

Kitchen Publics:  
*Indian Delights*, Gender and South African Indian Identity

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In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Durban, a woman wishing to concoct a biryani, kurma, khuri or patta employed the skills and knowledge transmitted through apprenticeships to her mother, aunties, or mother-in-law. Her repertoire of dishes was largely a familial or circumstantial inheritance, falling within a matrilineage of recipes that had traversed the Indian Ocean. Women who immigrated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as labourers and/or wives, under indenture or in trading families, had incorporated imported and locally grown ingredients to make meals that tasted of home. The familiar savour of meat or vegetables prepared through applications of jeera, arad, lavan, methi and other spices, made daily nourishment for the body also a ritual of cultural reproduction and transmission. Just as crucially, pleasures of the palate and aesthetics of the table were a medium for local (and commercial) adaptation, experimentation and change. As is the case for other diasporic communities, food and the material relations of sustenance have reflected the varied and changing socio-economic, gendered, and cultural realities of Indian South Africans.

By the late twentieth century, an authentic-tasting biryani might be attributed to another skill: literacy. Putting gastronomic knowledge into writing both reflected and shaped the way community was being imagined among people of Indian ancestry, as well as localized changes in family, gender and class relationships. The development of culinary print culture turned household kitchens into public spaces and their gendered readership into agents of diaspora.<sup>1</sup> In Durban, the most important text in this process was the cookbook *Indian Delights*, compiled and published by the Women's Cultural Group of Durban, a long-standing association of mostly Muslim women, in 1960.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Our argument, of course, is premised on the theoretical assertions of Anderson, Habermas and others who link print culture to the production of national identities of various kinds. For the purpose of this conference, we have chosen not summarized this well-known literature.

<sup>2</sup> The authors are currently writing a book on this group, tentatively titled "East Wind through My House: The Women's Cultural Group of Durban".

The success and circulation of *Indian Delights* makes it possible to consider the interface between food and text as aspects of cultural change—and to focus on those gendered spaces in which blended practices of cooking and literacy affected collectively imagined meanings of national/diasporic identity. In this paper, we focus on two aspects through which this can be observed: The first and main point relates to the compilers of the cookbook who, in their aspirations to produce a literary work—albeit one with a focus on preserving traditions—sought to make modern, public citizens of themselves. Members of the Women’s Cultural Group collected varied, oral food knowledges, which they translated into replicable, print-based recipe formulas and then collated into a single “Indian” cookbook interspersed with proverbs, stories, and other narratives of a cultural past. Sales of this runaway best-seller have sustained the Group’s civic life and philanthropic involvements for half a century. The second point relates to readership and the social life of the book as an artifact that crosses oceans and kitchen thresholds. Into its 13<sup>th</sup> edition and with over 300,000 books sold locally and internationally, *Indian Delights* is regarded as a standard gift to young brides and culinary novices. With its wide circulation, this text provides a common household reference of Indian South African communal identity and its transoceanic origins.

### **Taste in Translation: Gathering and Recording**

In 1954, thirteen women in Durban, under the leadership of Zuleikha Mayat, formed the Women’s Cultural Group as an organization through which to channel their creative and civic energies, to cultivate their friendships and their intellects, and to express themselves as modern women. Some of them had husbands in the Arabic Study Circle which, as Shamil Jepee has chronicled, was a scholarly group of laymen interested in modernist interpretations of Islam and the study of texts and language.<sup>3</sup> The Circle sponsored public lectures and speech contests that were open to women’s participation, and the Group was born from the enthusiasm of women finding themselves to be intellectually successful and outspoken in these forums. Comprised mainly of Muslim women, members aimed to establish something different from existing Muslim women’s associations.<sup>4</sup> The Women’s Cultural Group, despite its generic-sounding name, was lively in pushing at boundaries of accepted gender proprieties through performances in plays they

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<sup>3</sup> Jepee, Shamil, citation

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Mehfile Khwateene Islam, which the Group saw as conservative and old-fashioned in their views and limited in their charitable focus.

wrote themselves, experimental fundraising events, lecture forums, and artistic involvements. Group affiliations spanned a limited but important range of linguistic, religious, cultural and racial designations, reflecting the efforts of its leadership to create the group as a cosmopolitan entity. It was open to “all women over the age of sixteen (16) years.”<sup>5</sup>

Still, membership drew women mainly from Muslim, upper-middle-class Indian households, and this shaped its aims and development over time. The Group identified itself as an association of housewives coming together to extend their gendered labour into the community at large. All were literate, having received a formal education, and identified themselves with the broader trend of post-war domestic modernization occurring around the globe and represented in popular magazines. Zuleikha Mayat explained that the idea was to cultivate the talents of “the ordinary housewife, who was sitting at home, being a bonsai, really. They had talent [but] they didn’t even know what talent they had”. For this reason, they invited professional women (scholars and doctors such Fatima Meer, Hilda Kuper, Deeva Bagwan, and Vildin Juna) as “patrons” but not necessarily as members. “Ours was a little housewife thing that started off... We were just housewives and so on. Also some of the members might be intimidated by [professional women]. So you have to protect this.” At a time in which educational opportunities were limited for many women, the Group provided an avenue for education, as well as the development of artistic, financial and leadership skills. Mayat’s own literary orientation—with a certificate in Journalism from UNISA and a weekly newspaper column in *Indian Views*—as well as the influence of its “patrons” of a more scholarly bent impacted the aspirations of the Group as a whole.

Into its first few years, the Group considered embarking on a literary project as a means to raise funds to provide educational bursaries for disadvantaged children, but were unsure what to do. Zuleikha Mayat explained that

We had been working in isolation, we had been working in the community, we’d been always wanting to expand on our activities and also to help people at the same time, so members are constantly asked to bring in ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Frene Ginwala, on a visit from London, asked Mayat whether the Group would be interested in helping her produce a study of Indian South Africans which she had been commissioned to write.

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<sup>5</sup> Woman’s Cultural Group Constitution, 20 October 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Z Mayat, 6 October 2008.

Mayat says that she reported this idea to the members but not many felt such a thing was within their capacity, “so that fell flat.”<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, they became irritated when anthropologist Hilda Kuper at one of their meetings asserted that after a century in South Africa, Indian South Africans had failed to produce a literary work of note. Zuleikha Mayat objected strongly that P.S. Joshi’s *Tyranny of Colour*, Ansuva Singh’s *Behold the Earth Mourns*, and B.D. Lalla’s collection of poems, *Black Coolie* were fine examples of Indian work. More importantly, Mayat stressed to Kuper, the masses of Indians lived in poverty and did not have access to proper education. Indians needed to time to produce works of note.

I told Hilda – I said, “Listen, literature is written when there is, you know, satisfaction here. You may be angry, but the other social structures must be there. You can’t be working in the shop and trying to get pennies together, sending money to India, to the family there, looking after things there ... there’s no time for [writing].”<sup>8</sup>

But Kuper had clearly touched a nationalistic nerve and as Mayat puts it, “I told the girls, ‘Come on! Let’s do something’”.<sup>9</sup> One of the members, Hawa Bibi Moosa, suggested that they submit a recipe for *chevda* to Post Toasties to put on the cereal box. “If they put it on the box,” remembers Mayat, “you’ll earn some money. So when she proposed this, I said ‘Leave the Post Toasties, lets start a book!’ They said, ‘What book?’ I said, ‘A cookery book!’”.<sup>10</sup> The idea of producing a cookery book brought together some of the divergent skills and interests of Group members, those with talents in the kitchen and those with literary inclinations, where everyone’s contribution could be valued.

