

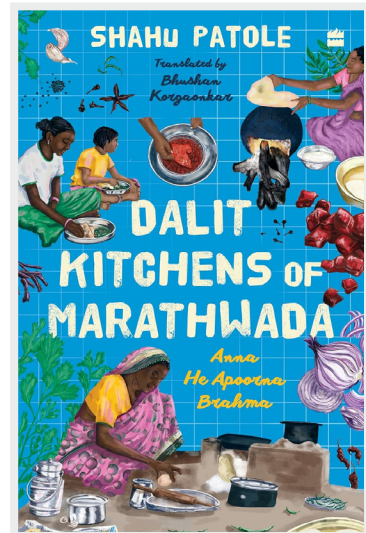
Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada

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When I first picked up the book *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* written by Shahu Patole, a few lines from the blurb caught my eye, ‘This book presents the poor man’s patchwork plate, one devoid of oil, ghee, and milk.’ I could not help but ask myself: What else could be used? I could only think of water as a common linkage between mainstream and marginalized kitchens. However, the caste-based politics of water knew no bounds (Freed, 1970; Wahi, 2022). In the preface, the author has done an excellent job of placing critical questions as food for thought, garnished with humor, yet punch in the gut style of writing. The author raises a simple yet profound question: Why are vegetarians obsessed with us? He strings a brilliant argument by juxtaposing the sattvic diet, expectations set out on sattvic diet eaters, and reality. Sattvic people are meant to be *Satshil* (good-natured). It refers to natural and good food for the soul. It also means tasty, rich, and substantial food loved by the man of goodness (Dolphijn, 2006). Nevertheless, are not the sattvic diet eaters the torchbearers of the caste and class system? So why is their diet not reflected in their persona? The preface is ended with a quote by a verse by Sant Eknath,

Vivad Vadhe he to adham lakshan

Bhaktiche karan na sadhe yene.

It is translated as, “To challenge something (in this spiritual discourse) or get into a debate is a sin and a sign of stupidity. If you indulge in such behavior, all your

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devotion and spiritual progress is futile. Reflecting on these lines, Patole concludes the preface, “I am glad that I am stupid and my devotion and spiritual progress is wasted” (p.xvi), and sets the tone of rebellion and criticality for the entire book.

This book, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, an English translation by Bhushan Korgaonkar of the original Marathi title ‘*Anna He Apoorva Brahma*,’ details the dietary practices of the Mahar and Mang communities of Marathwada. They are two prominent Dalit communities, among others from Maharashtra. The book primarily focuses on how Mahar and Mang communities’ culinary practices evolved over centuries, significantly shaped by discrimination and resilience. Patole passionately writes about caste, religion, food, and politics. The book has 12 chapters, ranging from an introduction to the Mahar and Mang communities, festivals, and different recipes for non-vegetarian and vegetarian food for the said communities. It ends with the 1972 famine and its impact on the rural food culture of Marathwada.

In the first and second chapters titled, ‘What about us?’, ‘Inclusion and Validation’, the author contextualizes the Mahar and Mang communities, their historical background, varied sub-castes within the communities, corresponding traditional occupations, and how their recipes never found a place in the mainstream culinary space. I could not help but think, if ‘recipe’ itself is an elite word? Shanahan and colleagues (2012) write that recipe books may seem quite natural today in kitchens, but they were once a new and fashionable genre intimately connected to social and cultural change. The earliest medieval culinary manuscripts were anonymous, although later, it was found that all were authored by men who were professional chefs working in royal and noble kitchens. Later, women from upper-class aristocratic backgrounds started leading in writing recipes (see, Shanahan et al., 2012).

Patole narrates how the identity of Marathwada and Maharashtra is equated to dishes belonging to the upper caste/class. For instance, *Puran poli* (sweet dish), *kande pohe* (sweet dish), etc., are associated with the Maharashtrian identity. He also details the marriage rituals of these two Dalit communities, duties undertaken by the bride and groom’s side, and how *shidori* (sweet dish) is a highly significant element in the wedding, which can break or make future relationships. The author says the preparation of sweet dishes undertaken by the so-called lower castes does not add sugar, jaggery or tamarind, making us ponder other alternatives.

