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## Food and Identity

By: Vinay Kumar

*A cookbook reveals itself as an ethnography of Dalits lives and spaces carved out of an oppressive caste system.*

Outside systematic caste oppression and violence, Dalit as an identity is still limited to slurs, derogatory remarks on occupation and 'hygiene'. The nuances of Dalit experience and life were never documented and are now forgotten or lost, except for works by Dalit authors.

*Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* by Shahu Patole is an ethnographic account of Maharashtra's Maang and Mahaar communities masquerading as a cookbook. It is his effort to archive the food and culture of his community for his children. Alongside, it navigates the reader through the untouchable identity in early post-modern India.

Food is the prism to arrive at the nuanced finale. Patole's text, in its original Marathi, was titled *Anna He Apoorna Brahma*, a word play on a popular Marathi prayer *anna he purna brahma* which means 'food is complete and divine'. When *purna* was replaced with *apoorna*, the meaning changed from 'complete' to 'incomplete'. With the many recipes in this book, Patole establishes how food practices are dictated by caste and class location.

Often, his recipes rely on accessible, imperishable ingredients, and their proximity to "freshness" decides if they are fit for consumption. There is a recipe for a dish that ferments the many leftover dishes from the upper-caste houses after a festival where the Dalit individual works. There are also recipes for various meats, including intestine, livers, kidneys, gall bladder, neck and other parts of an animal. While this could read as a response to lack of access to meat and full utilisation, that would be a limited view since in ritual sacrifice to deities there is also a recognition to value the life sacrificed and thus a need to respect every last morsel.

The recipes are not for the [faint-hearted](#), and cooks who rely extensively on precise quantities will struggle. The dedication reads:

"To my beloved mother, Gunabai Manik, who says, 'Cooking is a game of estimates, jugglery and hypnotism."

Patole records the kitchen, cutlery, culinary tools, food rituals, sacrifices for Dalit deities, and so on. While they help understand the influence and reality of caste as a structure in society, it also establishes that Dalits live and occupy space despite the system. It offers narratives of Dalits outside oppression.

"Within eight to fifteen days after the arrival of the Rohini and Mriga rains, the new seedlings of tarvat, with their rounded bright-green leaves, used to pop up along with other plants and grasses. People would pick the leaves of plants that grew on clean patches of land while avoiding the dirty places along the roadside or areas reserved for defecation."

Patole has skillfully documented Dalit life and livelihood with lucid language and erudite opinions that compel readers to engage. "Buffaloes and pigs are not mentioned in this holy sacrifice [...] eating the meat of cows and bullocks [...] something that is regarded as unholy, anti-religious, anti-cultural and forbidden for the majority is acceptable for the marginalized in the same religion."

He points out the role of Dalit literature, primarily autobiographies via lived experience in documenting food histories:

"References of Maratha, Bahujan, Dalit and other nomadic, backward communities are found only as reproachful representations of the paradigms of their caste and food customs. Dalit literature was the first to take notice of, document and bring the life of commoners to the forefront."

A juxtaposition of Dalit communities from Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu with Patole's Mangs and Mahars shows the life, religious customs, celebrations, rituals and practices are often identical, even as slightly altered versions of some of these practices exist. The only stark deviation I noticed was with the funeral ceremony, where some Dalits in Karnataka observe a wake on the 13th day. Patole notes that this is not common among the Mang and Mahars of Marathwada. Thus, it opens an interesting set of questions

on how an upper-caste practice found itself in Dalit customs in another part of India.

Other deviations also include the recipes because of the availability of different local fruits, vegetables, leaves, pulses and grains. The ragi crop is equivalent to the jowar and ragi *mudde* (ragi ball) and not *bhakri* – the consistency of the gravy is different. Rice is also consumed partly because it is pushed via the Public Distribution System (PDS). The ragi harvest and jowar harvest are nearly identical, especially when viewed with the role of the untouchable. I am not conflating the Mahar or Mang identity with other Dalit castes, but trying to illustrate that Dalits can relate to each other, sadly from their combined experiences of untouchability.

The English translation, by Bhushan Korgaonkar, gives me a strong sense of what the book must have been in Marathi and pushes me to wonder if a good translation needs to bring a new life or recreate the existing one in English. In this process, I wonder if the audience too has changed. “My book was a joke for the Marathi people. They didn’t take it seriously. Now in English, the joke is being taken seriously,” [Patole has said](#).

I wonder who the targeted reader for the translation is. When Patole first published the book in 2015, it was likely aimed at the lettered population of 8.3 crore Indians who speak Marathi. The conversation to translate the book took serious shape when he was approached by a publisher in 2021. This detail is noteworthy because Dalit writers and artists have produced work around caste and food for decades. The artist Rajyashri Goody has been [working](#) with food and making connections to caste for over a decade. Goody cited Patole’s book in her 2016 [Writing Recipes project](#) and traces Laxman Gaikwad’s autobiography *Uchalya* (1987) as one of the earliest examples of work that makes connections with caste and food by a Dalit person.

But it was during the Covid-19 pandemic, that the discourse on food received public and critical engagement across various fields of study, culinary research and practice, opening up spaces for Patole’s book for a wider audience. The pandemic-period discourse around food opened up a new and interesting door to study social structure through the lenses of gender and caste. It prompted the production of films, music, art and writing that offered and opined intersectional and critical commentary on South Asia. The food ‘delivery partners’ and gig workers were noticed and ‘studied’ briefly because the pandemic halted many and some were very curious about who was handling their food. The work on food and caste is important because even in [2015](#), [2016](#), [2016](#), [2019](#) and [2021](#), Dalit Anganwadi workers lost jobs or were in the news because children didn’t want to eat food made by an ‘untouchable’.

In his epilogue, Patole writes:

“I realized that my forefathers also have made an important contribution towards keeping ‘society united.’ They did not drift away from the ladder’s step that was assigned to them. They played their role, which the system had chosen for them, in a flawless manner for years together, without any dissent. I feel I am also doing the same thing from a different level and perspective. Because of my ‘sin’ of writing this book I don’t know in which form I will be born in the next birth. However, may such ‘literary sins’ continue to be committed relentlessly.”

While the book is being celebrated for its accomplishments, I am keen on the influence or the doors it would open for an academic investigation of caste with the knowledge that was invisible. Will the traditions and cultures of the Dalits, who were 16.6% (20.14 crores) of the Indian population in 2011, be part of the rich tapestry that is Indian culture, or will they be left out of the frame? I strongly urge those interested in food, ethnography of Indian communities, learning about different cultures, and reading more Indian authors to pick this book up. For those with academic interests and touchable caste locations, I urge you to investigate your own caste similarly. And I insist that you avoid looking down the pyramid for your food investigation.

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