It was a project, too, in which the private duties of homemaker could be put to valuable use in the fashioning of a public voice and presence for women in the Group. Moreover, it reflected their generations’ own experience of the changing structures and mobility of family. In a letter to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor of *World of Cookbooks*, dated 16 February 1988, Zuleikha Mayat explained that *Indian Delights* was ‘the result of a first generation of South African women who could no longer spare the time to teach the cooking to their daughters owing to such factors as breaking up the extended family system and mothers having to work outside the home to

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<sup>7</sup> Transcription of interview by KwaMuhle Museum, 2003, ZM personal files.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, 7 March 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, 6 October 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Transcript of Interview by KwaMuhle Museum, 2003. ZM personal files.

supplement family income.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even more crucially, these women were the first generation to see their own daughters with expanded opportunities for higher education and overseas travel. Zohra Moosa, one such mother and one of the original thirteen members of the Women’s Cultural group, recalls:

Somebody suggested ‘why don’t we have a recipe book?’ because today the young girls are all so busy studying, going to university, or they come out of University and get married so they don’t have the time to learn from their mothers, to cook. We didn’t have recipe books, so we thought it would be a good idea if we had a recipe book where they can refer to it. And not only the girls, but the boys who go away too, overseas ... they all refer to the book, you know.<sup>12</sup>

Not all Group members were convinced, initially, that a cook book would sell. Few Indian South African women were literate and, in many circles, culinary knowledge appeared ubiquitous and not something anyone would pay money for. There were proposals for a more modest project. But others, confident in their vision, ‘rebelled against what we considered to be scaling down our aspirations. Eventually, reason and common sense prevailed.’<sup>13</sup> Still, the debate appears to have fine-tuned their analysis and anticipation of a market for such a text. Mayat’s introduction to the first edition of *Indian Delights* acknowledged that “The cookery book, as such, is something that is foreign to Indian housewives”<sup>14</sup> and explained how transmission of recipes and skills across generations had long been transmitted through example. And, she argued, much more than tasty meals were at stake in this training. Young Indian women inevitably faced a specifically female economy of family reputation, in which cookery prowess featured prominently in the arsenal of talents a young bride was expected deploy in her new marital home, as a demonstration of proper upbringing and her usefulness. (“[E]xtreme care is taken that no novice is given in marriage”). Yet, all this was changing:

[W]ith the rest of the world, our modern way of life is such that mothers can no longer teach each individual dish to daughters under the old rigid conditions. Girls stay longer at school and manage their own homes sooner than in the olden days, where they still had to serve a term of apprenticeship under the mother-in-law. Under these changing circumstances, one finds the need of a good and reliable cookery book an essential entity;

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<sup>11</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, 22 Feb 2008

<sup>13</sup> Women’s Cultural Group Eighteenth Anniversary Pamphlet, 1972.

<sup>14</sup> Mayat, Zuleikha, (ed) *Indian Delights*, first edition. Women’s Cultural Group, 1960. p. 14.

one that will be a boon both to the young initiate as well as the experienced housewife, who will refer to the recipes contained therein as an aid to memory..”<sup>15</sup>

Advancing girls’ education was a key focus of Women’s Cultural Group activities and it is notable that the cookbook is matter-of-factly proposed as a practical substitute for the often insular world of extended family relations that these authors were themselves shaped by. Like post-war women in other parts of the world, they saw their own generation of womanhood as an advance guard of modernization. As such, their initiative in producing a book of recipes was a validation of changes in family and women’s opportunities, even as it re-asserted the figure of the Indian housewife within a gendered and cultural divisions of labour.

*Indian Delights* shows itself to be a squarely modern product as an expression of faith *both* in progress and in preservation.<sup>16</sup> The authors’ regard for ancestral mothers’ culinary expertise can be observed in their methods of recipe compilation and their sense of urgency in translating memory into print. Khadija Vawda, another of the original thirteen, conveys the Group’s general confidence in the power of script to archive cultural and gendered knowledge:

One of the main ideas was to get the old recipes down. As time goes on, people forget ... they use modern recipes. We used the old recipes of our mothers. Nowadays it is not mother’s cooking. We wanted to retain this ... retain how meals were prepared in “them days”. The idea was to retain the old methods. Do you notice now that *papad* is a lost art and samoosa *pur* is bought readymade? All this is most time consuming and people don’t have time. Most people buy *rotis*. In times to come, people are bound to forget our lentils ... mugh ... *mugh-ni-dhal* ... the youngsters don’t seem to prefer it. But what if they want to try it? There may be no granny to show them. That’s why we have the book. They can follow it.<sup>17</sup>

To “get the old recipes down”, members of the group drew upon the knowledge of senior members in their own families and households, but they also approached acquaintances and the public at large. This meant that the book’s content is a reflection of the compilers’ networks and mobility in the community and around the city. Mobility was affected by gendered and religious proprieties, as well as official racial zoning, and in this members were sometimes moving across boundaries in a way that raised eyebrows. Gori Patel, a member from the early period explained

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> The binary of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ is problematically utilized to express a temporal reality of past and future: as many have argued, ‘tradition’ is a modern concept. Thus, while *Indian Delights* orients its gaze to the past, its effect and interpretation by readers/viewers of the book has

<sup>17</sup> Interview, K. Vawda, 17 October 2008.

that she relied on the liberalism of her husband to legitimate her movements through the city for various Group activities. Her sisters and mothers, as well as others, disapproved:

You see, I had the habit of not asking the family. I just – I get the permission from my husband, that’s all. Because everyone – even my sisters and them – they all were very angry with me. They say, now you going walking in the Grey Street... [you have] no shame... But my father was very modern, too, huh. I know. I tell them, ‘If Papa was here, you know, he would have encouraged me to do [this].’<sup>18</sup>

Where Group members did not have family access to grannies, they made contact through domestic employees, employees from family-run businesses or neighbours. The aim was a book as inclusive as possible of “Indian” cuisine represented in Durban. Something of their conception of what this meant can be found in the forward of the first edition, written by Fatima Meer, which briefly traces the history of Indians in South Africa and underscores the region’s culinary heterogeneity. For Meer, whatever the social, economic, and political consequences of difference among Indians, it at least “makes their cooking particularly attractive”.<sup>19</sup> Meer identified only four broad groups: the Tamils and Telegus from South India; Hindustanis from the North; and “two groups of Gujeratis, differentiated by religious affiliations in food habits.” There were, of course, many other ways of expressing differences, such as those of social class, region of ancestral origin, ethnic or clan group, migration patterns, and language. Even among the Muslim passenger classes there were distinct culinary tastes and methods of cooking between ethnic groups broadly identified as Memon, Surti, Konkani, and Mia-bhai. “The old recipes”, the ones existing in memory and practice, belonged to family and ethnic lineages.

Patel notes that they made use of their connections as best they could in trying to achieve inclusivity for what was to be a compendium of “Indian” (or diasporic) delights:

[We] used to go home to home. If I, you know, I got some old grannies – say my *kala* [aunt] is there – so I know them and I tell Mrs. Mayat...then they give us recipe... We make an appointment and ... we take our ingredients, everything, and go there...lot of people we went to ... We went even Tamil people’s house, Parsee people’s house, *Bhania* people’s house.... for recipe. Like, I don’t know the *Bhania* people but the other members will know them so she will introduce us, “let us go to that house and that” .... That’s why that book is very thick. All recipes – and even for the confinement too – everything is there.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, G. Patel, 26 May 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Indian Delights, First Edition, p. 3

The cookbook was meant to capture the diversity not only of regional preparation but also of local preparations. Zuleikha Mayat explains that they tried not only for a spread of “ethnic recipes” but also from “all classes of society”.

I had even recipes in there from people working in our homes—those are the *kalas* [Goolam, is this an Indian servant in this case?] and my one sister in law, Mrs. Aisha Mahomady, had an Indian girl working for them, Lutchmee, and she virtually grew up with them and she had lots of Tamilian recipes... We’ve got lots of recipes from Gujerati Hindu people, from the Dhupelia family, from the Popatlall Kara family.