In chapter four, ‘What does ‘non-vegetarian’ mean for us?’, it becomes evident that there are no alternatives; it just does not exist. Food is prepared in the absence of these ingredients. Most of the meat involves *rakti* (blood), *jeebh* (tongue), *bheja* (brain), *gana* (windpipe), etc. An eerie pattern was noticed in the list of ingredients, and it ends within 3 or 4 requirements at the maximum. Everything is mainly cooked with salt, turmeric, and chilli. Ginger-garlic paste and coriander are optional. Here, optional does not refer to the cook’s discretion, but rather, it indicates accessibility and affordability of that ingredient. Dried fat is also used as a substitute for oil for frying. Food and eating have always been markers of social class distinction. Eating also refers to a symbolic system that reflects social, religious, political, economic, and aesthetic aspects. Bourdieu’s study (de Morais Sato et al., 2016), conducted in France

from 1963 to 1968, resulted in two conclusions: the taste of luxury/freedom and the taste of necessity. The taste of luxury was established among dominant social classes whose privileged access to certain types of food and cultural capital was necessary to appreciate these specific types of food. The taste of necessity was more characteristic of the working class. It was also found that the higher the class, the healthier the food practices.

In chapter six, '*Kaaran* (sacrifice of a male buffalo)', the author details the duties of *Potaraj* (a troupe of male artists who perform religious songs, storytelling and puja). In concluding the chapter, he explores a few myths of the pre-Vedic and post-Vedic periods surrounding the sacrifice of a male buffalo; highlighting their casteist and sexist implications. These myths demarcated the distinction between how brahmins are symbolized versus the Dalits. To the extent that if a brahmin woman finds out her husband is Dalit, she immolates herself or jumps into a well. A Dalit husband is considered the male buffalo, and hence, the sacrifice of the male buffalo is carried out to reduce the Goddess's wrath. I can only hope and pray that the current and future generations realize the inherent casteist nature and view these Vedic myths with criticality.

As the book progresses, the writing shifts from critical to casual/ non-scholarly; it feels like an onlooker's observation. For instance, in chapter seven, 'Other Meats', usage of the terms like "addiction" (p.149) can cause serious repercussions when used lightly to represent a community and locality. Addiction refers to a compulsive, chronic, physiological or psychological need for a habit-forming substance, behavior, or activity having harmful physical, psychological or social effects typically causing well-defined symptoms upon withdrawal or abstinence (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the book, the paragraphs written under the title 'Addiction' had only the process of making the liquor and how men drank during certain occasions only and how it can potentially lead to domestic abuse at home.

There was a strong undercurrent of patriarchy flowing through the pages and how women are tied to the kitchen inseparably. For instance, in chapter ten, titled 'Chapati, Puran Poli and more' the author writes, "Making these bread were invariably women's work" (p.245); Similarly in chapter twelve, 'The 1972 famine and its impact on the rural food culture of Marathwada' he writes that "The invention of motor facilitated the advent of grinding machines. Women were the happiest when these machines reached villages, as this innovation reduced their toil considerably" (p. 327). In chapter three, 'Starvation and Survival', the author asserts, "After men finished their meal, the women, especially the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would eat together from the same plate" (p. 52). Correspondingly, in chapter four, "Women still do not get to eat in the first serving. They are usually the last ones to eat and have to make do with whatever leftovers came their way." (p. 93)

Foregrounding the above passage, the author could have also addressed the triple intersectionality faced by Dalit women—caste, class, and gender; and the toll it takes on their health, especially given that they often eat last if anything remains. It has been shown that women bear the primary responsibility for family eating practices.

