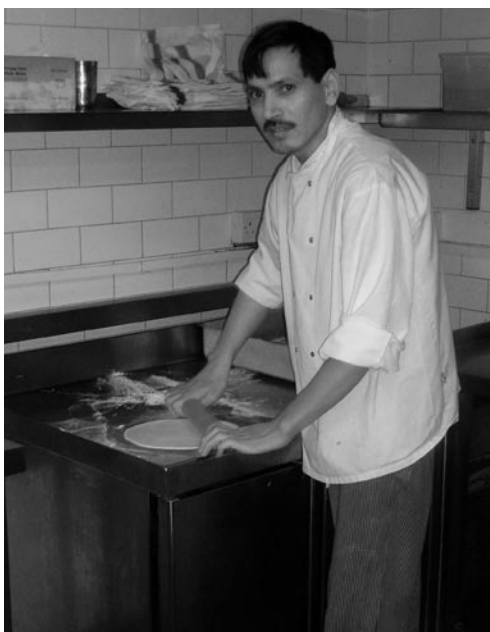
Further to the assertion that food is an integral component in the creation of an authentic experience, engaging with the menu highlights several differentiating factors between the Dhabba and other Indian restaurants.<sup>10</sup> The menu consists of an extensive range of dishes unlike those served in other Indian

restaurants. Typical popular dishes such as Chicken Korma and Chicken Tikka Masala do not feature on the Dhabba menu, as they are regarded as unauthentic dishes. However, the Dhabba's menu features a European section like most other Indian restaurants in Britain. Despite this, the menu communicates a more authentic approach to Indian cuisine than the majority of restaurants.

## The cuisine

The chefs in the Dhabba kitchen all come from India where they have been classically trained and have a wealth of experience cooking Indian cuisine. Because of this, the food preparation techniques are traditional and without shortcuts; there is a passion for staying true to 'Grandmother recipes' which are passed-down through generations of Indian families. Chef Manoj Sharma describes the cooking preparations and how they differ from 'British curry' restaurants as every element of a dish is prepared from scratch, which is uncommon compared to the typical 'shortcuts' used in other restaurants. He describes in detail one his most popular curries, the Chicken Murg Maskawala, something that sounds similar but differs significantly

in almost every way from Chicken Tikka Masala. For Chicken Murg Maskawala, made with tandoori chicken, tomatoes, cashew nuts, butter and cream, the curry paste, marinate and gravy are prepared freshly every day; this differs from more mainstream restaurants where one generic gravy is used for the preparation of every dish including Tikka Masala. Furthermore, the meat is cooked in its gravy slowly to ensure tenderness and flavour. Chicken Murg Maskawala is cooked in a charcoal oven as opposed to the cheaper and more easily maintained gas ovens used in other restaurants, this cooks the dish in a more authentic manner, giving a distinct texture and flavour to the meat.



Despite the faithfulness to traditional methods and ingredients, there are certain elements of the food preparation that cannot be achieved because particular ingredients are not available in the UK. Fresh mustard leaves, Indian carrots and Indian buttermilk are important ingredients that simply cannot be sought beyond India. Furthermore, UK regulations prevent lambs being slaughtered as young as they are in India; thus the way the older, tougher lamb is cooked must be altered. Goat is also a common meat dish in India but it is not bred for consumption in the UK. Freshness is also an issue as some ingredients are available but not in the same wild and fresh quantity they are in India. Cooking techniques differ significantly too as labour costs between India and the UK are so different. Mr Sharma explains that an Indian kitchen would be constantly occupied day and night; often dishes will require five chefs to work through the night to prepare them. This is achievable in India as labour is so cheap and traditionally skilled individuals are widely available. In Scotland, recreating such techniques would bankrupt a business; thus compromises have to be made to recreate dishes with more economical processes.

Between the authentic elements that are strictly

adhered to and the aspects that are impossible to recreate, there are elements of the experience that the Dhabba purposefully alters. Goat is a prime example; even if goat meat were available, customers would not choose to eat it. Furthermore, if some of the cooking techniques were exactly recreated, the income required to cover the costs of such labour-intensive techniques would be so high that the market could not bear such prices at the Dhabba. Dishes are also cooked in a way that achieves a slightly milder taste than one would experience in India, because the British palate cannot cope with the spicier versions of dishes in India.