She concedes, however, that “meals, as cooked in certain strata of Hindu and Muslim homes appear to have been given preference. The simple reason for this is that access to these homes, via our members, has been easier.”<sup>20</sup> For this reason, Mayat asserts, the first edition “in no way claims to be a comprehensive and complete encyclopaedia of Indian Cooking in South Africa...”<sup>21</sup>. In somewhat of a contrast, Meer’s forward glosses over circumstantial bias, rather producing a poetic sense of the diversity it captures under its encompassing title: although “a basic uniformity may be abstracted in respect of Indian cooking in general, each of these groups have so elaborated and distinguished their own repertoire of dishes, as to accommodate in each, distinctive forms of food preparations.” So, while Gujarati cooking may have had “symptoms of upper class cooking,” the cuisine of the descendents of indentured Indians was “subdued in the variety of commodities used, [but] enriched in taste by a wealth of knowledge in ways of preparation.”<sup>22</sup>

Sherbanu Lockhat, a second generation Group member, recalled the conditions in which her mother prepared meals—with big families and traditional technologies. Her mother, known as Chotima (as the youngest of five daughters-in-law living in the household she was called ‘small mother’),

was a very good cook, my grandmothers were very good too ... my mother’s mother was an excellent cook. And because we had the farm in Westville, you see at that time there were no freezers and things. So my grandfather used to bring ... his friends and say “right, cook this, cook this”... sometimes my grandfather used to tell her on Sunday morning, “I’m getting ten people for lunch so you’ll have to cook X amount”, whatever. So my mother and them used to go into the garden, go and run up to the fowls, and bring the fowls and cut them, because you know we had to say the word “Bismilla”, you know in the name of Allah, they used to cut them, skin them, do it themselves, they used to wash clean, and

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<sup>20</sup> *Indian Delights*, first edition. p. 16

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.



cook it and serve. There was no such thing of saying, “I can’t do it,” “I don’t have a maid,” or “I can’t do it today,” or something ... no. If they said this had to be done, you had to do it.<sup>23</sup>

Lockhat’s description highlights another important feature about putting into writing the oral knowledge of older generations of women—the problem of their translation into a language of precision and replicability such that “no difficulty should be encountered by the average person” in producing a given dish.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, the meaning of ‘average person’ (or rather “average housewife”, since this is the presumed reader of *Indian Delights*) was changing, as was the social context. Putting into writing the methods of women who crafted meals in a time where it was normative to cook for large numbers, in the Durban heat without benefit of refrigeration—thus necessitating ritual slaughter and preparation just prior to meals—required more than transcribing recipes into print from the verbal instructions of the “women who cherished them.” It also required that they be “brought up-to-date and whenever possible short cut methods devised.”<sup>25</sup>

In this endeavour, one major challenge was converting the measurements of ingredients, traditionally exercised through habit and intuition, into quantifiable amounts. The older women had not typically measured with much precision. Gori Patel explained

You know that we ask [the] grannies, “Ma, how much you put this in, masala in. They said, “Put a little bit.” “And the salt?” “No, after that you must put your finger and you must taste.” You see, that’s how they tell us, like that, and that’s how I also learnt cooking.

Tasting, then, was an ongoing part of transcription from oral to textual record, and it involved the considered judgement and input of Group members. This meant that, to some extent, the Group’s own flavour preferences came into play in deciding on correct amounts of salt, ghee, spices, and so on. While pre-literate tasting methods of measurement were subjective and varied according to serving size and the signature styles of individual cooks or family preferences, written recipes calculated fixed amounts. In keeping with an age excited by scientific achievement, cookery from a printed manual offered a kind of popular chemistry for the kitchen. “We put [different ingredients] on the scale and see how many ounces ([at] that time [it] was, you know, no gram, no kilo, but pound and this thing, ounces) so that’s how [we converted] from [weight measurements] into teaspoon [amounts]. It took lot of time – I think over three years it took to

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, 12 March 2008.

<sup>24</sup> *Indian Delights*, Thirteenth Edition, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Indian Delights*, First Edition, p. 15.

make that book – because it wasn't easy," Patel remembers. "We don't just print the recipe on the book.... First, we all cook and then we try...."<sup>26</sup>

By the time Nafisa Jeewa joined the Women's Cultural Group, the revised and expanded versions of *Indian Delights* were being planned and the sources of recipes were more varied:

It wasn't so much [going to] houses ... it was like talking to family members and getting recipes from them and...if you've been abroad and you ate something and you'd, you know, if they were polite enough to give you the recipe then you'd bring that with you and you'd submit that...we'd try it out and if it's feasible then [include it] because every recipe in the book is tried and tested.

A range of local influences, too, are apparent in these pages, as words like *brai* and ingredients like springbok and gemsbok, indicate. Recipes can be found for "Namaqua Steak", "Indian Biltong" and "Cape Frikkadels". A recipe for Chinese Springrolls and several for Putu, Roast Green Mealies and Meales with Sour Milk reveal the cookbook's rootedness also in South African social terrain. In these recipes, and others, exchanges with various indigenous and immigrant communities make their appearance as *Indian* delights.

Zuleikha Mayat acknowledges that the Group's labour in this process often depended upon various women who were not members of the Group. For example, Mayat's domestic worker Mildred Mdladla is the first named individual thanked in the acknowledgments in the 'super edition' of *Indian Delights*, for "her quick grasp of [cooking] procedures" which also "spared me many valuable hours which were sorely needed for recording and writing." The hiring of maids and cooks was, over the decades, an aspect of change in a growing number of households. Mothers working outside the home found it possible to sub-contract some of their own gendered duties of child-minding, cooking and other chores. In some Muslim households, as in Mayat's, these women themselves were trained in cooking apprenticeships, learning the subjective art of tasting (an especially important skill in preparation for Ramadan Feasts, when devout members of the household could not check on the flavour of the food they would eat after sundown.)

Behind *Indian Delights* is the labour of bridging taste and calculation, of reconciling culinary diversity with "Indian" cuisine, and of preserving tradition through a celebration of change. Transcription to print, and bringing cooking methods "up to date", meant accounting for innovations in culinary technologies, dietary trends, health wisdom and the daily rhythms of the

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, Patel, 26 May 2008.

modern household. While compilers of *Indian Delights* took as axiomatic that “[a]s a cook, the Indian housewife is second to none” and that “[i]n the handling of food, the Indian woman finds fulfilment for her talents...and this is visible when her labour of love appears on the table”,<sup>27</sup> , they were eager to account for changes in the labour process. So, for example, *Indian Delights* notes that:

The ancient Indian technique of wrapping fish or meat in banana leaves for stewing, steaming or baking, is rapidly being replaced by the use of tin foil. The contemporary housewife can no longer bother hunting for the banana leaf, even though it may be growing in her back yard.<sup>28</sup>

If, at times, it is hinted that new inventions may invite a bit of laziness, or spoil, the “contemporary housewife”, it is also clear that new technologies are considered welcome liberation. In regards to microwave ovens, Mayat wrote:

The signs are there that they will be increasingly used in the future. For the working mother, this means as more relaxed period with her family once she is at home from work, for she can take pre-planned dishes from the freezer, pop them in the oven, lay the table and call to her family that dinner is ready.<sup>29</sup>

The convenience of the freezer, the microwave oven, Tupperware and other time-saving technologies are discussed as part of an energy-saving and pro-family economy headed by the modern housewife. Readers are instructed also in how they can save and conserve money-- “Remember the adage: ‘A woman’s savings are equal to a man’s earnings.’”

To live up to this motto you must learn to make do, improvise and substitute. ...Don’t buy bread crumbs, rather put the stale slices into the oven from which you have just taken out your cake. The remaining heat will make the bread crisp and you can then crumb it fine. Which reminds us, do switch off the element a little before baking is done or the pot of curry stewed. The remaining heat will do the job for you at no cost.

While a special section of *Indian Delights* provides instructions for mass gatherings, such as weddings (“Biriyani for 100 People” or “Gajar Halwa for 800”) most recipes are designed for daily sustenance of a modestly sized household, with proportions to serve six. Family size is one indication of changes in family relationships and household make-up. Another is indicated in some of the narratives within the text which convey various aspects of disappearing (and

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<sup>27</sup> *Indian Delights*, 13<sup>th</sup> Edition, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Indian Delights*, 13<sup>th</sup> edition, p. 168.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 161.

therefore quaint) gender etiquette. So, “Homage to the Serva Curry”(Gravy Curry), a dish which ‘sustains families over lean days without making them feel like paupers’, explains that “males being traditionally the bread winners in the family, growing children, women who were pregnant or breast feeding babies, would be coaxed [by the mother/cook] to spoon off the choice bits of meat and vegetables.”

Mothers were usually left only the gravy to spoon over their portion of rice or to mop up with their bread. Often, when father insisted that mother too must have some meat, the latter would pretend that she had gone off meat or had a current digestive problem... Of such stuff are mothers made.”