Providing food for the family socially constructs the identities of women and mothers (Beagan et al., 2008). I also wonder why the book's original Marathi and English titles are entirely different; the Marathi title (*Anna He Apoorna Brahma*, "the original verse *Anna He Poorna Brahma* means food is the complete truth. Prayer asserts that consuming food is not just about filling the stomach but it is a sacred act and the title of this book proclaimed food is an incomplete reality" (p. xxi) captures a subtle act of rebellion, while the English title has a more descriptive language. The act of rebellion could have also been retained in the English title.

With the mention of Marathwada in the title, I expected the book to explore Dr. Ambedkar's influence on the region's food culture. In 1978, Marathwada witnessed widespread violence following the renaming of Marathwada University to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University, leading to the killing, rape, and displacement of thousands of Dalits (Soni, 2017). Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in establishing several educational institutions in both Bombay and the underdeveloped Marathwada region (Sukumar, 2011). Given the history of Marathwada, it has been a region of activism particularly related to caste and social justice. The activism inevitably seeps into the food culture of the region. According to Guru (2019), in the cultural history of Dalits in Maharashtra, dead cattle were traditionally given as dowry within Dalit households. However, the Mahars willingly abandoned this practice, led by Ambedkar, who encouraged them to embrace dignity and self-respect. Their dietary habits also shifted dramatically—from *Murdada* (meat from dead cattle) to *Hatfatka* (meat acquired through hunting) and eventually to *Toliv* (meat from a slaughtered animal). The book, however, fell short of capturing these significant nuances and acts of resistance within the community, neglecting the inherent political nature of food.

Even though a section is dedicated to references, a significant limitation of the book is not having notes to explain corresponding references. The references were Hindi/Marathi texts; if available, the translated version could have provided an English translation. So, it was hard to follow up or read further on the historical facts mentioned. Usually, books and cookery shows leave an element of excitement and salivation for the viewer, but this book was a stark reminder to look within oneself. Reading the pages felt like traversing through a different civilization in itself. A civilization born out of discrimination that grew from the margins, and trauma filled in each bite. Upper caste leftovers became the centrifugal force in planning diets in Dalit communities.

The India Community Cookbook Project (Pujary et al., n.d.) aims to preserve India's culinary heritage by digitizing it—Maharashtrian cuisine from *Soopshastra* (1875), considered the first book on Marathi cuisine, to more recent works, including cookbooks from the Thanjavur Maharashtrian and Saraswat Brahmin communities. Although I haven't reviewed all the books in the list, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* stands out as more than just another addition; it challenges a space typically dominated by upper-caste dishes and cooking methods. A deeper analysis of this would be valuable, highlighting how food is political and which 'cuisines' gain mainstream recognition.

Reading this book led me to reflect on the term ‘non-vegetarian’. We have all encountered it in restaurants, menu cards, conversations around diet and cuisines, but what does it imply? The term ‘non-vegetarian’ automatically implies a vegetarian centric worldview, framing vegetarianism as the societal norm and other diets as deviations. Let us try to understand it statistically with the metaphor of a normal probability curve, it positions vegetarianism at the mean, signifying societal acceptance, while ‘non-vegetarian’ diets are seen as deviations, with foods like chicken closer to the mean and others like beef and pork pushed to the periphery as stigmatized or ‘deviant.’ This hierarchy also reflects biases, reinforcing social inequality and marginalization of communities based on dietary practices, underscoring how language particularly terms like ‘non-vegetarian’ can perpetuate cultural power dynamics. Going forward, I hope we remain cognizant of the political nature of food and language surrounding it.

Patole’s book holds up a mirror with a scathing reflection of caste, class, and other privileges perpetuating injustices. It highlights society’s silence and complicity towards marginalized communities’ pain. As a reader I could not help but wonder how these communities coped with adversity, oppression, and cruel demarcation that penetrates their very being. As the question lingered, the book provided the answer: ‘*Ati zaala ani hasu aala*’ (if it becomes too much, just laugh it off). It certainly is a testament to the community’s struggles. More than just a documentation of their resilience, the book is also a call for action, urging everyone to confront biases and break these seemingly unbreakable societal shackles.

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