## Indian tradition versus Western influences

The consensus amongst customers is that their initial impressions of the restaurant are positive and that the staff are warm and welcoming. A significant contributory factor to the perceived authenticity of the Dhabba experience is that all the waiting staff are from north India, which adds to the authentic atmosphere of the restaurant. Other aspects commonly cited are the quality of the meal itself, the colours, décor and music, creating a perceived authentic ambience. Despite the vast majority of Dhabba diners considering it to be authentic, many of its clients have never visited India. The north Indian staff have particularly insightful opinions. In general the Dhabba is regarded as the

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best you can get in Scotland, not exactly the same as one would experience in a restaurant in India, but as close as the location and environment will allow. Modifications to suit local customers are highlighted within all aspects of the restaurant experience. The

modifications to the experience are also highlighted as vital in order to ensure success.

Pictures and images of the north of India feature throughout the restaurant, illustrating an effort to transport the guest to that area and enhance the authenticity of the overall experience. Ornaments are presented within the restaurant, providing another cultural dimension to the atmosphere, creating curiosity amongst guests, and allowing staff to 'break the ice' and communicate with guests. The cuisine is the true focal point of this restaurant, however, and a passion to stay true to 'Grandmother recipes' and traditional methods has earned the restaurant a deserved reputation in the culinary world. The Dhabba has even featured in a television programme that was aired on national television.<sup>11</sup> This programme focussed on the Dhabba as an example of an authentic Indian restaurant and provided insights into the concept as well as following the kitchen brigade whilst they prepared a

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popular authentic Indian dish. It is evident that the Dhabba is aware of the myriad elements required to attempt to recreate an authentic restaurant experience in a location as remote from India as Scotland and there is a shrewd focus on tangibly authentic 'objects.' Because of this, the cuisine and ethos behind it is painstakingly true to Indian tradition, but there is also a tacit awareness that the customers will only be willing to pay for a certain degree of authenticity so certain elements and traditional techniques must be adapted.

### Can you create an 'authentic experience'?

The case of the Dhabba exposes several debates within the authenticity literature: tangible versus intangible, product versus experience, perceived versus absolute. There is no doubt that this restaurant serves truly 'authentic Indian cuisine' but the authenticity of the experience it provides is so subjective, it illustrates the somewhat foggy nature of defining an experience.

In a market that is so dominant in the culinary landscape of the UK, effective differentiation separates success and failure. The Dhabba differentiates by offering a perceived authentic Indian dining experience and its success lies in focussing on the elements that will infer authenticity to diners without disenchanting them with the experience itself. As a result, the major focuses are the cuisine which is as authentic as is possible given the location, using traditionally trained chefs with traditional ingredients and techniques; the waiters too are from India and are extremely knowledgeable and finally the interior design creates an exotic atmosphere. Thus the Dhabba proves that authenticity in experience is almost impossible to objectively quantify, however, there are tangible elements that can be quantified as authentic and these highlight to the customer distinct differences. These tangible differences influence the subjective intangible side of the experience, informing the customer that the overall experience must indeed be authentic.

A balancing act between authenticity and satisfying customers' desires is clearly carried out at the Dhabba. To its diners the Dhabba is truly authentic, it is different and exotic in every way

that differentiates it from the run of the mill 'British curry' houses in Glasgow but it also has to accommodate local peculiarities of taste, procurement barriers and labour costs. So is it authentic? The subjectivity of experience means that it is impossible and pointless to objectively define an experience as authentic or unauthentic.

However, because devout attention is paid to the detail of the tangibly authentic objects, the intangibles take care of themselves. The result is an experience that customers believe is authentic and they return often because they know there is a difference. They may not be fully aware of exactly what the differences are but they know they exist and that is all that matters. Had he enjoyed the Dhabba's Murg Maskawala, Robin Cook might have described it as an authentic North Indian Curry experience—but an unauthentic 'British curry' experience—such is the gulf between it and a Chicken Tikka Masala. However, the success of this restaurant indicates an experience that most certainly lives up to diners' expectations and the tale of these two curries shows there is an expansive range on the

scale of Indian restaurant authenticity in Glasgow. An experience as a whole cannot be objectively quantified but objective elements within an experience provide handles which can help define the experience. In the case of the Dhabba restaurant, awareness of this has provided a recipe for success.



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