The inclusion of tributes to idealized womanhood in the figure of the virtuous, self-sacrificing home-maker/mother, may be seen as a gender (self)disciplining and a behavioural prescription.. But it is also an acknowledgement of changing ideals of femininity and womanhood.<sup>30</sup> Such narratives are often conveyed with a sense of humour and playfulness introduced through hyperbole—husbands described as a “Prince Charming” or a “Lord and Master” who is waited on hand and foot by his “Lady” in “days gone by.” There is a mix of parody and respect for “them days”. Notions of what it means to be a ‘modern’ housewife are cultivated in gently humorous contradistinction to these visions of a gendered “Indian” past.

Working oral food knowledge into print-based recipes was not a passive or straightforward act of transcription. It involved active intervention and translation by the book’s creators. As women sensitive to the trends and new opportunities of their own decade, even as they set out to “preserve” the food traditions of India that could be found in Durban, their work was necessarily transformative. Their own tastes, sensibilities and specific social circumstances were inscribed into what would become the “classic” archive of South African Indian food traditions.

### **Household Knowledge to Public Knowledge: Publishing and Marketing**

In recounting the story of how Indian Delights was published, Mayat and other members use the kind of story-telling devices that indicate that this narrative has become something of an oral tradition itself. It is a narrative of overcoming various kinds of adversity, of encounters with

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<sup>30</sup> There is obviously much more to say about gender in relation to these narratives, but we do not explore this fully here in this paper.

villains and unexpected allies, of using their minds to defeat thuggish male bigotry. The manner of telling says something important about the experiences of women (housewives, and therefore private sphere people) making their way into public domain, the sphere of business, of men. What is clear that through these experiences, the Women's Cultural Group members gained valuable skills they have subsequently put to use in their collective, civic life.

Once the recipes had been gathered, tested and written into a text, the prospect of how to publish it was a new challenge. None of the Group members had any editorial experience and typing skills were in short supply. Zubie Seedat and Ayesha Vorajee had organized and indexed the recipes; Mariam Motala (the Group's president) had assisted with the typing; the illustrations were sketch by Fatima Meer, then a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Natal.; and Dennis Bughwan produced the photographs (gratis). Members of the group prepared the dishes and displays of food to accompany the recipes. But, as Mayat recounts,

we didn't have sufficient money to go to a publisher so I went to A.I. Kajee's Essop Kajee. The late Essop Kajee was a manager at that time, and I told him, "Essop, we need just three of your sponsors or the firms that you deal with ... and we are going to ask them for help." I didn't ask A.I. Kajee to give me anything. So he said, "What? A cookery book – everybody knows how to cook!" I said, "I don't know how to cook, and there will be people in future who [will not] know how to cook so we are going to print it, it's ready, now give us the names."

Kajee gave the names of three companies [Ilovo sugar, Joko tea and ?] and Mayat and Motala went to each and stated their case. All three companies gave them the fifty pounds they asked for (and one offered them a job, impressed by the way they had marketed their product).

Now with start-up capital, they set out to get quotations from printing houses. The first publisher they visited was abrupt and paternalistic: he described their typing as "atrocious" and did not regard the Fatima Meer's whimsical sketches as "art". Meer had designed the sketches with much thought. She "took stick figures and made them run and clothed them and dressed them. I was trying to show the Cultural Group as an active group of women. I wanted to show something lighthearted because the Cultural Group were light hearted in their approach...I wanted to depict the fun aspect...these women are a breezy lot."<sup>31</sup> Mayat confirmed,

We were very happy with those sketches. They looked so lively. [But] Mr Mehta [the publisher] says, "Ja, but there's something very wrong, what do you think? You don't want *those* pictures ... I've got some lovely pictures" and he brought us some India calendars

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<sup>31</sup> Interview, 16 October 2008

with those big, curly haired women and the clips in the hair and so on. I said, “Mr. Mehta, this is *our* book, *this* is what we want. Please, we want you to give us a quotation on *that*.”

His price was double what the Group had budgeted and he wanted to charge extra to correct their typing. Worse, when they asked for the manuscript back in order to go and find another quotation, he would not give it to them. They had to devise a trick to retrieve their manuscript.

So we phoned one of the members [Amina Moosa], said, “Look, okay we are going there now back for the manuscript, you phone us in exactly half an hour and say that your father-in-law says to bring that manuscript back immediately.”... Her father-in-law was Mahmood Moosa. He had nothing to do with it. So now we went back to Mr. Mehta [and] said, “Look, I think we’d like to – we really can’t come up with this [money]... We will just abandon the whole thing.” And just then Amina phones and he says, “There’s a call for you.” I said, [mimics speaking on the phone] “What ... here? ... okay ... alright ... no, no, no ... I’ll tell Mr Mehta. No, if your father insists ...” and, you know, we made a little drama there, so the man gave us the things back.

Fortunately, the second publisher, Mr. Ramsay was more sympathetic, and did not necessitate the use of plots and dramatics to equalize the balance of gender-power. He said that his editors would take care of typing errors, was substantially cheaper, and allowed them to run a second edition before he had been paid for the first. Best of all, he “chuckled at the sketches and thought them enchanting.”<sup>32</sup>

The first lot of books was sold through members as well as through Indian retailers like Roopanand’s, Taj Company (later Sartaj), and Saloojee’s and Akhalwaya’s in Johannesburg. But the Group believed that their market was not in the Indian community alone, so Mayat summoned her courage and found, to her surprise, a female ally:

I went to CNA in Smith Street. They said, no, the buyer is upstairs. So I went upstairs and there was a woman who was doing something with books and I said, “I want to see the buyer of the English books.” She looked at me. She said, “I’m the buyer of the English books.” So I said, “Look, we’ve got a book here which we have printed – it seems to be very popular amongst Indians but maybe you could also sell it.” So she said, “You’ll have to leave a copy, let me have a look at it, and she took a copy and immediately they bought ...

The first, 140-page edition of *Indian Delights*, sold at CNA for 19s. 6d., about R1.95. It ran in seven editions (17,500 copies) over nine years. A larger 310 page version of the book was

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<sup>32</sup> In Women’s Cultural Group. Eighteenth Anniversary 1972.

published in May 1970. It contained many new recipes and 85,000 copies were sold in twelve years. Sales of the first book meant that there was a decade-long delay in getting the second book on the market. In fact, reprints of the first edition included an explanatory note to their readers:

For some time now, we have been contemplating on bringing out a revised and enlarged edition of *Indian Delights*, but pressure on sales remain unabated and we are compelled to bring out yet another impression on this popular cookery book in its old format. However, a firm decision has been taken and work is proceeding on a new more comprehensive, highly illustrated edition....

April 1975 marked an important moment in recognizing the scale of *Indian Delight's* print success. The Group placed an order for 15,000 copies of *Indian Delights*, a major leap from the prudent practice of printing a few thousand copies at a time. Received in September 1975, every copy of this substantial order was sold out by April 1976. Their new publisher, Robinson, made them cede their investment certificate to the New Republic Bank to guarantee payment of R27,452 (the bank had to underwrite payment). With brisk sales, the Group did not have to call on the NRB, something that members were proud of.<sup>33</sup>

Members were already planning a larger “deluxe” edition, but again had to put this on hold as demand forced them to continue reprinting the existing versions. The resolution to increase production was a “difficult decision” as members feared that they may be getting into “something we could not handle.” They eventually agreed on 25,000 copies to obtain a cheaper price, which allowed them to sell the book at R4.75 instead of R5.50. This new order of *Indian Delights* was received between August 1976 and February 1977, leaving the Group with a “colossal” bill of R46,000, due in May. As acting Treasurer, Mayat would record at the end of that year:

Ladies, our reputation stands so high and I have great pleasure in telling you that Robinson has not asked for any guarantees from us and has even extended terms of payment from 60 to 120 days after delivery.... I need not remind members that the success of our Group revolves around brisk sales of *Indian Delights*. The committee has already commenced negotiating with bigger outlets ....”<sup>34</sup>

Members resolved that instead of borrowing money at high interest rates, they would liquidate fixed deposit certificates that were maturing and pay Robinson for the shortfall after sales. While the fixed deposits would be depleted, the Group would be free of debt and monies recovered from

