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Book Review: Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada

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"You are what you eat"

Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada (2024) is a seminal work that challenges this commonly trusted idea. Originally published in Marathi as *Anna He Apoorna Brahma* (2015) by Shahu Patole, the book has been translated into English by Bhushan Korgaonkar, and published by Harper Collins. The title of the original book in Marathi means 'Food is the incomplete truth' as against the original saying '*Anna He Poorna Brahma*,' which means 'Food is the complete truth.' The book, divided into twelve chapters, resonates with the title as it focuses on the food prepared and consumed by the Dalits, majorly through the culinary practices of the Mahar and Mang communities from the Marathwada region of Maharashtra.

The first chapter opens with the question 'What about Us?' while bringing out the fact that although food channels on television, cookery and recipe books are the most sought after, the food of the Dalits is given a pass indicating negligible interest in knowing what is cooked by the numerically substantial but socially marginalised communities. Latching on to this reality, the book goes on to explain the stratification of the society into castes and sheds light on how each caste has its own set of dietary rules.

To explain the nuances of the food eating habits among different social groups, the author with specific focus on the Marathwada region, categorises the food consumers into five types:

a. Special pure vegetarians (*vishesh shuddha shakahari*) being those who exclude ingredients like garlic, onions, and ginger from their meals, opting instead for asafoetida and those who observe *chaturmas* (a four-month period of dietary abstinence with specific eating habits).
b. Vegetarian (*shakahari*) food eaters being those who exclude onions, garlic, and brinjal from their diet only during the *chaturmas.*
c. Those with a mixed diet (*mishrahari*) includes food eaters who occasionally consume eggs and meat.
d. Non-vegetarian (*mansahari*) food eaters consist of those who consume meat of goat, lamb, chicken, peacock, wild boar, pigs, ducks, various wetland birds, fish, rabbits, turtles, deer, occasionally monitor lizards and also eat shrimp, crabs, and the eggs of certain birds. During specific occasions, they follow a vegetarian diet such as during the *chaturmas*, in the holy

month of *Shravan*, on particular days of the week, or according to religious guidelines. e. Culture-compliant non-vegetarians (*sanskruti-palak mansahari*) being those who are deemed to be *shudratishudra* (the lowest of the low) that is, those who exist outside the formal structure of Hindu society. While they do not have any dietary restrictions, they are bound by stringent rules concerning their social conduct. They consume beef and buffalo meat, as well as that of the discarded dead as well as domesticated animals and birds. Their dietary practices are scorned and looked down upon by all other groups. The book majorly talks about these people.

Patole points out that when one is describing the signature dishes of Maharashtra or even Marathwada, the Dalit food does not feature in this list. The author describes how in the social dietary regime vegetarianism was considered the "right-way" of consuming food for the upper castes versus non-vegetarianism for the lower castes. In this regard, Patole argues that vegetarianism is incorrectly considered superior because there are no staunch supporters of non-vegetarianism.

The author goes on to give a detailed description of the Dalits in Maharashtra, the functioning of the village economy through the *alutedars* and *balutedars* and the beginning of the Dalit cuisine in this system.

Chapter Three on 'Starvation and Inclusion' in particular discusses the duties of Mahars and Mangs and explains how they had to clear carcasses of dead animals and eat that flesh thus making the cuisine based on leftover and rejected foods. The author describes how each part of the dead carcass ranging from *rakti* (blood), *jeebh* (tongue), *fashi* (epiglottis), *mendu* (brain) to organs like *kalij* (liver), *boka* (kidney), *dil* (heart), *gana* (windpipe), *wajadi* (intestines), each had a recipe.

As Maharashtra has had a strong *bhakti* tradition in the past, the author in his quest to explore if at all the Dalit food has been ever talked about in the compositions of the *bhakti* saints, reviews their work by focusing on the bits on culinary practices. After delineating how even these saints which were deemed progressive have overlooked the Dalit food, the author questions the silence of many saints on the plight of Dalit communities and the caste-based discrimination they faced, including restrictions on food and their inadequacy to challenge the societal norms on food despite most of them being aware of it.

Inter-linking the ecological changes and the food vulnerability of the Dalits, Patole describes how the Famine of 1972 in the rural parts of Maharashtra worsened the condition and the dietary patterns of the marginalised communities along with their social dynamics. The book ends by informing the reader how caste-based discrimination continues till date and poses a question as to whether equality exists.

Patole's book apart from documenting the Dalit food culture, challenges the narrow perspective of 'cuisine' being solely defined by the food choices of the elite or the socially dominant groups. By revealing how something which is "rejected" by the majority becomes staple for marginalised communities, the author highlights the intricate relationship between food, social hierarchy, and power and challenges our preconceived notions of "normal" or

"staple" foods. This questioning of the dominant perceptions will not only provide the marginalised communities a newfound awareness of their culinary identity but also help them overcome the feeling of being ashamed or inferior for their food choices. In the academia, Patole's first-hand account opens up new arrays of research for the scholarly milieu by unveiling a world which was hitherto ignored and even denied.

Bhushan Korgaonkar's translation effectively conveys the essence of Patole's original work, making it accessible to a wider audience. While commendable in capturing the cultural nuances and regional flavours, some subtleties might be lost in translation. The Marathi version, rich in proverbs, slang, and regional idioms, presents a unique challenge. Readers unfamiliar with the Marathi language and its regional context may miss out on certain nuances present in the original text.

It is pertinent to note here that while the title of the translated version might give an impression of it being a cookbook, far from it, the book is a documentation of Dalit food traditions. For instance, the book does list out several ingredients and recipes. However, the author has intentionally avoided precise measurements, mirroring the realities of cooking within these communities, where resourcefulness and adaptability are more crucial than anything else.

While focusing on Marathwada, it also touches upon culinary practices from northern Maharashtra, that is Khandesh, western Maharashtra, Vidarbha, and also from the adjoining parts of the neighbouring states like Telangana and northern part of Karnataka. Contrary to this wide scope of coverage, the title of the translated book sounds like a mere documentation of the Dalit Food from Marathwada alone, doing little justice to the author's desire to write the book. The title of the original book in Marathi—*Anna He Apoorna Brahma*—on the other hand, not only negates the possibility of this geographical narrowing down but also indirectly hints at the author's desire to question the dominant notions regarding food and caste.

While the book effectively highlights the impact of caste-based discrimination on Dalit food practices, it may inadvertently oversimplify the perspectives of higher castes. Just as the book critiques the generalisation of food beliefs within Dalit communities, it is also crucial to recognise the diversity of perspectives and experiences within higher caste groups. While the author's intention to challenge the prejudices faced by Dalit communities is commendable, the onus is on the readers to recognise the complexities of human interaction and avoid generalisations about the entire elite stratum or other intermediate social groups.

For instance, it is important to note that while the book mentions certain recipes as 'Dalit recipes,' they may not be exclusive to Dalit communities, as they are also prepared by people from the non-Dalit social background in the region. This might be also due to easy availability and accessibility of certain ingredients in a particular region. This makes it difficult to trace the origin of each dish to any particular social grouping.

Notwithstanding such points of caution, the book propels the Dalit food to the forefront unlike in the past where it has played a background role in the Dalit literature. At the same time, its English translation now compels the non-Dalit reading publics to recognise and respect

this diversity. The book celebrates diversity born from adversity in the form of Dalit Food and takes one deeper into believing and practising the principle of '*Eat and Let Eat*.'