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<sup>33</sup> Treasurer's Report 75/76 – Zuleikha Mayat (Acting)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the sales of books would be invested. This is an example of the Group's prudent budgeting. Mayat described these efforts to their AGM at the end of that financial year:

Thank God for an alert committee. Putting our shoulders to the wheel we started early last year collecting monies from creditors, cajoling merchants to buy more books, putting in any cash that came in into safe investments and thereafter even if it was for short terms we scrounged around for favourable investment returns. The result was that Mrs. [Mariam Yusuf] Motala and I, with shaking hands, put our signatures to a cheque of R46,000. The cheque was posted the next morning and when Mr. Quirke phoned me in the afternoon using a tone one usually reserved for creditors who owe you money and you are making the first call in this respect, I was able to forestall him by saying: "Hello Mr. Quirke you must be after your money." Let me assure you the man was taken aback. He was prepared for an extension of time and here I was telling him that the cheque had been posted to him.<sup>35</sup>

Even without advertising, average sales were 1000 copies per month in the late 1970s. As bigger and bigger consignments of the books arrived—no longer two thousand or five thousand, but tens of thousands— storage of the books became a problem. As the Group did not have a warehouse, the books had to be divided up and stored in the members' own households. Those with cars transported loads of books, others packaged them for delivery. This was the case until a calamity struck: Bari Paruk phoned to say that her basement had flooded and the books were getting wet. Zuleikha and her sister Bibi Mall "just ran" and drove there to collect the books, only a few dozen of which proved to be sodden. They brought them to Mayat's house.<sup>36</sup> The Secretary recorded the incident in her annual report.

[A]bout a dozen members sweated for a full day, opening parcels, wiping, drying, dusting with mildew preventing powder, airing each individual copy and finally making up the parcels again. Robinson's [publisher] rushed extra dustcovers to replace badly damaged ones and brown paper and tape for the new packings. The hard labour saved the books and the few (thirty copies) that were badly damaged, the Paruk family, after much negotiating with their insurers, finally recovered the money for us.

This produced an important change in storage strategies, but also in the increasing professionalization of the Group's approach. Zuleikha spoke to local book distributor AH Khan and "he said, 'fine, you can bring them' and afterwards when that Taj Company closed down and Sartaj opened, he continued and he still stores [the books] for us...ten thousand copies at a time."

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Interview, Z Mayat, 6 October 2008.



They agreed in 1977 to pay Taj a 5 cents per book fee to deliver books directly to retailers and pay an annual insurance premium. But they continue themselves to fetch and deliver stores when demands arise.

Meanwhile, recipes continued to be collected and the need for an expanded version was pressing, but progress was slow. In March 1980, Zohra Moosa told the Committee Meeting that Zuleikha Mayat had done “a great deal of work on the new *Indian Delight*” but that she was lacking adequate help from others. It was decided that more members would meet Mayat and work out the new recipes. The result was the current 400 page super enlarged edition, which was first printed in 1982. To its authors, it felt like a new level of accomplishment, both in content and the appearance. In an undated letter to political prisoner Ahmed Kathrada, with whom she had been corresponding, Zuleikha Mayat wrote:

[C]ongratulate me. The new Indian Delights is out and it is a beauty. As my children say, it's no longer housewifey but professional, meaning thereby that Andrew Verster who had been responsible for the arrangement deserves the credit for appearance. The public that had patiently been waiting for this new edition has just overwhelmed us with orders and that has not given us time to launch or publicize it yet. Price R10.95+GST.

It was launched, finally, at the Natal Mercury Auditorium with cookery demonstrations and sample delectables. Zohra Moosa, Fathima Loonat, Fathima Mayat, and Farida Jhavery each provided 500 samoosas. Massive publicity accompanied the launch. Among those contacted to run features on the new book were Gail Kruger of the *Daily News*, Mrs. Pillay of the *Tribune Herald*, and Madelaine van Biljon of the *Sunday Times*. C.N.A. allowed the Group to promote the book at their La Lucia branch, and Jane Raphael of *Fair Lady* was petitioned to run a feature. In April 1985, Zuleikha Mayat appeared on prime time television to speak about the cookbook.

Of the first 25,000 copies of the new *Indian Delights* printed, 18,418 sold out within three months<sup>37</sup>, and the rest by the end of the year. The Group made a profit of R82,000, R50,000 of which was kept as working capital, R10,000 set aside for a women's Activity Centre they were trying to build, and the balance was given as charity.<sup>38</sup> From July 1983 the Group began receiving the first of the 25,000 copies of the *second* impression of the super edition. Again, the books flew off the shelves, with 15,000 copies sold within nine months. The R50,000 working capital set was not utilised for payment as sales exceeded expectations. Robinson was paid

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<sup>37</sup> MGM August 1982.

<sup>38</sup> MGM December 1982

R60,000. By the end of 1983, after paying expenses, the Group had a development fund of around R90,000 for its Activity Centre. The Group gave R13,873 to the Education Trust for bursaries and also purchased a microwave, tape recorder, and photocopier for their Group.<sup>39</sup> “Sale of our Indian Delights is still soaring due to all Mrs Mayat’s efforts in this direction and it is through this that we have managed to give out 27 bursaries,” the secretary would record for 1983.<sup>40</sup> Within five years over 80,000 copies were of the enlarged super edition were sold.<sup>41</sup> “There is no doubt,” Z. Mayat wrote in 1988, “it will become a classic.’ She intended “overhauling it every ten years because it contains not only recipes but a way of life as reflected in our cuisine.”<sup>42</sup> Each new edition was to further reflect the changing Indian way of life in the South African household.

At the 1984 AGM a decision was taken to publish *Indian Delights* under the tax exempt Educational Trust and further work, to produce other editions, was proposed. “After these tremendously successful figures” stated Mayat, in her capacity as Group treasurer, “I am not going to relax and I am proposing that we not only reprint the current *Delights* ... but as well compile a *Delights* for beginners to fill an urgent need.”<sup>43</sup> Visions of cookbooks to service various tastes and expertise had been floating about for a while. Mayat had earlier written Kathrada of her idea to create a “Soul Food” version of *Delights*, with the help of her friends Siko Mji and Virginia Gcabashe, which would create an African-Indian fusion, “based on peasant Indian cooking like khitchiri and khuri, pumpkin and potato curries, lentil dhals etc combined with traditional African dishes – that is Indian manner of cooking porridge (bhurkoo) and the African puthu! Similarly the different manner of cooking pumpkin, samp mealies, mealie Ria, etc etc” The proceeds of which would go towards baby crèches in the townships.<sup>44</sup>

This particular dream was not realized but other cookbooks did indeed emerge. In January 1986, the Group got to work on a new book.<sup>45</sup> *The Best of Indian Delights*, even more than other

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<sup>39</sup> Treasurer report 1983-1984.

<sup>40</sup> Secretary report 1983.

<sup>41</sup> The enlarged super edition of *Indian Delights* was printed as follows:

First Impression	1982	25,000
Second Impression	1983	25,000
Third Impression	1985	25,000
Fourth Impression	1987	10,000

<sup>42</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Treasurer report, 1984.

<sup>44</sup> Mayat to Kathrada, 19 May 1979.

<sup>45</sup> MGM, January 1986.

editions, responded to the changing pace of life in South African Indian households. This was to be a book that promoted shortcuts and the use of ‘gadgets’ as time-savers. As they tell it, the Group began compiling *The Best of Indian Delights* in response a call from working women who complained that the super edition had too many versions of each recipe and they did not have time to sift through the lot: “This is at the insistence of modern housewives who... just want tried out, best of the litter sort of recipes.”<sup>46</sup> As Zuleikha Mayat pointed out at the launch of *Best*, the new edition was not “simply a repeat edition,” but had been updated and included 140 new recipes.<sup>47</sup> The new recipes reflected “changing culinary tastes.” Where basic recipes were included, according to Mayat, “they have been cut down in labour.”<sup>48</sup> This included casseroles, which could be prepared in advance, frozen, and warmed in an oven or microwave.<sup>49</sup> Another example was the inclusion of recipes based around “the humble *dhunia* chutney. If you have this in your freezer you can turn out most tantalising dishes”<sup>50</sup> in little time. The new edition was also syncretic in making traditional dishes but using non-Indian products. For example,

Look at *mithais*. We used to do the *mawa* in the old days – it had to be the milk that you had to burn and dehydrate to make a *mawa*. Nowadays very few people bother with that and they all use Klim or dehydrated milk; and maybe the *mawa* tastes nicer but people have forgotten those days ... they still like this one here.<sup>51</sup>

Another example was the use of phyllo and katayef pastry with Indian fillings in place of the samoosa *pur*, which required both time and expertise.<sup>52</sup> In Mayat’s estimation, the *Best* was a success because of the “easier methods, “face lifting” old favourites and presenting them with trendy styling.”<sup>53</sup>

Health was also more consciously taken into account. The super edition contained tips on the nutrition of foods like spinach, extolling their vitamin contents. But Mayat explains that by the time *The Best of Indian Delights* came out, “some of the doctors had been complaining that, you know, ‘you’re interfering with the health of people with all your recipes,’ so this is when I

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<sup>46</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

<sup>47</sup> *Post*, 3-6 August 1988.

<sup>48</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

<sup>49</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

<sup>50</sup> “Preface,” *Best of Indian Delights*, 1988.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, Z Mayat, 6 Oct 2008

<sup>52</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

<sup>53</sup> “Preface,” *Treasury of South African Indian Delights*, 12.

started saying, ‘no frying your onions beforehand ... just use the onions, but no more oil when you cook.’

So we got a section just on health foods at the back.... People’s taste also [changed] ... Look, in the olden days if the *ghee* wasn’t swimming there or the oil wasn’t swimming there, it wasn’t good curry. Nowadays people don’t like to see all that oil ... so our taste also changed.

The new book, at 200 pages, was half the length of the super edition. Again, in its creation, progress was slow and earnest pleas at committee meetings were regularly made to assist Mayat, Moosa, Vawda and other stalwarts who took on much of the typing and proof-reading. By February 1988, Mayat and Andrew Verster had prepared 99 pages of the book. Yasmin Sabat assisted with typing while help was needed for the index and glossary. The typewriter had to be repaired several times.<sup>54</sup> One thousand six hundred copies of *Best* were pre-sold.<sup>55</sup> The first thousand copies were received in August 1988. Two hundred copies were exported to America and the rest of the books sold by Group members at launches in Pietermaritzburg, Stanger, and other areas. The also hired a stall at the Flea Market on the last Sunday of August where Fathima Loonat and **Zuleikha Vawda** sold books.<sup>56</sup> Only one impression of 10,000 copies of *Best* was printed.

The final cookbook in the Women’s Cultural Group stable was *A Treasury of South African Indian Delights*, published in 1999. This was the only one to specify itself in the title as a “South African” cookbook. Like *Best*, it was responsive to perceived changes in Indian culinary tastes and lifestyle, as well as “the availability of newer products, the increasing acceptability on our tables for cheese, pasta, etc, lesser use of fats, increased salad consumption and...our growing interests in the cuisine of other cultures”<sup>57</sup> This new book more conspicuously than ever celebrated cultural fusion, the variety of commercial products that could be incorporated, and the appropriation of global dishes which could be given an “Indian” taste and appearance:

See how we utilised the various types of noodles, couscous, coconut cream, cheese and dairy products, and transmuted them from their origins into the Indian look. Taste and tradition have been enhanced and the repertoire enlarged in a way that it can be presented internationally.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> MGM, February 1988.

<sup>55</sup> *Post*, 3-6 August 1988.

<sup>56</sup> MGM, September 1987.

<sup>57</sup> Preface, *A Treasury of South African Indian Delights*, p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*.

The claim that these recipes enhanced not only taste, but tradition, indicated the flexibility and centrality of change that infused the Group's conception about culture. The *Treasury* conceded that it could not go against the grain and fight consumerism. It had to change "with the times."

The current trend by busy homemakers is to turn to the market shelves for packets of soup, tinned products and marinades.... Our mission statement is that since such recipes are found in magazines or exchanged among friends, they should not be called recipes for they fall in the category of tips. To prove that it is not our intention to put anyone off from utilising these quickmeal measures, we have included some ... as a further aid to the housewife in the transformation of a ready product into a unique dish."<sup>59</sup>

Into its fifth impression, the *Treasury* remains popular, with 45, 000 copies sold during its decade of existence. Sales of this book, however, did not diminish those of the Super Edition, the demand of which continued apace into the 1990s and 2000s, selling an average of 600-700 per month.<sup>60</sup> This indicate that the search for practical answers to quick meals has not eclipsed the desire for the 'authenticity' now more strikingly associated with the expanded version of the original text. Indeed, globalization and the new availability of commercial commodities that came with the end of apartheid, has paralleled the new, post-apartheid valorization of ethnic distinction in South Africa.

### **Transoceanic Kitchens**

In marketing *Indian Delights*, the Group had relied on personal contacts as well as a personal touch. When, for example, in 1987 the Group received advance payment for a book from a Mrs. Fourie of Kimberley, who unfortunately forgot to be more specific about her address, the Group placed an advert in a Kimberley newspaper in an attempt to get the book to her.<sup>61</sup> This personal

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<sup>59</sup> "Preface." *Treasury of South African Indian Delights*, 12

<sup>60</sup> Sixth Impression	1990	20,000
Seventh Impression	1993	20,000
Eight Impression	1996	10,000
Ninth Impression	1998	10,000
Tenth Impression	2000	10,000
Eleventh Impression	2003	10,000
Twelfth Impression	2006	10,000
Thirteenth Impression	2007	20,000

<sup>61</sup> MGM, October 1987.

approach proved successful in generating interest not only in South Africa, but internationally as well. According to Mayat, word of mouth and family connections were key. “Look, we’ve never really advertised and so on but we get ideas from all over the world. People buy a book, they give it to somebody, they go to their home overseas, they show it to their friends ...our expatriates have gone overseas, some in Canada, some in Australia...and they would have copies there and show it to their friends and this is how the orders start coming in.” These networks spread across diasporic communities in North America, Australia, the United Kingdom as well as in India and Pakistan. At this time, too, a concept of ethnic cuisine and a gastronomic hedonism was growing in the United States and elsewhere, and so a new market for Indian recipes existed also among people who were not of Indian ancestry.

In 1970, a publisher in Pakistan wrote that they wanted to sell the book and offered to buy the copyright, arguing that it was much cheaper to produce from that side of the Ocean. This was a wake up call as they considered, for the first time, the commercial value of what they had produced, and the possibility of the book’s illicit production. The Group used an extended family connection in Karachi to register copyright of *Indian Delights* in the name of the Women’s Cultural Group in Pakistan.<sup>62</sup> A few years later, there was a letter from a publisher in Delhi who wanted to print the cookbook in Urdu and English. Robinsons Publishers assisted in negotiating international copyrights.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, from the mid-1970s, the Group received orders from around the globe, usually for around 25 copies each. The book was selling for £5 in London and \$12 in Canada. The agent in London advertised it in newspapers and a feature in a women’s magazine. On a trip to the United Kingdom, Zuleikha Mayat was interviewed on the Nayyi Zindagi Sunday Urdu program by Salim Shahid.<sup>64</sup> In the early 1980s, there was talk from Europe about the book’s translation into German and French.<sup>65</sup> An order for 500 *Indian Delights* came in from Los Angeles in November 1985.<sup>66</sup> The following year, 600 copies were sold in Britain, 700 in Canada, and 50 in Australia.<sup>67</sup> There was also a request from New Zealand for copies of the cookbook.

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<sup>62</sup> Interview, Z Mayat 6 October 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Treasurer’s Report, 1977/78.

<sup>64</sup> Treasurer Report, 1977/78.

<sup>65</sup> MGM, September 1982.

<sup>66</sup> MGM, November 1985.

<sup>67</sup> Z. Mayat to Grace Kirschenbaum, editor, *World of Cookbooks*, 16 February 1988.

In August 1985, Fuad Elahee in Calgary, Canada undertook some advertising on behalf of *Indian Delights*. Elahee reported that there was great resentment towards South African products in Canada at this time. In January 1986 Elahee sent the Group pamphlets advertising Indian Delights and they decided to direct enquiries from the USA and Canada to Elahee.<sup>68</sup> Later that year, however, he reported that the response had not been that good.<sup>69</sup> **Gheewala** Stores in London had better success. In early 1987, they placed an order for 500 copies of *Delights* and sold it for R11.35. In the same year, M.A. Kurta, also of London, also placed an order. Ayesha Kajee sent a pamphlet showing how her son was advertising the books which he was selling in America: he was sent a hundred books.<sup>70</sup> Inventory was requested also from Mauritius.

Overseas demand for the book increased with the 1988 release of Grace Kischenbaum's Los Angeles based *World of Cookbooks* in which *Indian Delights* received an excellent review. New queries came in from the United States and Canada.<sup>71</sup> In this year, a Nadia Beekun of Philadelphia wrote to Zuleikha Mayat that she had purchased a copy of the book during a visit to Mauritius. She related that since her

return to the United States I have not seen a cookbook on Indian cooking that compares in either recipes, ease of use, or presentation and I also find that your delightful book is not available here.... *Indian Delights* is not just about food but also a way of life, an Islamic way of life. The small stories, the helpful hints within boxes, running commentaries on spices, history, and human nature are all interesting and informative and present Islam in a different way to westerners who only hear the negative aspects of "Muslim" terrorists. I really believe it will be very successful here as both a cookbook and as a new way to look at Muslims.

Beekun offered to become an exclusive distributor. She had access to newspapers, had her own talk shows and food magazines to publicise the book, and was connected to the Islamic Society of North America and American Trust Publications. She appeared regularly on radio and television on issues of "Islam and Christianity" and "Islam and Women".

Partly in response to Beekun's encouragement, Mayat made a trip to North America in [year?]. Her first stop was Canada, where one of her niece-in-laws arranged a few interviews in Canada. One of the interviews was with a Mr. Chandrasekhar:

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<sup>68</sup> MGM, January 1986.

<sup>69</sup> MGM, April 1986.

<sup>70</sup> MGM, March 1986.

<sup>71</sup> July 1988, Joint President/Treasurer report.

I took the book there .... So when he saw the book...he shouted to his wife – I forget her name – he said, “please come here quickly, you see this lovely book, I’m interviewing the editor.” So she looked at him ... she says, “[from what book] do you think I’ve been cooking for you all these years?”<sup>72</sup>

Mayat’s next stop was Philadelphia where her niece Leila Lateeb (Dr. Daoud and Bibi Mall’s daughter) had made contacts with a few radio stations. Here, Mayat also visited Mrs Beekun to promote the book. The Group had sent 200 books but because of the anti-apartheid political sanctions “the whole consignment had to be diverted” and there were no books when Zuleikha arrived. She did manage to get hold of a few books and to do a few promotions. One was at the ISNA Centre in Washington, where she was interviewed for television.

Mayat also appeared on the “Focus on Islam” channel, run by a Pakistani couple in the basement of their home, who had wanted interview but were wary of the “Indian” in the title so they decided rather to feature the Group’s more recent book, *Nanima’s Chest*, which featured clothing and traditional attire. Mayat recalls that this interview was intimidating: “The Pakistani woman who interviewed me was very smart and very “in there”– I was like a little *kala* [auntie] in front of her but anyway I never saw the programme afterwards so I don’t know how it went.”<sup>73</sup> During the tour she lectured to numerous organisations and a Zuby Haffejee, a past bursar, donated \$100. “The people there were very impressed with our book but the only problem was the sanctions because no banks want to handle transactions from South Africa.”<sup>74</sup>

In January 1989, letters were received from Mauritius and Belgium requesting that *Indian Delights* be translated into French. However, Mayat turned down the request.<sup>75</sup> [Why??] In August 1990, an order came in for 450 *Indian Delights* and 80 *Best of Indian Delights* from **Gheewala’s** Stores of Leicester. The book continues to sell widely, clearly inviting multiple uses and readings from its varied and global publics.

### **Response from the Public**

Clearly, the Group’s dream of making a literary impact was not far fetched. Judy Desmond, wrote in her review of the book that it was “not even necessary to try out the recipes, just to read

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<sup>72</sup> Interview, Z Mayat, 6 October 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Z Mayat, 6 October 2008.

<sup>74</sup> MGM, November 1988.

<sup>75</sup> MGM, January 1989.



over and imbibe them, for that is what one does if one really likes recipe books.”<sup>76</sup> According to the *Natal Mercury*, “a guide to the art of Indian cooking including, among many other traditional dishes a comprehensive chapter on curries, is the latest contribution of Durban’s Indian community to achievements marking the centenary year of the arrival of the Indian immigrants in South Africa.”<sup>77</sup>

“The Fakir”, a columnist for the Indian weekly newspaper *The Leader*, was also full of praise, though it was conveyed in deeply paternalistic language:

Cooks, it is said, are not born but made. With a cookery book like this one, any girl would like to be a cook on the make. The recipes are precise and simplified though they include all the finest delights of Indian cuisine.... This is a marvellous book containing hundreds of recipes with some lovely illustrations of prepared foods. Some of the photographs also show off some lovelies to good advantage. This is a book well worth having.... There’s only one section with which some chaps I know may quarrel with. The authors imply that the male Indian masseurs are better than the maiden masseurs of Japan!

“The Fakir” concluded his review: “I think it jolly good that our women should be getting down to doing some solid work for the community and a movement such as this obviously caters for the need for women to get together now and then and have a good natter while at the same time doing constructive work.”<sup>78</sup>

Newspaper reviews were one kind of public feedback: another kind, which reveals a different kind of reading, came to the Group through written correspondence. Letters from readers came in from all over. Most were appreciative. Mumtaz Patel said she was “absolutely thrilled” with the presentation and recipes. Some letters contained complaints. A Mrs. S. Singh of Northdale wrote that “many recipes tried by me and many others...never turn out right. We try step by step following the recipe and flop it goes when baked or fried...Please look into this matter as now we are beginning to think that this is a money making scheme.”<sup>79</sup>

Mayat responded with a lengthy and conciliatory reply, explaining that “each week we receive orders from throughout the republic, Zambia, Fiji, Europe, Canada and even India and Pakistan” and gently suggesting that perhaps the problem did not lie in the recipes: “Please, I am

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<sup>76</sup> GET HER NAME AND PAPER. In Women’s Cultural Group. Eighteenth Anniversary 1972

<sup>77</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 27 June 1960. In Women’s Cultural Group. Eighteenth Anniversary 1972.

<sup>78</sup> *The Leader*, GET DATE. In Women’s Cultural Group. Eighteenth Anniversary 1972.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from S Singh, 29 May 1987.

not saying that the recipes are so perfect that they cannot be improved upon. I constantly overhaul them and try and make it simple for the young housewife.” She also assured her that

To the last cent, all the money goes for bursaries to students at various universities and we give vast amounts to organisations such as Natal Indian Cripple Care, Blind Society, baby crèches, etc. ...Not only do we not make a single penny but all ingredients used for testing and photographs, the members pay for out of their own pockets....If you would like to help with any of the recipes, just phone.

Again, the Group’s personal approach, as demonstrated through such letters and also apparent in the conversational tone of the book, has clearly gone a long way in effecting the aims they stated in 1960, in the very earliest edition of *Indian Delights*. The book, of course, invites varied readings and uses, and—as a text—therefore has many ‘publics’. Still, the Group had endeavoured to provide modern, young women the culinary skills and cultural/diasporic knowledge they felt were being lost through changes in society and family. A letter, dated 15 September 2008, demonstrates that even after half a century, they continue to succeed in these specific aims. Farzana Jawaheer Khan of Circonstance, St-Pierre, Mauritius, writes:

Respected Madam,

Ten years back I came across one of your edition of “Indian Delight”, then I was a teenager. But although very young I was very interested in your book and I jot down some recipes. But now I’m a housewife and mother, I came across your book again, a new edition, a new look. Believe me, I know what a treasure your book is. “An invaluable jewel that all and every housewife loving Indian cuisine will want to possess.”.... Once more I want to compliment you for the colourful and lively photos, setting and layout of the book. You successfully disclose, ... hmmm, no, no, but I would rather say you opened the doors of many recipes which make this book a unique masterpiece, un chef-d’oeuvre. Your frankness really touched me. You must be a woman with a golden heart, golden mind with golden ideas. You not only shared recipes but a whole culture. I want to write much more Madam. But I’m very busy. I have twin babies, and I have little time. I hope you will understand or else I would have talked much more about your book.... I believe good work, hard work performed with heart and so much dedication really need all these compliments.

Letters, as well as published books, are an aspect trans-oceanic print culture. This letter confirms *Indian Delights* as a text that has generated a public situated within the private, gendered spaces of kitchens, a public that—through utilizing these recipes and understanding them to be “Indian” delights—share and pass on an idea of diasporic identity.

### ***Indian Delights* as Cultural Representation**

As we have shown, behind the creation of this a cookbook was an *ethnographic* motivation, an attempt to “get the old recipes down” and to “preserve the richness of a well-established culture”. It is a text rich in narratives, its recipes intermingling with cultural anecdotes, stories, poetry, proverbs, illustrations, and claims about the past. According to its editor, it was “never intended to be a primer of Indian cooking.”<sup>80</sup> But, of course, it is used as that too. It contains an instructive, encyclopedic glossary of ingredients, careful instructions and advice for the novice. It has become a gift given to brides. It was produced to cultivate skill and cultural knowledge.

Hajima Omar, who joined in the 1990s, is one of the younger generations of women in the Group. She regards *Indian Delights* as a retainer of her cultural heritage, which she hopes to pass down to her daughters:

I think [the book] is extremely important because it's a way of preserving the culture. I mean we are all now eating differently because of health reasons, we are starting to bake fish and grill meat and that sort of stuff, and this in a way preserves [food history], even if you don't use the recipes, it's a good way of knowing how people did prepare food. So it's a preservation of culture. And whether, I mean both my girls, don't, hardly ever use it, but they have the book, you know... I think every family gives it to their daughter as a gift.

Nafisa Jeewa also believe that the book continues to be appealing

we sell a lot of books to people overseas as well... And it's a book that anybody can follow ... You know you have recipe books and you have recipe books and you find that with ... the new books that have come out, you know, every housewife doesn't have all the ingredients ... but with our “Indian Delight”, everybody has all those ingredients in the home ... so it's easy. You're not rushing out all of a sudden to buy something. That is why it's a very popular book. It's a lovely book to give as a gift and I think most brides – new brides – want it as well.... Whether she uses it or not is another matter.

Omar's and Jeewa's suggestion that the book has value even if it is not actually used as a cookbook, highlight the way in which it is perceived as a book of food history, a cultural archive. Some feel that this comes from the recipes themselves; others consider the text-boxed narratives to offer insights into the cultural past. Some readers have expressed reservations about these narratives: In 1982, reviewer for *Arabia: The Islamic World Review* Leila Badawi lavished praise on the super edition of *Indian Delights* but commented that the folk-tales, homely asides and anecdotes of family life made ‘outsiders’ at once feel charmed and excluded:

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<sup>80</sup> Mayat, Zuleikha (ed) *Indian Delights*. Durban: Women's Cultural Group, 2007 (13<sup>th</sup> Edition). P. 5.

Excluded because they often seem so distant and do foreign – and because they present a remorselessly idealised picture of life in South Africa’s Indian community in the same way that some of the books on “homemaking,” written in America in the 1950s, idealise the American way of life, or the American family. The impression one gets is of an intelligent, hardworking, astute and yet rather naive community.

Mayat confesses to feeling upset by this characterization, even though she admits that it was a positive review. She felt that it missed the crucial point that “this is part of our history.” She points to a section of the book that describes the use of tablecloths made from newspaper, with the accompanying illustration showing a simple but elegant arrangement with a water jug and some basic well-presented dishes. The setting and text was intended to show readers that wealth need not be present to create a beautiful and festive table. When she says “this is part of our history”, she is referring to times of poverty, with racial exclusion and labour relations translating into socio-economic scarcity. “[Paper tablecloths are] what we had at every wedding at one stage”, she argues.

Some of the book’s representations of culture have been even more controversial, however. In 1986 there had been complaints that *Indian Delights* contained Arabic inscription and there were questions about whether it was permissible to hold the book with out wudhu (ablution). It was advised that the book *could* be held without wudhu, but that the hand could not be on it unless it had an English translation. The Group has weathered these, and other, complaints and take heart from the reality that responses to the book have been overwhelmingly positive and has enabled them to continue with their community work.

The Group’s own conception of culture is clearly one that embraces change and flexibility. *Indian Delights* is not a quest for the “pure” and “authentic.” Rather it celebrates appropriation and adaptation, fusion and short-cutting. While it conveys a strong plea to value the past, it is not retrogressive or reactionary in relation to promoting that past, and innovation and invention are held to be equally important aspects of culture. While ensuring that old classics like samoosas and biryani’s were not compromised, the books have “added to our repertoire categories of dishes not dreamt of by our elders.” Mayat explains

Any culture, any thing develops – it doesn’t remain static. If you go in a new environment and there are new products and then you take it on and it becomes part

of it. Like the original Arabian and Persian recipes that we had ... like *biryani*, *samosa* and so on ... if you eat our India *biryani* and you eat the *biryani* in Persia, it's a world of difference because we've used the products of India and that really changed the *biryani* to a new thing. *Biryani* in India, in Gujarati, it's the one with the *masoor* ... if you eat it in Kashmir, it's got no *masoor*., The Indian Pakistanis there ... used *masoor* but the Pakistani Pakistanis don't use *masoor*. So it becomes an Indian dish afterwards. In the pasta sometimes you just put a dollop of your own thing and it does change.... Nowadays we are using a lot of fusion foods ... on our tables especially when the young children are there, you've got to give them burgers .... like they buy burgers outside there although the mother will put in ginger garlic in hers ... Our burgers are stronger.... It's an Indianized version. And what is a burger? It's a type of kebab really.... Food is changing.... Well, look, *biryani*'s still very much; very much Indian; *haleem* is still very much Indian; *dhall* is still very much Indian; curry itself is very much Indian, but curry ... you get a hundred thousand types of curries, right, but if you talk of a curry it's an Indian curry. Rice dishes are still very much Indian.... [But] there are changes like, look if you make *yakni pilaau*, you can have the genuine version and you can have other version – you find both in *Indian Delights*.... Food is evolving all the time. Even appetites, even tastes are evolving all the time.... You have to accommodate that because we use less sugar now, we use less oil and *ghee* and yet, I mean, the authentic-ness of the dish doesn't change.... It becomes the authentic dish – it's still an Indian dish....

Katija Vawda, too, argues that changing culinary tastes are not necessarily good or bad, but is about individual taste. “It depends on one's palate. If they like it, then it's good.” The idea of taste as a criteria for what constitutes ‘good cooking’ is, somewhat ironically, much more aligned with the oral based traditional knowledge of the grannies who shared it with them fifty years ago. This shows that authenticity has only recently come to be attributed to recipes encoded in text as if they were doctrinal.

. *Indian Delights* has preserved, but also altered, the flavours of diaspora. Vawda is old enough to remember when foods prepared by South Africans of Indian ancestry belonged to family lineages of oral knowledge, before it was collated into a compendium of “Indian” cuisine.

In the past, when you went to people's homes, whether they were Memon or Surto or Koknee, of Gujarati Hindus, or even Tamilians, there were very distinct tastes ... they used different spices and methods and you could see and taste the difference ... even the aroma was different. Nowadays they are all similar.<sup>81</sup>

Indian diasporic identity in South Africa has been formulated out of difference as a political reality, but it is also a culinary reality, the result of literacy, changing relations of gender and

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<sup>81</sup> Interview, K Vawda, 17 October 2008.

labour, and global commercial trends in food production and representation. In this story, *Indian Delights* has played a small but significant local part. Like other texts which are regarded as repositories of culture, it constitutes a common household referent of diasporic identity and material culture. *Indian Delights* has its publics in the gendered spaces of kitchens, spaces in which the flavours of Indian heritage can be similarly and simultaneously savoured in Durban, Dehli or Toronto.